

REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF HERITAGE COASTS IN ENGLAND

Executive Summary



Report to The Countryside Agency
by Land Use Consultants
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This paper evaluates the 32 Heritage Coasts defined in England to determine how effective they have been in achieving their original objectives, the impacts they have had on the management of their coastlines (both terrestrial and marine) and the implications that these have for Natural England's developing policy towards coastal management.

The study has been conducted between January and March 2006. It has drawn primarily on telephone interviews with staff involved in delivering the Heritage Coast purposes and with other stakeholders, and secondly it has used a desk-based analysis of national coastal policy and previous studies on Heritage Coasts.

Many individuals with experience of Heritage Coasts, including a small steering group from the Countryside Agency and the Northumberland Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, have contributed information to the study. Their assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Nonetheless, the study has sought to provide an independent evaluation and any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

The history of the Heritage Coast designation

The first work to define the coastline of greatest scenic quality took place during and just after World War II. But it wasn't until 1970, following a decade of concern about the impact that urban development was having on these coasts, that the definition of Heritage Coast status was formally proposed. Reports by the Countryside Commission identified 34 stretches of coast in England and Wales (covering a length of some 730 miles equivalent to 27% of the coastline) of exceptional or very good scenic quality and called for these Heritage Coasts to be given a statutory designation and purposes.

The Government's response accepted the overall objectives and the role for defined areas of Heritage Coast but rejected any new statutory designation, preferring that the existing designation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (which over-lapped strongly with the proposed Heritage Coasts) should be used instead. This left the adoption, definition and management of Heritage Coast to Local Authorities, in consultation with the Countryside Commission (particularly in terms of the definition of boundaries). The Countryside Commission also indicated that it would provide funding for coastal management to Local Authorities that adopted Heritage Coasts, usually to a rate of 50% of costs. This would fund the employment of a Heritage Coast Officer by the Local Authority and the preparation, by them, of a Management Plan. Although Heritage Coast status would confer no new statutory powers or obligations, they were to be identified on County Structure and Local Development Plans and would be a material consideration in planning terms.

To demonstrate the process of definition and to develop best practice in developing management programmes in Heritage Coasts, the Countryside Commission funded three pilots in the Suffolk, Purbeck and Glamorgan Heritage Coasts which ran successfully during the period 1974 to 1977. There was interest from many Local Authorities during and after the pilot programme and by 1980, 19 stretches of Heritage Coast had been defined latterly, with a further 5 in the 1980s, 7 in the 1990s and 1 in 2001. Full definition of the terrestrial boundaries usually took a little longer. Figure 1 lists the Heritage Coasts in chronological order of their full definition. A similar programme of definition took place in Wales over the same period (leading to 14 Heritage Coasts accounting for about a third of the Welsh coastline).

Figure 1. Heritage Coasts in England, listed chronologically by date of full definition

Name	Lateral def.	Full definition
Sussex	1973	April 1973
Isles Of Scilly	1974	Dec. 1974
North Norfolk	1975	April 1975
Suffolk	1973	Sept. 1979
N Yorks & Cleveland	1974	May 1981
Purbeck	1981	June 1981
West Dorset	1984	Feb. 1984
East Devon	1984	June 1984
Rame Head	1976	April 1986
Gribbin Head – Polperro	1976	April 1986
The Roseland	1976	April 1986
The Lizard	1976	April 1986
Penwith	1976	April 1986
Godrevy – Portreath	1976	April 1986
St Agnes	1976	April 1986
Trevoise Head	1976	April 1986

Name	Lateral def.	Full definition
Pentire - Widemouth	1976	April 1986
Hartland (Cornwall)	1976	April 1986
South Devon	1986	Dec. 1986
Spurn	1988	Oct. 1988
Hamstead	1974	Dec. 1988
Tennyson	1974	Dec. 1988
Flamborough Head	1979	Aug. 1989
Hartland (Devon)	1990	Feb. 1990
Lundy	1990	Feb. 1990
Exmoor	1991	April 1991
St Bees Head	1992	Feb. 1992
N. Northumberland	1973	April 1992
North Devon	1992	Aug. 1992
South Foreland	1998	Jan. 1998
Dover-Folkestone	1998	Jan. 1998
Durham	2001	Mar. 2001

National policy objectives

The most recent national policy framework for Heritage Coasts in England was provided by the Countryside Commission in 1992.

