

## **A summary / overview of the Sussex Heritage Coast, from inception to today 1973 - 2014**

### **I. BACKGROUND TO HERITAGE COASTS**

- I.1 Heritage Coasts were established in the 1970s to raise awareness of the vulnerability of the country's undeveloped coastline and to stimulate management to conserve their natural beauty and to improve accessibility. There are 32 Heritage Coasts in England; some 90% lie within AONBs and National Parks.
- I.2 About a third of the English coastline has this status (1,057km), but covers only 7% of the South East coast, due to the highly developed nature of the region (the proportion for the SW is 40%). The Sussex Heritage Coast was the first to be defined, stretching from Eastbourne, along the iconic chalk cliffs of Beachy Head and Seven Sisters, the Cuckmere (the SE's only undeveloped estuary), to Splash Point, Seaford.
- I.3 There is no statutory designation process (as with AONBs and National Parks), but they are formally defined by agreement between relevant maritime local authorities and Natural England. There are no specific statutory powers or obligations, but they did have to be identified on Structure and Local Development Plans<sup>1</sup> and be a material consideration in planning terms. Now, under the National Planning Policy Framework, there are specific references to restricting development<sup>2</sup> and maintaining character<sup>3</sup>.
- I.4 The national purposes of Heritage Coasts are to:
- I. Conserve, protect and enhance the natural beauty of the coasts, their maritime flora and fauna, and heritage features.
  - II. Facilitate and enhance their enjoyment, understanding and appreciation by the public (*extending recreational, educational, sporting and tourist activities drawing on and consistent with their natural beauty and protection of heritage*).
  - III. Maintain and improve the health of inshore waters affecting Heritage Coasts and their beaches through appropriate environmental management measures.
  - IV. Take account of the needs of agriculture, forestry and fishing, and of the economic and social needs of the small communities on these coasts (*promoting social and economic development that helps conserve and enhance natural beauty and heritage features*).
- I.5 A policy framework was produced in 1992, which redefined the purposes of Heritage Coasts and specified that “Every Heritage Coast should have a management plan incorporating targets and a timetable for their implementation”. These targets, to deliver on the purposes, required a timetable to be implemented by 2000:

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<sup>1</sup> Coastal Planning (PPG 20), 1992: “the planning policies to be pursued in Heritage Coasts and the uses and activities which are or are not to be permitted should be defined and local plans should contain clear policies on public access to the coast”

<sup>2</sup> “At the heart of the National Planning Policy Framework is a presumption in favour of sustainable development ... For plan-making and decision-taking this means ... specific policies (relating to ... land designated as ... Heritage Coast) in this Framework indicate development should be restricted” (NPPF, S.14)

<sup>3</sup> “Local planning authorities should maintain the character of the undeveloped coast, protecting and enhancing its distinctive landscapes, particularly in areas defined as Heritage Coast, and improve public access to and enjoyment of the coast” (NPPF S.114)

- I. Creation or retention of a strip of grassland or semi-natural vegetation behind the beach or cliff edge; removal or amelioration of eyesores; protection and enhancement of landscape features.
  - II. Continuous coast path along each Heritage Coast and all rights of way in the Heritage Coast properly managed.
  - III. All intensively used beaches on Heritage Coasts to be designated as ‘bathing beaches’ (in line with the EC directive); litter clearance and collection to be related to the highest standards for amenity beaches.
  - IV. No specific targets proposed.
- I.6 An evaluation and review of Heritage Coasts was carried out in 2006<sup>4</sup>. This provided an overview, with a potted history of their evolution and how the designation had fared over the years. It concluded with a series of options for potentially taking forward:
- i. **National policy development and delivery focus** – important that the mix of policy challenges facing England’s most scenic coasts are recognised at a national level, due to high development demands and high levels of recreational use in a fragile natural environment; this requires policy solutions to be tailored, developed at a national level by Natural England, with other government departments; also, a national forum, a network of people working in Heritage Coasts.
  - ii. **Heritage Coast purposes** – these are closely aligned with those of National Parks (and AONBs (but note point v below)); however, a lack of a coastal focus, due to wider Protected Area concerns, means that the distinctive needs and opportunities of coasts are not being met; the National Park (and AONB) Management Plan needs to give the Heritage Coast specific attention.
  - iii. **Heritage Coast not attached to AONBs / National Parks** – not relevant to the Sussex Heritage Coast, as this is within the South Downs National Park.
  - iv. **Heritage Coast brand** – there is high regard for Heritage Coast status because of the way it draws attention to the special qualities of the coast and can attract funding for specific projects; it is recommended that Natural England retains ‘ownership’ of the status, whilst accepting that the purposes will be delivered through the statutory landscape designations (SDNP).
  - v. **The inter-tidal and marine remit** – the third purpose of Heritage Coasts (re the environmental health of inshore waters) has taken on greater significance due to the implementation of Integrated Coastal Zone Management and the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009; AONBs and National Parks have an uncertain remit beyond the mean low water mark, but Heritage Coast designation could provide a valuable contribution, though this needs to be formally recognised and supported by Natural England or Defra to gain the necessary technical expertise to allow them to contribute.
- I.7 Natural England replaced the Countryside Agency shortly after this review was published. It has put this document on its website and reiterated the Heritage Coast objectives, but has not progressed anything specific since. However, it has made coastal and marine issues a priority and produced a number of reports and other information. These have included coastal access, seascape character assessment and marine conservation zones (much stemming from the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009), which are relevant to Heritage Coasts. As mentioned above (para 1.3) Heritage Coasts are highlighted in the new National Planning Policy Framework.

