

From Conflict to Consensus to the Ecosystem Approach

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Abstract

In 1998/99 The Thanet Coast Natura 2000 site was an early example of where stakeholders participated in a deliberately designed and facilitated consensus building process. The process was used to help stakeholders explore issues and agree the content of a European marine site management scheme for 28 miles of the Kent Coast in England. The process transformed a situation of tension to active co-operation and a new partnership project that helped to pioneer further innovative approaches to coastal management. The management scheme is being reviewed and the process to do this and agree the contents of the next scheme, has again led the way. This time stakeholder dialogue has been used to take a new and integrated approach to management called the Ecosystems Approach.

1. The Thanet Coast - negotiating its future. 1997 – 2005

About 28 miles of the coast around northeast Kent is a Natura 2000 site, part of a network of sites established under the Habitats Directive across Europe. The features considered of European importance are the chalk reef, sea caves and wintering birds.

The coast has intense human use with fisheries, high levels of recreation, a port, wastewater treatment works, development pressure, and coastal protection. The coast receives over 2 million visitors annually and there is a population of about 130,000 living adjacent to the site. The high levels of coastal recreation were known to be causing severe disturbance to the wintering birds and some birds were not building up enough body fat to migrate to their breeding grounds. The effect of human activities on the chalk reef was unknown.

The site required a management scheme setting out how the different activities would be managed to maintain the features of importance. But there was a problem. Following 20 years of tension between the local authority and English Nature (and its predecessor the Nature Conservancy Council), Thanet District Council and the then port operators objected to the proposed Natura 2000 site. They perceived it as a threat to economic regeneration, as undermining local governance and as a drain on staff resources. They declined to be involved in the management scheme process. The area has high unemployment and at that time had Objective 2 status—acknowledging it as a priority area for economic regeneration within Europe. The local authority threatened to go to the European Courts to test the two European agendas against each other: economic regeneration versus wildlife conservation. To attempt some negotiation the local English Nature officer proposed a consensus building process that went beyond wildlife interests to include recreation management and economic regeneration – both issues of importance to the local authority. On this basis the local authority agreed to take part.

An independent third party was brought in to design the process and facilitate the workshops. They worked with freshly trained volunteer facilitators drawn from each

of the organisations who had responsibilities for the coast. The process in 1998/99 involved stakeholders meeting in a sequence of four workshops with over 100 people attending at least one workshop. The workshops were seen as only a part of the whole process. Equally important was the time planned in between workshops to gather information, draft text, or enable people to check back with those they represented. During the workshops, a range of interactive techniques were used to help people list information needs, fill in maps, brainstorm ideas, check solutions against agreed criteria, and agree acceptable solutions and action that was then written up in the Management Scheme (Pound D 2001).

All ongoing coastal activities were assessed to see what effects they had on the nationally important habitats and species. At the start, areas of tension included economic regeneration versus nature conservation, recreation causing bird disturbance, conflicts between different recreation interests, and concerns about water quality and flotsam. When the draft scheme went out for formal consultation there were no objections although there were a good number of representations. People felt that it was worthwhile and that what they said made a difference. Many of the letters commended the scheme and how it had been produced.

As a result of all this, the local authority started to see the surrounding maritime habitats and wildlife as an asset for tourism. They worked with English Nature and other authorities to set up the Thanet Coast Project to implement many of the ideas agreed in the workshops. This included helping users develop codes of conduct for their own activity so they could lessen their impact on wildlife and other users. Codes were written for horse riding, dog walking, powercraft use, wind-powered activities, harvesting shellfish, shore angling, bait digging, school field trips and a general seashore code. As a result of these codes, research showed that there was a significant reduction in disturbance to birds and the birds had greater body mass, were healthier and better able to migrate.