This redefined the purposes of Heritage Coast, and specified that “Every Heritage Coasts should have a management plan incorporating targets (Box I), and a timetable for their implementation by the year 2000”.

Box I. The national purposes and targets of Heritage Coasts

Purposes	Targets (abbreviated)
1. To conserve, protect and enhance the natural beauty of the coasts, including their terrestrial, littoral and marine flora and fauna, and their heritage features of architectural, historical and archaeological interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The creation or retention of a strip of grassland or semi-natural vegetation behind the beach or cliff edge. The removal or amelioration of eyesores The protection and enhancement of landscape features
2. To facilitate and enhance their enjoyment, understanding and appreciation by the public by improving and extending opportunities for recreational, educational, sporting and tourist activities that draw on, and are consistent with, the conservation of their natural beauty and the protection of their heritage features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A continuous coast path along each Heritage Coast and all rights of way in the Heritage Coast properly managed.
3. To maintain, and improve (where necessary) the environmental health of inshore waters affecting Heritage Coasts and their beaches through appropriate works and management measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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
4. To take account of the needs of agriculture, forestry and fishing, and of the economic and social needs of the small communities on these coasts, by promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development, which in themselves conserve and enhance natural beauty and heritage features	

Although Heritage Coasts are not subject to any statutory development control processes, Planning Policy Guidance Note 20: Coastal Planning (PPG 20), which was published in September 1992, clarified Local Planning Authorities responsibilities towards

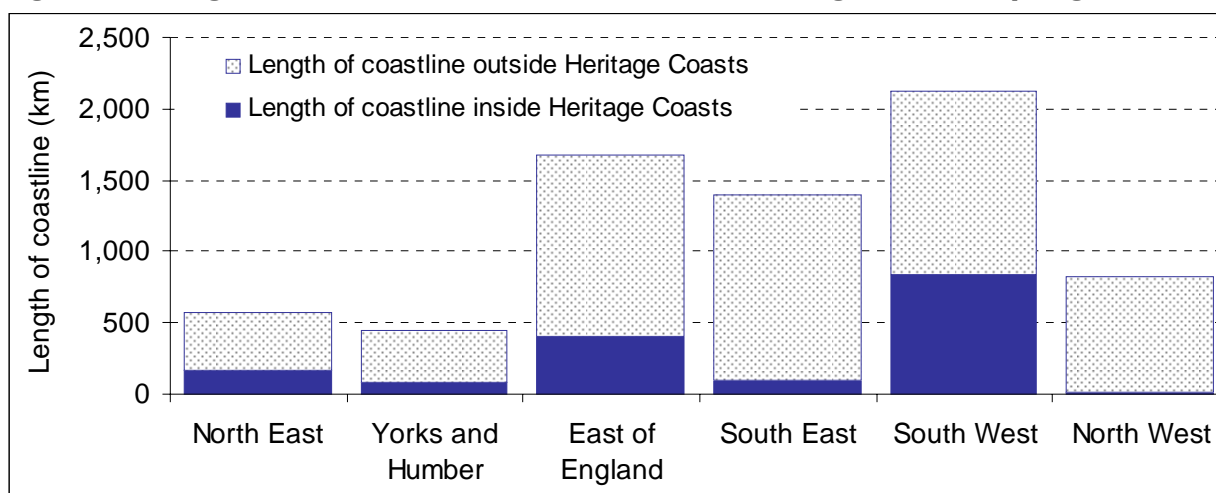
Heritage Coasts. It states “the planning policies to be pursued in Heritage Coasts and the uses and activities which are or are not to be permitted should be defined and local plans should contain clear policies on public access to the coast”.

The extent of Heritage Coasts

The distribution of Heritage Coasts amongst the English regions is not even. As Figure 2 shows, the South West has by far the greatest length of Heritage Coasts (two thirds of the total length), with the North East, East of England, Yorkshire and Humber and South East all accounting for less than 15% of the total length each. The South

West also has the greatest proportion of its coastline under designation (40%), followed by the North East (30%) and the East of England (24%). Yorkshire and Humberside has 19% of this coastline in Heritage Coasts, the South East 7%, the North West less than 1% and the East Midlands none. The West Midlands has no coastline.

Figure 2. Lengths of coastline inside and outside Heritage Coasts, by region.