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<sup>4</sup> “Review and Evaluation of Heritage Coasts in England” Report to the Countryside Agency by Land Use Consultants, July 2006

1.8 The most significant recent development has been the establishment of the Marine Management Organisation, which has the major role to play in managing the marine environment and producing Marine Plans. The work on the South Marine Plan has just started, so now is an ideal time to integrate Heritage Coast objectives and action.

## 2 SUSSEX HERITAGE COAST

2.1 In Sussex, when the first Heritage Coasts were being recommended, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) set about drafting management policies for the Sussex Heritage Coast<sup>5</sup>. This was intended as a discussion document, noting a series of issues pertinent to the planning and management of the coast and seeking an agreed policy framework to guide future action. A **policy statement** was produced<sup>6</sup>, adopted by ESCC, Lewes and Wealden District Councils, with the objectives approved and policies noted by Eastbourne Borough Council.

2.2 The defined Sussex Heritage Coast lies between Seaford and Eastbourne, with the A259 road as its northern boundary. However, the Downs behind this coastal strip were also included in the policy statement, taking the area up to the A27. The objectives were set as follows:

- 1 To maintain the valued character of the landscape; in particular, its variety of scene, and its rural atmosphere.
- 2 To safeguard the interests of farming, forestry, water supply, nature conservation, and residents.
- 3 To provide for recreation activities that are based on the resources of the area, and do not damage them.
- 4 To provide for a variety of tastes in type of recreation activity, and in degree of solitude.
- 5 To ensure that recreation activities do not conflict with each other, and that the enjoyment of visitors is not spoilt by the numbers of others present.

The policies covered a number of themes: Recreation Activities; Vehicle Access and Car Parking; Land Accessible to the Public; Camping and Caravanning; Services for Recreation; Information and Interpretation; Eyesores; Trees; Design; Development. A short Action statement concluded the policy statement.

2.3 This policy statement became a useful tool in both ensuring plans took account of this nationally significant landscape and stimulating action on the ground. In planning, although some of the more radical measures proposed (such as land-use zoning and one-way street traffic schemes) were not adopted, the basic protection of the Heritage Coast was taken on board (eg eyesore removal, access management and development control). Action focused on an innovative Heritage Coast Project that was set up by East Sussex County Council, in line with three national pilot projects<sup>7</sup> sponsored by central government, through the Countryside Commission; though, for the Sussex Heritage Coast, without the benefit of government funding (the pilots received 75 per cent grant aid).

2.4 The Heritage Coast Projects innovated in a number of **countryside management** areas, which had been rarely seen outside of the National Parks. In Sussex, though

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<sup>5</sup> "Management Policies for the Sussex Heritage Coast - Draft Report" ESCC, June 1973

<sup>6</sup> "Sussex Heritage Coast Policy – a statement of objectives and policies for its planning and management" ESCC, March 1976

<sup>7</sup> Dorset, the Gower and Suffolk

some of the quasi-planning notions did not come to fruition, there were a number of practical ideas that were implemented, later extended across the AONB and provided some of the foundations for the South Downs National Park Authority. Some of the original ideas and projects should be re-visited with a rejuvenation of the Heritage Coast concept. The following paragraphs of this section highlight examples of the Heritage Coast / South Downs Conservation Project.