The new atmosphere of co-operation between the authorities led to jointly funded research and better management of all the ongoing human activities. It also led to open minded consideration and co-operative problem solving of potentially controversial issues. Examples of this include a proposed new art gallery to be built on the shore within the site, or the District Council carrying out an unconsented activity that could have led to a Judicial Review.

Stakeholders continued to have their say in the ongoing management by helping to review progress and influence the next steps.

2. The next phase of management. 2006 onwards

In the first half of 2006 the management scheme was reviewed and updated for the next six years. The original scheme focused on three specially protected birds (Turnstone, Golden Plover and Little Tern) and key habitats (the chalk caves, the chalk reef on the shore and stretching out under the sea, and the sand and mudflats). Concentrating on particular birds and habitats made sense from the point of view of the UK and European laws that protect them, but it didn't make much ecological sense. To address this problem the management group and science advisory group agreed that the review should take an internationally agreed approach to management called the Ecosystems Approach. This meant including other habitats and species, how the natural systems function and the way humans interact with them.

The Ecosystem approach

The Ecosystem Approach represents a shift in thinking. It roots the concept of sustainability in functioning ecosystems with integrated management across sectoral interests and the sharing of benefits (Laffoley et al 2004).

The Ecosystem Approach is defined as: "a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way" (Convention on Biodiversity (CBD)). The approach was developed to bring clarity to the concept of sustainability, and it has been adopted as the primary framework for action under the Convention. Twelve guiding principles have been adopted and five points of operational guidance (see text boxes).

12 ecosystem approach principles are:

1. The objectives of management of land, water and living resources are a matter of societal choice.
2. Management should be decentralised to the lowest appropriate level.
3. Ecosystem managers should consider the effects (actual or potential) of their activities on adjacent and other ecosystems.
4. Need to understand and manage the ecosystem in an economic context.
5. Conservation of ecosystem structure and function to provide ecosystem services should be a priority.
6. Ecosystem must be managed within the limits of their functioning.
7. The approach should be taken at the appropriate spatial and temporal scales.
8. Process and objectives for ecosystem management should be set for the long term
9. Management must recognise that change is inevitable.
10. Seek the appropriate balance between integration, conservation and use of biodiversity.
11. Decision-making should consider all forms of relevant information (scientific, indigenous and local).
12. Involve all relevant sectors of society and scientific disciplines

The 5 points of operational guidance are:

1. Focus on the relationship and processes within the ecosystem.
2. Enhance benefit sharing.
3. Use adaptive management practices.
4. Carry out management actions at the scale appropriate to the issue, with decentralisation to the lowest level appropriate
5. Ensure intersectoral co-operation.

Some aspects of the approach or the way it is interpreted need further work. For example the Ecosystem Approach "recognises that humans, with their cultural diversity, are an integral component of ecosystems". However the way that Principle 5 ('Conservation of ecosystem structure and function to provide ecosystem services should be a priority') is being interpreted could lead to problems. Conservationists are now seeking to convince other sectors to conserve ecosystems because of the 'goods and services' they provide for humans (e.g. flood control, food, raw materials, clean air). This anthropocentric and utilitarian view sees humans as separate to rather than part of nature and nature as something to be used. It also appeals to the materialistic and overlooks the aesthetic, inspirational, spiritual, and educational and recreation benefits of the natural world.

Despite these quibbles the Ecosystem Approach is at least a welcome corrective to the reductionist approach that concentrates on individual species, habitats and isolated sites that has characterised biodiversity conservation (Nowicki 2005).

The review process

For the review of the Thanet Coast management scheme it has meant grappling with the Ecosystem Approach as more than a theoretical concept. The focus of the review has been to find the action that is achievable over the next 6 years and that will take the management of this coast and sea in the right direction for both people and nature to thrive.

The stakeholder process used to achieve this was designed to be coherent with three workshops spread over 6 months with key tasks planned in and around each workshop. Each workshop was fully facilitated and designed in detail using tools and techniques that encourage good communication and help people to identify and talk about the issues that are of concern to them. The workshops included professionals and local people with interests in recreational activities, fishing, tourism, economic regeneration, the natural and physical environment, and local communities.