Source: GIS analysis by this study

There is a large overlap between Heritage Coasts and AONBs and, to a lesser extent, National Parks. Overall 89% of the total Heritage Coasts area in England lies within these designations. Only the Durham, Flamborough Headland, Spurn, Lundy and St Bees Head Heritage Coasts are independent of AONBs or National Parks.

Twelve of the 36 AONBs, and two of the nine National Parks have stretches of Heritage Coast. For eight of the AONBs the Heritage Coasts occupies a substantial proportion of the AONB (the Northumberland Coast, Norfolk Coast, Suffolk Coast and Heaths, Isle of Wight,

South Devon, Cornwall, Isles of Scilly and North Devon AONBs).

In 1993, the National Trust calculated that nearly 40% of the coastline of Heritage Coasts was in their ownership or direct protection. This proportion is likely to have increased since then as the National Trust have continued to purchase land under the Neptune Coastline Campaign.

The role of Heritage Coasts to 1995

During the 20 year period to 1995, Heritage Coasts were one of the most high profile and influential programmes operated by the Countryside Commission. During this period, most Heritage Coasts in England demonstrated successful partnership working between the host Local Authority and the Countryside Commission. In a minority, such as St Bees Head, the initial interest of the Local Authority which led to definition of the Heritage Coast, was not translated into a lasting programme of work.

During this period Heritage Coasts were particularly active in visitor and landscape management, revolving around the post of the Heritage Coast officer, usually based within the Local Authority Countryside Management Team. But most Heritage Coasts seem to have been less successful over this period at providing a strategic overview of land use and landscape protection. Few Heritage Coasts saw the levels of partnership working that are now considered fundamental to rural development initiatives and landscape designations.

Heritage Coasts since 1995

Since 1995, the priority attached to Heritage Coasts by the Countryside Agency has declined, in favour of support for the Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and work with rural communities (such as the Market Towns Initiative). As funding by the Countryside Agency to Local Authorities with Heritage Coasts has declined, Heritage Coast units have tended to dissolve, with most Local Authorities transferring their funding and interest to their AONBs (where they exist) or to initiatives in the wider countryside. Where staffing posts with a stronger coastal remit are in place, this is

usually the result of new external funding acquired for specific projects.

Compared to the activity that took place in the 'hey day' of Heritage Coasts, AONBs are now less involved in 'hands on' management but take a more strategic role and rely on the activities of partner organisations to deliver AONB purposes. This difference is less marked in the two National Parks that contain Heritage Coasts (the North York Moors and Exmoor) where their warden service maintains an active presence 'on the ground'.

While regretting the reduction in direct management of the coastal environment by Local Authorities, many consultees recognise the benefits of the more integrated approach which reflects the changed national priorities established for AONBs. There is now more synergy between the objectives pursued by all statutory (and most non-governmental) bodies than was previously the case, accepting that the time needed to develop and maintain these relationships (through strategies and management plans) can divert resources away from actual delivery by these bodies.

National co-ordination

The Heritage Coast Forum provided a valuable function during the period to the mid 1990s when it received core funding to bring together and disseminate experience from Heritage Coast units. Although this role has been partly taken on by the charity Coastnet, its remit is now far wider and its funding is tied to specific projects. As a result, there is little ongoing sharing of best practice between the AONBs and other bodies working in the Heritage Coasts.

Delivery of Heritage Coast purposes

The decade that has passed since Heritage Coasts operated under a nationally funded and coordinated programme means that it is difficult to be categorical about the success of the designation during this earlier period. Nevertheless, there is good evidence that:

- a) Heritage Coast teams were effective in intervening directly at a local level to protect and improve the coastal landscape, facilitate visitor management and interpretation and involve local communities in the protection of the coastal environment (parts of Purposes 1, 2 and 4).
- c) The environmental health of inshore waters was interpreted narrowly, being primarily associated with reducing the impact of marine pollution (such as litter). There was little work in the marine, as opposed to littoral, environment (Parts of Purpose 1 and Purpose 3).
- c) The adoption of effective planning policies that sought to protect Heritage Coasts' special qualities appears to have been patchy. Most of the effort put into coastal zone planning has not borne fruit (Parts of Purposes 1 and 4).
- d) The programme was successful in developing a positive national profile for the designation as a prestigious accolade that Local Authorities valued.

