

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK STATE OF THE PARK REPORT

CHAPTER 5. COAST

Vision for the Coast

Clean coastal waters, rich in wildlife. A coastline dominated by semi-natural vegetation and subject to the natural processes of sea and weather, with adequate access provided for people to enjoy these wild areas.

Objectives and Indicators

Objectives relate to the Exmoor National Park Management Plan
Indicators may be shared with those from other plans or organisations

LP - Exmoor National Park Local Plan
BVPP – Exmoor National Park Best Value Performance Plan
AC – Audit Commission
CA – Countryside Agency indicators used in their ‘State of the Countryside Reports’
RWP – The Government’s Rural White Paper ‘Our Countryside’
NPA – ‘Headline’ indicators developed by the National Park Authorities’ Data Working Group
RO – Indicators developed for the South West’s Regional Observatory

Objective 5/1

To conserve and enhance the cliffs and foreshores (and the littoral and sub-littoral zones offshore).

Indicators:

Extent of cliff and foreshore managed in line with National Park purposes

Objective 5/2

To maintain and, where appropriate, improve the quality of sea water along the Exmoor coastline.

Indicators:

Occasions on which tests fail to meet EU Bathing Water bacteriological and other standards

WHAT IS THE QUALITY OF THE SEA WATER ALONG THE EXMOOR COAST?

Current situation:

Bathing water quality is moderate

Trends:



Bathing water quality is improving.

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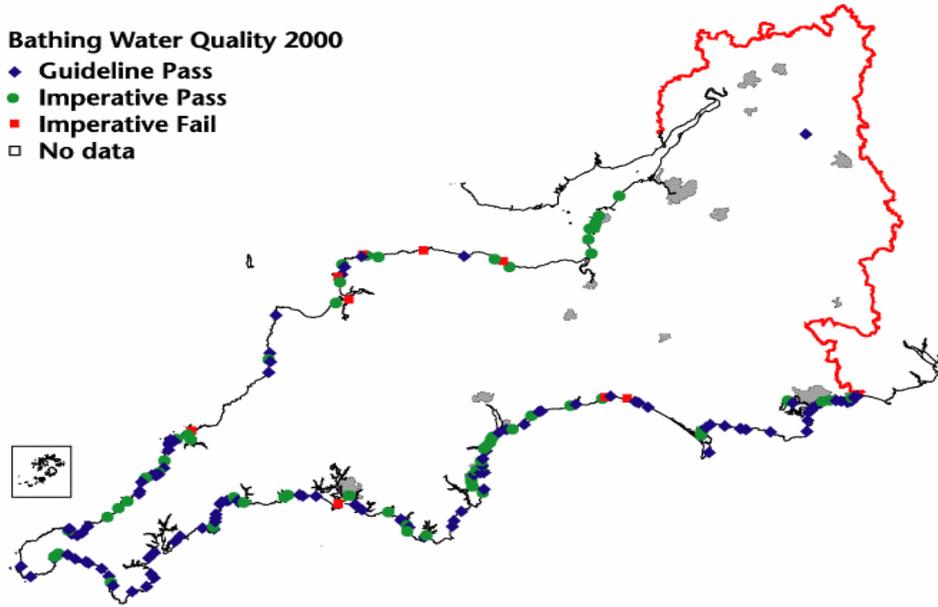
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In recent years there have been considerable efforts by water companies to improve the quality of sea water off the Exmoor coast and new sewage treatment works have been provided at Combe Martin, Lynmouth and Porlock. The dumping of sewage sludge in the Bristol Channel has now ceased and most is used in agriculture, despite a great increase in the production of sludge. In the year 2000 there were imperative passes at Combe Martin and Minehead, a guideline pass at Porlock and fail at Lynmouth. Since then ultra violet treatment facilities have been installed at Combe Martin and Lynmouth and in 2002 Combe Martin beach received a Blue Flag, which is an award for general environmental quality on and around the beach, including water quality. However, there is still concern about bathing water meeting the EU Bathing Water Directive bacteriological standards all along the coast and the year round. Measurements are only regularly taken at a few places and the smaller coves where much of Exmoor's bathing takes place are not included. There is little information about the full extent of pollution, including the effects on wildlife. The Government target is 97% compliance with mandatory (imperative) standards by 2005. Compliance of open beaches in the South West was 98%, so targets have been met although there are still some problems on Exmoor.

It is thought that global warming will lead to a deterioration in water quality, with an increase in algal blooms and a decrease in productivity of the sea. It may also result in a rise in sea level and increase in coastal erosion. The Environment Agency makes spot checks on the amount of chlorophyll in the water as an indicator of algal blooms and more extensive surveys of fluorescence by ship or plane to the same purpose. So far there is no evidence of blooms off the Exmoor coast, which remains one of the least contaminated in England and Wales. There has been a rise of sea level of 0.2 metre since 1915 but this is likely to increase by up to another 0.8 metre by 2050.