Since the first process, there has been growing interest and regular stakeholder workshops for local users and the stakeholder list had grown from 100 to over 170 people. However fewer people chose to participate in the review than took part in the first scheme. Participants suggested that the lower attendance may reflect greater trust because there is now an expectation that managers will involve people in finding acceptable solutions for any new issues - rather than making decisions behind closed doors and imposing the results.

The Ecosystem Approach in Practice

The process was designed to meet all 12 of the Ecosystem Approach principles either in the way the process was designed (Principles 2,11 and 12) or in the content of the questions. The following tables list some of the questions that participants considered and identifies which Ecosystem Approach principles the question fulfils.

Table 1 - Scoping Questions

Questions	EA Principle
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is 2020 and you are looking at the sea and shore delighted with what you see. What do you see?	1 & 7
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What do you value now that you want people to be able to see of do in many years to come	7
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What coastal and marine plants do you value	5
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What does this coast and shore provide for us	5
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In the last 6 years what has changed for the better?	9
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What has changed for the worst?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thinking about different parts of the coast and sea<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the issues?• What is working well?• What else needs to happen?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ecosystem Questions<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What kind of changes do you think are occurring and what evidence do you have?• Which of these changes do you think are part of natural cycles and processes?• What are the possible effects of locked in changes such as sea level	6,7,8,9

- rise and climate change?
- Discuss possible ideas for long term objectives for the ecosystem and its function
- What are the options for defining the ecosystem/s – which one do you think works best?
- What research is needed?
- What action is needed to make this happen?

Following these overarching discussions, stakeholders were asked to consider in depth the management and sustainability of 49 activities categorised under the following headings:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1. Shoreline Management | 6. Ports and Harbors |
| 2. Fishing and Harvesting | 7. Research, Education and Wildlife tourism |
| 3. Shore Based Recreation | 8. Water Quality |
| 4. Water Based Recreation | 9. Species Management |
| 5. Air Based Activities | 10. Extraction of Hard Materials |

Each activity had its own 'Assessment Table' which reviewed current management and identified where new actions were needed. All the dialogue was summarised on paper in front of participants during the workshop to foster transparency and understanding. This information was then transferred to the Assessment Tables, which will form the working part of the management scheme. This has created a direct link between what people said in the workshops and the end product.

Table 2 – Assessment table questions

Questions	EA Principle
1 What is the long-term goal or vision for this activity?	1&8
2 What is the current situation?	
3 What are the current positive and negative effects of this activity on the following:	1&4
• Social, economic and cultural interests	1
• Habitats and species of local importance	1
• Protected species and habitats	5&6
• Ecosystem function	3
• Other ecosystems	
4 What is the current management?	
5 Will it get us where we want to go?	
6 Can the ecosystem support this activity over the long-term? (Will you be able to do this activity at this level in 100 years if not why not?)	8
7 What if anything do we need to do differently?	
8 What is the long-term effect of what we want to do on: socio-economic and cultural interests the environment and ecosystem function?	3, 4,5 & 6
9 How will we know if we are going in the right direction?	

The last workshop was held in June 2006 and the outputs had not been fully analysed when this article went to press. However the subjective view is that there has been a significant change in attitude. At the start of the first process eight years ago, the participants seemed to assume there was a threat to their interests and came into the process on the defensive. This time round stakeholders appeared to make the opposite assumption - that their activities can continue but may need minor modifications. Subject areas that the facilitation team anticipated would be quite heated were characterised by local stakeholders expressing the view that 'we

think that it is being well managed now', 'it is all in hand' and 'the management is going in the right direction'.