- 2.5 In the early 1970s, public **rights of way** in East Sussex were maintained on a largely reactive basis across the county, with a minimal maintenance programme and no prioritisation to popular routes or areas. Initially, the Project utilised a few volunteers from the Ramblers Association to tackle some path repairs.
- 2.6 Then, in 1981, the South Downs **Volunteer Ranger Service** (VRS) was founded in the Heritage Coast area, initially to tackle rights of way improvements, but became increasingly involved in basic public paths maintenance to compensate for the county council's insufficient resources to meet the demands in this highly popular area. The VRS expanded its role into conservation projects and, as numbers increased, soon operated every weekend and some weekdays too. The VRS expanded westwards and by 1987 was covering the whole of the East Sussex AONB. Over the next few years, first in West Sussex, then Hampshire companion Volunteer Ranger Services were set up and the VRS thrives today, across the entire South Downs, working with many different organisations and administered by the SDNPA.
- 2.7 The other chief manpower resource at the time came from the government's desire to cut unemployment, with **Manpower Services Commission training schemes**. At its height, in the mid-1980s, the Heritage Coast / AONB project ran two eight-person practical teams, a small interpretation team and admin support, with a total of 22 trainees employed at any one time, supporting the two officers in post employed by the county council. The practical teams accelerated the rights of way maintenance and improvement work, undertook some ambitious conservation programmes working with private and public landowners in the area, and were an invaluable trouble-shooting resource, for example, helping clear up the post-storm devastation in 1987. The interpretive team launched a comprehensive guided walks programme, provided a useful visitor service with much needed information and produced a range of interpretation, such as panels to explain key Heritage Coast features (eg Long Man, coastal geology and landscape) and educational material, which helped in introducing conservation projects (eg scrub clearance and sheep grazing on chalk grassland).
- 2.8 In 1982 the National Trust purchased land at Birling Gap to add to its holding there, part of the larger Crowlink estate, which it acquired in the 1920s, arguably the birth of the South Downs protection movement. It did this through its Enterprise Neptune campaign (with its aim to buy up undeveloped coastline – since its inception in 1965 it has accumulated nearly 750 miles around Britain). Chyngton Farm, on the Cuckmere's west bank was bought in 1993; and in 2013, the Trust used Neptune again for Gayles Farm, lying to the west of Crowlink. Nearly all the Sussex Heritage Coast is in public or quasi-public ownership, from Beachy Head at its eastern end (Eastbourne Borough Council) to the west, with Seven Sisters Country Park (East Sussex County Council) and Seaford Head (formerly Lewes District Council, now Seaford Town Council).
- 2.9 On the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1987 David Bellamy came ashore, wading onto the beach at Seven Sisters Country Park and officially declared open the new **Seven Sisters Voluntary Marine Conservation Area**. This was the culmination of over three years of

research, engagement of key bodies and individuals, and general consultation (with some 40 organisations identified with a direct interest in the coastal and marine environment). This completed the link between the action on land with the traditional terrestrial role of the authorities working in the area (addressing Heritage Coast purposes I, II and IV) and the integral marine world of the inshore waters (Heritage Coast purpose III). Over the next few years monitoring of the sea continued (through Seasearch surveys), environmental education with the popular rock-pool rambles and involvement of most of the interest groups in the area, though the full engagement of commercial fishermen was not achieved.

- 2.10 With the coming of the Sussex Downs Conservation Board (1992) the Heritage Coast area was incorporated into the Sussex Downs **AONB Management Plan** and work programmes. In 2005 the East Hampshire Joint Advisory Committee merged with the Sussex Downs Conservation Board to create the South Downs Joint Committee. The Sussex Downs AONB Management Plan was superseded by the South Downs Management Plan 2008-13, produced in preparation for the forthcoming South Downs National Park (which was confirmed in 2009).
- 2.11 There is a statutory requirement to have a **Management Plan for the National Park** and this has been a key focus for the new SDNPA. Following early engagement in defining the sense of place and determining what people thought were the special qualities of the Park, a State of the Downs report was produced, to provide a baseline of key facts and figures. Since then, the central work on drafting the Management Plan has been undertaken, involving key partners responsible for various elements of delivery in the SDNP, along with extensive consultation. It was published in December 2013 and covers the period 2014 – 19. There is a clear reference to the Heritage Coast<sup>8</sup>, along with an emerging delivery framework designed to capture the significant work areas and the responsible organisations.
- 2.12 Following on from the South Downs Partnership Management Plan will be the **Local Plan** for the National Park. One idea might be to split this into perhaps four spatial areas, to cover the complexity of the different areas of the Park, with an eastern / coastal section as one of the spatial areas. It is anticipated that this will be published in 2016 or 2017.

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<sup>8</sup> South Downs Management Plan (extract)

**Policy 7:** Actively promote more joined-up & sustainable management of the coast, including the defined area of the Sussex Heritage Coast, through Integrated Coastal Zone Management.

**Delivery Framework, Outcome 2, no. 23 Heritage Coast:** Develop a partnership & plan for the effective protection & management of this defined & heavily visited area (Links Local Plan & South Marine Plan)