Bathing Water Quality 2000

- ◆ Guideline Pass
- Imperative Pass
- Imperative Fail
- No data



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Another concern is pollution from industrial areas in Wales and at the eastern end of the Bristol Channel. Although this tends to be diluted by the Atlantic waters off the Exmoor coast, the coastal waters, particularly from Porlock Bay eastwards, do have measurable levels of chemical pollutants and little is known about their effects. Of particular concern are the levels of cadmium and to a lesser degree some residual pesticides and hydrocarbons. The Exmoor coast does not suffer greatly from oil pollution but the recent 'Sea Empress' disaster in Milford Haven could easily have affected this area. There are occasional small spillages and oil can affect the wildlife of coastal sediments when it sinks and becomes bound up in the sediments. Nationally the amount of heavy metals entering the sea has declined considerably over the past 15 years but there has been a steady increase over the last 5 years. Another concern has been the increase in output of nitrates from fertilisers, with about 30% increase in discharge to the sea since 1990.

The coast does suffer heavily from marine litter, which can affect both wildlife and the quality of experience for the visitor. It detracts from the qualities of remoteness and wildness in what are otherwise the least spoiled parts of the National Park.

There are three nuclear power stations within the Bristol Channel area: Hinkley Point, Berkley and Oldbury. The Government has a programme to shut down the older Magnox gas cooled reactors and Hinkley A and Berkeley have been decommissioned or are in the process of decommissioning. Oldbury will be decommissioned in 2008 and Hinkley Point B Advanced Gas-cooled Reactor in 2011. There are no plans for any new reactors at present and radioactive discharges, already low and below the natural background radiation, are set to fall even further.

- *The Government has set targets to reduce tritium discharges from nuclear power stations by 70% and all other discharges by 85% by 2020. Current discharges in the Bristol Channel are well below the target levels. Exposure to radioactivity for persons eating fish or shellfish from the Bristol Channel is negligible and for those fishing in the areas of the power stations it is negligible at Berkley and Oldbury and for Hinkley Point it is currently 60% of the 2020 target and 1.2% of the maximum EU recommended level.*
Source: DEFRA, UK strategy for radioactive discharges 2001-2020.

HOW WELL PROTECTED IS THE EXMOOR COASTLINE?

Current situation:

A high proportion of the Exmoor coastline is protected through public ownership or SSSI status

There is little protection for offshore parts of the coastline

Trends:



There has been increasing protection for the Exmoor coastline through public ownership, management agreements and the creation of SSSIs

Designation of an area as a National Park does not automatically mean that its natural beauty and wildlife are protected, although it helps. Exmoor is one of only two National Parks in the UK with an open seaward boundary. It is not clear what the significance of this is, if any. The planning controls of the National Park Authority extend to the mean low water mark, as does the conservation interest as defined by the Wildlife and Countryside Act. The North Devon Voluntary Marine Conservation Area extends to include all of Combe Martin Bay along the edge of the National Park. As this has only voluntary status, there is no special protection for offshore parts of Exmoor. However, this does not mean that the National Park Authority should not take an interest in offshore areas and there is no reason why, with an open boundary to the sea, that National Park purposes, particularly those of understanding and enjoyment, should not extend offshore. The Land's End to Minehead Natural Area extends seawards to the 12 mile limit and is not a designation but forms part of English Nature's strategy for the coast.

In terms of designation, the Exmoor coastline must be among the best protected in the UK. It is all National Park and Heritage Coast and all of Exmoor's cliff and foreshore is categorised under Section 3 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act as land whose beauty it is particularly important to conserve. 82% of this cliff and foreshore falls within Sites of Special Scientific Interest. None of these sites, however, have been notified on the basis of their marine interest.

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There are areas of special geological interest, including Geological Conservation Review sites at Combe Martin beach, Hollowbrook, Crock Point, the Valley of Rocks and Glenthorne. All of these have now been incorporated into Geological or general SSSIs. Including areas owned by the National Trust, 82% of the cliff is in public ownership. Technically all of the foreshore is also in public ownership as it belongs to the Crown.

HOW STABLE ARE SEA BIRD POPULATIONS ON EXMOOR?

Current situation:

On the Exmoor coast there appear to be sustainable populations of razorbills, guillemots, fulmars and cormorants.

Populations of other seabirds appear to fluctuate greatly and illustrate their vulnerability.

Trends:



Although numbers are not stable, there appears to be no long term change in populations of guillemots, and razorbills on Exmoor.