Future coastal management – stakeholders shape the proposals

The review confirmed that many actions identified in the first process should continue and be enhanced. This includes liaison between agencies, increased interpretation, education, and liaison between recreation users with active and positive problem solving. More research is needed into some activities such as kite boarding, shell fish harvesting and fossil collecting, including the location, numbers taking part, and effects. The Thanet Coast Project¹, set up following the first management scheme, has become valued by all stakeholders who are now concerned for its future viability and so action will be taken to make its funding more stable.

Following the review of how to improve management, stakeholders were asked to indicate their support for new initiatives. Some exiting new projects emerged and others gained fresh consideration, for example:

- A project that would blend public art, landscaping and wildlife interpretation
- A project to manage and market the coastal strip and near shore as a 'linear coastal park'
- New research into ecology and natural processes

One new suggestion was that part of the intertidal reef should be set-aside as a 'natural area'. This idea arose simultaneously from different discussion groups covering research, shellfish harvesting, fishing with shore nets, interpretation, and education. The proposal was for an area to be set aside 'for nature' where all other human activities would be discouraged – including all education ('rock pooling') and research other than monitoring. This is effectively an intertidal no take zone - an idea that has been contentious and strongly resisted when conservation agencies have proposed it elsewhere. Here it emerged from stakeholders themselves.

Table 3 - To what extent do you support the idea of a natural area?

I am completely opposed	I have strong concerns	I could live with it	I can support it	I can actively support it
	✓	✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓	✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓
What would need to happen for you to move your tick to the right? (sample of comments)				
	No human intervention. No policing / rubbish left and adjusting accordingly. – observe wildlife.	I just wonder how it can practically be achieved. Needs to have clear reason and understanding ie education, conservation, - but only if needed. Need to understand the objectives better	Link with education. Backing of partner organisations including funding. A workable proposal with information on funding and how it would be managed and 'policed'. Need to look into it further	I think there could be big benefits for wildlife so would actively support it If set up and taken in proper consultation

No one expected this process to be able to pin down the natural and human processes at work, that is a long-term challenge, but it has prompted a new discussion amongst scientists who are now thinking about the science needed to

inform the Ecosystem Approach in a coastal context. This includes how to define the local ecosystem/s, ecosystems function, resilience and limits, the relationships with adjacent or linked ecosystems, and finding ways to distinguish natural from human induced change. The Ecosystem Approach also requires better understanding of the cultural, social and economic systems involved in managing, using, and harvesting, the resources of the area and the feedback mechanisms between these and the natural systems.

Even before the resulting scheme is fully written there is good support for the contents and the agreed action.

Table 4 - To what extent do you support the content of the Management Scheme?

I don't agree	I agree in part but not totally	I can live with it	I can support it	I am very supportive
		✓	✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓ ✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓
What would need to happen for you to move your tick to the right? (sample of comments)				
		Providing better definitions Robust action –for dealing with conflict between coastal protection for people and property and impacts on nature conservation interests.	Obviously more funding would improve everything! I want to know how effective it has been after (say) a year. Please keep it as simple as possible. Put the proposed aims into practice. Scheme Requires much more working up.	If only we had the manpower to implement everything all at once!

Stakeholders view of the process

At the last workshop in the process stakeholders were also asked to comment on the workshops and process itself:

Integration

- Integration of nature conservation/social/economic issues
- The wide variety of topics

Good output

- Good product in the end - the management scheme
- Seeing in management plan much of what we discussed

Group discussion

- Being able to go into problems in detail
- Focus on individual issues and time to explore and discuss in more depth
- Gathering of opinions and sharing of knowledge

Being heard

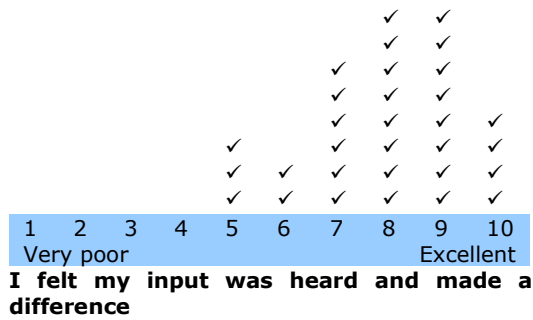
- To be allowed to put your own point of view over
- Small groups and facilitated discussions that give people the chance to be heard
- Facilitators approachable and non judgmental – and on-the-ball

