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By e-mail

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Dear Stakeholder

River Wye and Lugg SAC/SSSI assessment of indicative site condition using CSMG. Natural England March 2023

We are writing to inform you of a recent indicative site condition assessment of the River Wye and Lugg Sites of Scientific Special Interest (SSSI).

The River Wye (and part of the River Lugg) is designated SSSI and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), giving it the highest level of protection in the UK. This means making sure that it can support the life that depends on it, the business that depend on it and is healthy and thriving to provide enjoyment for generations to come

There is much work currently being undertaken by multiple stakeholders to support this work. We at Natural England work closely with the Environment Agency, using monitoring data and evidence collected by the EA to understand the health of the rivers and identify where best to make interventions.

Assessment

Natural England categorises the conditions of SSSI's based on condition assessments undertaken in line with Common Standards Monitoring Guidance (CSMG). These assessments are published on the Natural England Designated Site Viewer, which can be viewed here > Designated Site Viewer. For full details on condition assessments please see Appendix 2.

The River Wye and Lugg designated sites have a relatively complex set of aquatic plant and animal life, aka interest features, and conducting a full condition assessment of every feature of the river is a significant operation.

A full two-year assessment is planned to commence in 2024, but in the interim, ther Area Team has conducted a small-scale assessment, looking at four specific indicators to create an indicative assessment of the site as a whole.

Using CSMG with data and evidence from the Environment Agency, our assessment reviewed:

- Atlantic salmon
- Macrophytes
- Native white-clawed crayfish
- Water quality

The attribute that has received the most attention is water quality, as it is fundamental to the health of the river and in light of the "nutrient neutrality advice" in place for rivers failing water quality targets. Natural England regularly reviews the water quality targets, and the data is available here > environment.data.gov.uk/water-quality .

Assessment findings: summary
In summary, the river was largely previously classed as 'unfavourable - recovering'. As per CSMG if any one of the features is classed as either 'unfavourable', 'unfavourable - no change' or 'unfavourable - declining', the whole unit of the river is classed as such, irrespective of the status of the other interest features.

As at least one feature in both the Wye and the Lugg are showing declines, and we cannot be assured that all necessary management is currently in place, despite the significant efforts of many stakeholders, we have updated the SSSI condition status for the Wye and Lugg as 'unfavourable – declining', as shown in Table 1. For an explanation of the categories please see Table 2.

Assessment findings: River Lugg
Our recent assessment has identified that the River Lugg is showing declines in Atlantic salmon, and white Clawed Crayfish.

The Lugg is failing its water quality targets and the water quality in the Lugg is declining. Nutrient Neutrality advice remains in place for the Lugg.

Assessment findings: River Wye
In the River Wye we can see declines in macrophytes, salmon and white-clawed crayfish.

The Wye is not currently failing its water quality targets. Although the River Wye is close to its phosphate targets on some of the monitoring points, the latest evidence indicates levels have been stable. Nutrient Neutrality advice does not apply to the Wye as it is not failing its water quality targets.

For a more detailed review of the evidence used to determine condition, please read Appendix 1. For full details on condition assessments please see Appendix 2.

Action to address the issues
Clearly this change of condition is of concern for all with an interest in the Rivers. However, in light of the recent media coverage on the Wye and the health of UK rivers generally, we feel it is important to communicate this change transparently and provide an assurance as to what this means.

Our recent findings do not suggest a sudden decline in the Wye and Lugg SSSIs, and instead reflects the overall decline in health which we are all working collaboratively to halt, and to restore the health of the rivers.

We and other partners do not yet fully understand all the reasons for these declines, so further investigations are being conducted by the Environment Agency and other partners to build greater understanding. Meanwhile there is much activity by multiple partners to improve the health of the river and the outcomes for the species that depend on it.

Improving the condition of the river and reversing declines in species such as salmon and white-clawed crayfish is complex and challenging but are issues we must address.

Reducing phosphates in the river Wye SAC is also a complex issue, but one which we know is fundamental to the health of the river. Both the Environment Agency and Natural England together with our stakeholders are committed to reducing phosphate levels. The Nutrient Management Plan Board oversees the delivery of the Nutrient Management Action Plan to deliver reductions in phosphate. This is an iterative plan with further actions required to tackle this challenging issue. We are working with Herefordshire Council and Partners to improve the operations of the NMB board. Both the Environment Agency and Natural England continue to work with stakeholders to deliver the environmental improvements required to reverse the declining condition of this wonderful river.

Table 1: Change in Condition for River Wye and Lugg

Unit	River	Reach	Previous Condition on CMSi	Updated Condition on CSMi
1	River Wye	Tidal river - Estuary to Brockweir Bridge	Favourable	Unfavourable - Declining
2	River Wye	Brockweir Bridge to Monmouth	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
3	River Wye	Monmouth to Ross	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
4a	River Wye	Ross to Lugg Confluence	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
4b	River Wye	Lugg Confluence to Hereford	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
5	River Wye	Hereford to Bredwardine Bridge	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
6	River Wye	Bredwardine Bridge to Whitney Toll	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
7	River Wye	Whitney Toll to Hay	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
1	River Lugg	Bodenham Weir to Confluence with Wye	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining

2	River Lugg	Bodenham Weir to Leominster	Unfavourable - Recovering	Unfavourable - Declining
3	River Lugg	Leominster to Mortimers Cross	Unfavourable - Declining	Unfavourable - Declining
4	River Lugg	Mortimers Cross to Presteigne		Unfavourable - Declining

Table 2: The following table explains the condition categories.

SSSI Condition categories	
Condition status	**Explanation**
Favourable condition	The designated feature is being adequately conserved and the results from monitoring demonstrate that the feature is meeting all the mandatory site-specific monitoring targets set out in the Favourable Condition Tables (FCT). The FCT sets the minimum standard for favourable condition for the designated feature and there may be scope for the further (voluntary) enhancement of the feature.
Unfavourable recovering condition	Often known simply as 'recovering'. The Feature is not yet fully conserved, but all the necessary management measures are in place. Provided that the recovery work is sustained, the feature will reach favourable condition in time. At least one of the designated features mandatory attributes is not meeting their targets (as set out in the site specific FCT).
Unfavourable no-change condition	The feature is not being conserved, and will not reach favourable condition, unless there are changes to the management or external pressures and this is reflected in the results of monitoring over time; with at least one of the mandatory attributes not meeting its target (as set out in the site specific FCT) with the results not moving towards the desired state. The longer the feature remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.
Unfavourable declining condition	The feature is not being conserved and will not reach favourable condition unless there are changes to management or external pressures. The feature condition is becoming progressively worse, and this is reflected in the results of monitoring over time, with at least one of the designated features mandatory attributes not meeting its target (as set out in the site specific FCT) with the results moving further away from the desired state. The longer the feature remains in this poor condition, the more difficult it will be, in general, to achieve recovery.

Part destroyed condition	Lasting damage has occurred to part of a designated feature, such that it has been irretrievably lost and will never recover (no amount of management will allow the feature to ever reach favourable condition).
Destroyed condition	Lasting damage has occurred to an entire designated feature such that the feature has been irretrievably lost (no amount of management will bring this feature back). This feature will never recover e.g., a finite mineralogical feature has been totally removed from its surroundings without consent and is therefore lost forever.

Yours faithfully

Emma Johnson
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