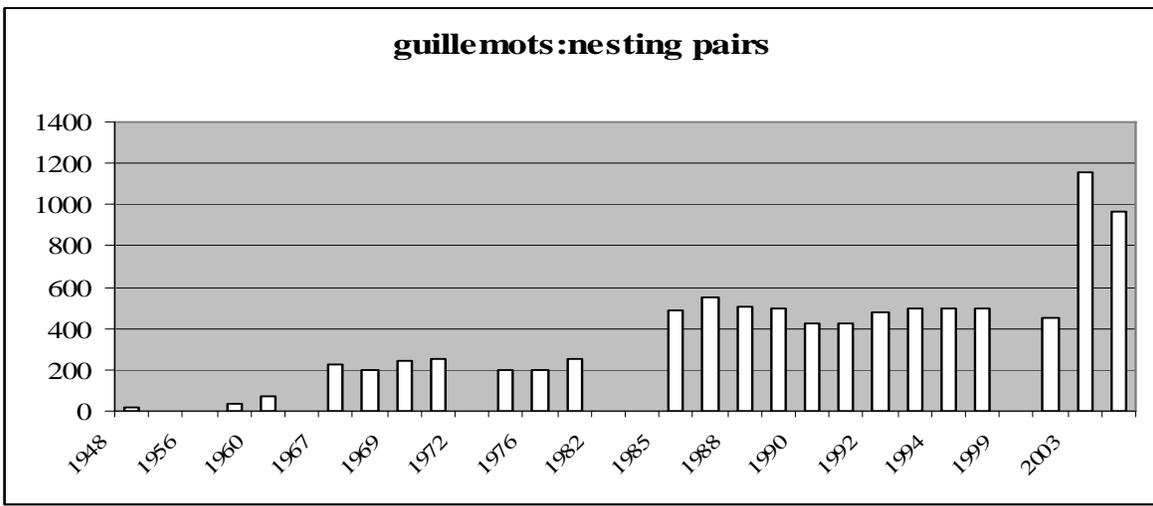
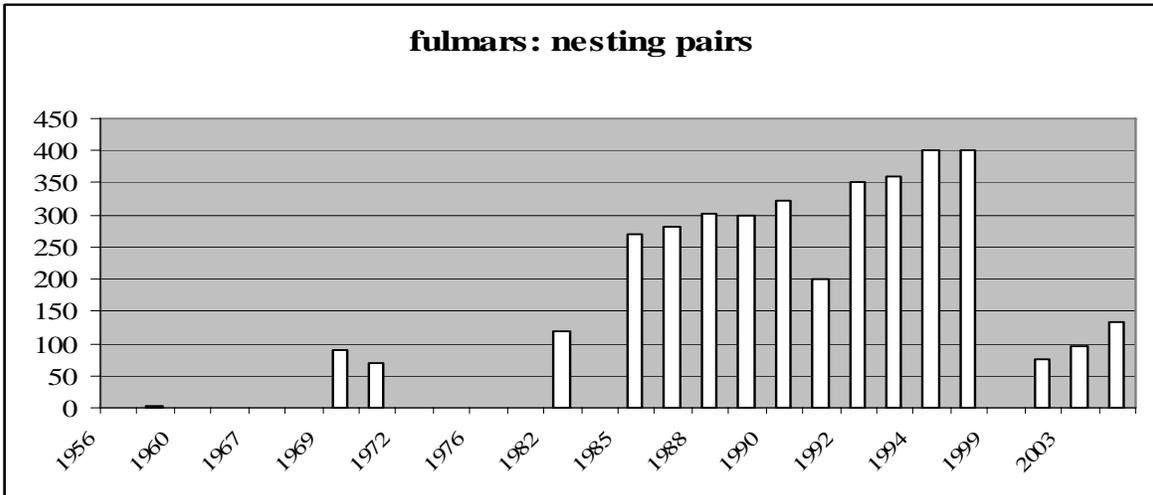
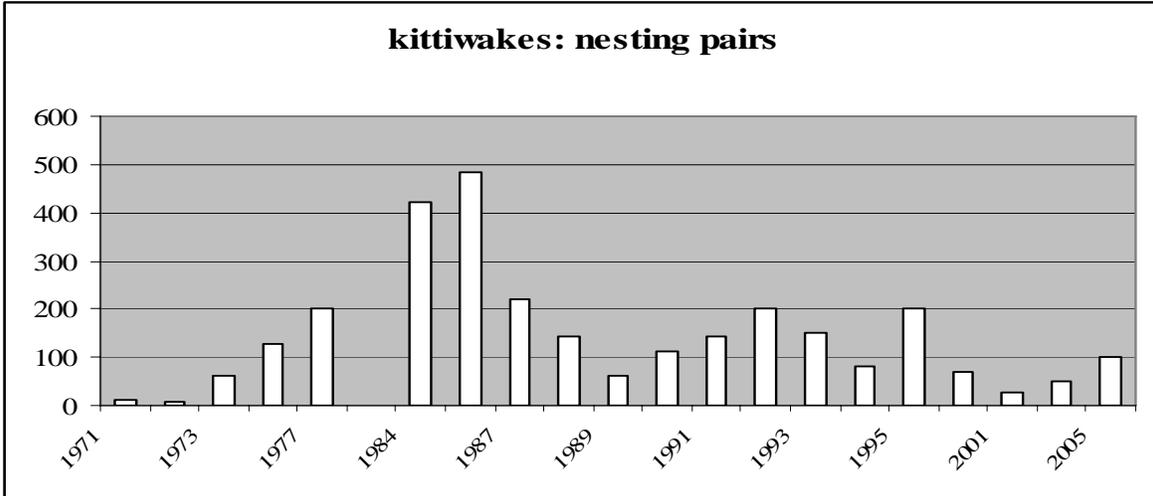
The population of kittiwakes reached a peak in 1985, then crashed and has never recovered. The population of fulmars crashed in the late 1990s and has not recovered.