Working together

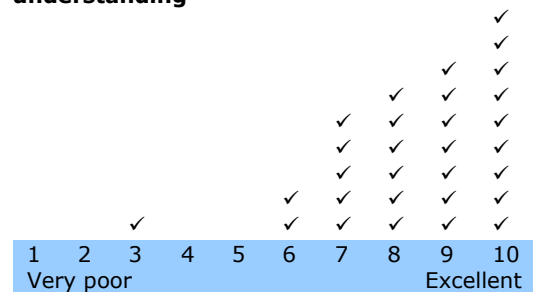
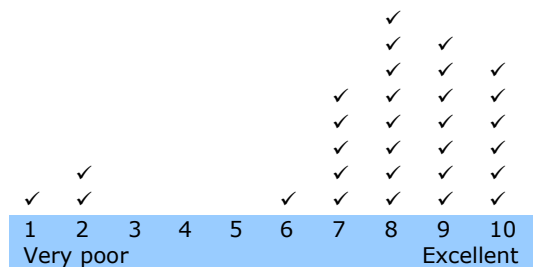
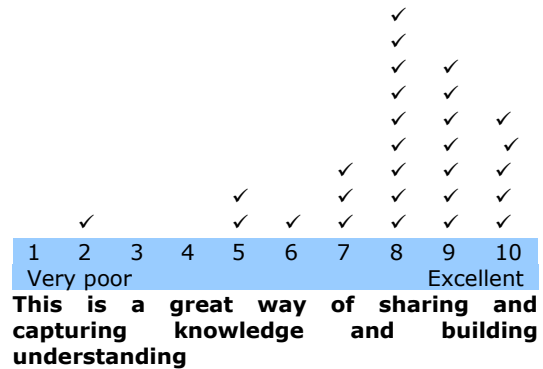
- The range of stakeholders that attended and their willingness to participate
- Meeting people from other groups
- The knowledge that there are a lot of like-minded people working together to achieve the same aims

This selection is of positive comments and there were also some helpful suggestions about how the process could have been improved. However the following graphs show that for the vast majority of people, these comments represent the feeling that the process worked well and that stakeholders from all sectors felt their input was heard and made a difference.

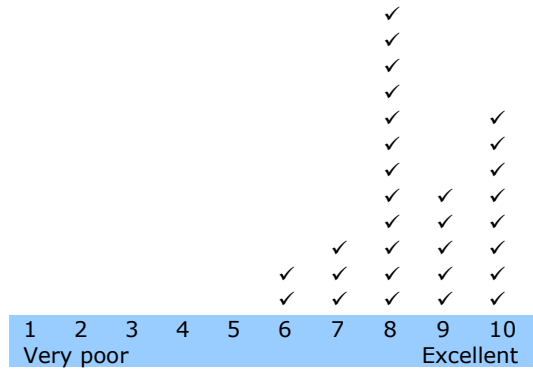
Overall how would you rate the process?



The workshops were well structured



I enjoyed taking part



Conclusion

The original stakeholder process in 1998/99 transformed a situation of tension to active co-operation and resulted in a new partnership project that helped to pioneer further innovative approaches to coastal management. The management scheme review in 2006 has again led the way as the first attempt in England (that we are aware of) to deliberately take the ecosystems approach, and integrate decision making across so many interests and sectors, for the better management of the coast.

It has been a complex project to run and when the process is reviewed we will no doubt identify ways it could have been improved. However all those involved feel

pleased at the outcome and there is good support for what will be the contents of the management scheme.

References

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