The first kittiwakes arrived in 1970 and their numbers increased steadily until 1984, when there were 420 pairs between Lynmouth and Heddon's Mouth. In 1987 the population began to collapse, at least partly due to predation of the eggs by gulls. There are recorded incidents where disturbance by people has caused the adults to leave the nests long enough for gulls to snatch the eggs. In 1990 no young at all were reared. At the last count in 2005 there were 100 pairs and the population appeared to be slowly recovering.

Since the mid 1990s the bird counters have retired and regular counts only take place at Wringapeak. The birds do not necessarily return to the same ledges each year and the colonies are spread more widely and thinly than before, so the Wringapeak counts do not reflect the whole Exmoor population of any species. However, there appears to have been a recent steep decline in the numbers of razorbills and fulmars. There is concern that the populations of sand eels, the main food for the guillemots and razorbills, is declining through climate change and overfishing in other areas. The fish and bird populations are declining sharply in the North Sea, giving more importance to the Exmoor populations. Recent fluctuations in auk numbers, however, are partly due to the movement of nesting sites outside the range of the surveys. The 2005 survey was the most extensive, covering a ten mile range of nest sites.

During the 1970s and 1980s the gull population in the Bristol Channel declined through diseases induced by feeding from refuse tips. The population of herring gulls between Glenthorne and Minehead was 175 pairs in 1968, 61 pairs in 1980 and 31 pairs in 1987. As a result predation on other seabirds reduced and populations increased. Numbers of herring gulls are now building up: there were 162 nesting pairs on the cliffs between Lynmouth and Heddon's Mouth in 2001, 251 in 2003 and 213 in 2005. Numbers of great black backed gulls, however, appear to be low. The balance of seabird species is important and all should be monitored. Care also needs to be taken to avoid disturbance during the nesting season.

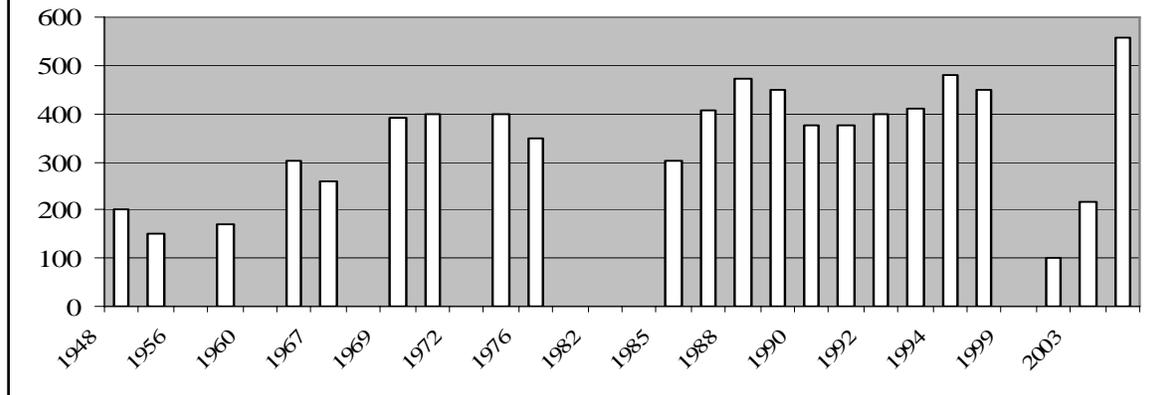
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razorbills: nesting pairs



Actions

This action is from the Exmoor National Park Management Plan

Action 5/1

Develop a coastal research strategy and coastal management plan

NB The information contained in this report is based upon the best information available at the time. Although every effort has been made to confirm its accuracy and ensure that it has been used in the proper context, Exmoor National Park Authority cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information.