Overall, while it is not now possible to make a full financial evaluation of the programme, the Countryside Commission and Agency's co-funding of locally-based project officers does seem to have delivered significant benefits against the policy priorities that were current at the time.

Returning to the present, the delivery of Heritage Coast purposes has been superseded in most of the defined coasts by the purposes of the AONB and National Park designations. There are strong similarities between these purposes (particularly the primary purpose of the conservation of natural beauty) and the focus remains on natural beauty, enjoyment and understanding and economic and social well-being of communities. However, these programmes now take a generic approach to the countryside as a whole and the distinctive coastal emphasis of Heritage Coasts is generally not reflected in current activities (with some significant exceptions).

As noted above, there are advantages to the geographically broader and more strategic approach now used in AONBs and National Parks that was often lacking in Heritage Coasts. However, the critical point is that, in the absence of any dedicated delivery agency or multi-agency management plan that has a specific focus on the coastal zone, the needs of this scenically and economically important zone must compete for resources with other areas of the designated landscapes.

The agri-environment schemes (mainly the Countryside Stewardship Scheme in the past and now the Environmental Stewardship scheme) have been key mechanisms for maintaining and enhancing the natural beauty of the wider landscape backing the coast. If these schemes are to help deliver the distinctive public benefits appropriate to the Heritage Coasts, Local Authorities and other agencies supporting Heritage Coast purposes have an important role to play in ensuring adequate targeting of these schemes to the coastal zone and in facilitating applications by landowners. In the absence of active Heritage Coast programmes there is little evidence that

this targeting and facilitation is taking place, even in many of the Heritage Coasts that lie in AONBs or National Parks.

In relation to the second purpose of Heritage Coasts, of promoting public enjoyment and understanding of the Heritage Coast, the reduction in 'hands on' visitor and countryside management has meant a switch to more generic promotion and interpretation, particularly in most of the AONBs.

The needs and views of local communities and businesses appear to receive greater attention in Heritage Coasts now than they did in the early 1990s. Again, this is the result of the broader strategic and partnership-based approach being taken by AONBs and National Parks (particularly in relation to the development of their Management Plans) as well as to the greater national policy priority applied to social inclusion in relation to the environment.

Activities in the marine environment

Heritage Coasts have one purpose that is not covered in AONBs and National Parks - the environmental health of inshore waters. This was narrowly interpreted in the 1990s (relating mainly to freedom of beaches from litter and to bathing water quality) and is now not particularly evident in the current objectives being pursued in Heritage Coasts.

Most coastal AONBs would like to have more involvement in the marine environment but feel constrained by their terrestrial boundary. Heritage Coasts where there is more involvement in marine protection and management issues are those where there are specific marine designations that justify this involvement (such as Marine Nature Reserve and World Heritage Site status).

While people working in Heritage Coasts are conscious of the emerging national and regional activity in relation to Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM), the Marine Bill and the second round of Shoreline Management Plans (SMP), there has been little significant involvement at the level of most Heritage Coasts to date.

While AONBs and National Parks may not have the technical background in marine and shoreline policy, their inclusive partnership structures and integrating approach to sustainable development merit greater involvement in the local development and implementation of these policies in future

The Heritage Coast 'brand'

Many consultees to this study commented that Heritage Coast status has been, and continues to be, valuable as a 'badge' that has the support of local communities. This status is considered helpful to promote the area for tourism, to highlight the need for policies to address development pressure, and to attract external funding for environmental work. With the cessation of national core funding for Heritage Coasts, this marketing and awareness raising aspect of Heritage Coast status is one of the key reasons why it continues to be kept alive by Local Authorities (when in almost all respects, Heritage Coast purposes are now being delivered under different programmes of work).

Options for the future

These conclusions point the way to a number of options for the future of the Heritage Coast designation.

1. **A national policy development and delivery focus.** It is important that the particular mix of policy challenges facing England's most

scenically attractive coastal areas are recognised at a national level. The combination of high demand for development, high levels of recreational use, a fragile natural environment and, in some coastal communities, the need for economic and social renewal, requires policy solutions that will be unique, or at least specially tailored, to this part of England's landscape.

This suggests a strengthened coastal policy unit in Natural England, working closely with relevant government departments to develop and deliver the appropriate policy solutions. It also suggests a renewed role for a national forum and network of people working in Heritage Coasts.

2. **Heritage Coast purposes within AONBs and National Parks.**

Overall, the four national purposes of Heritage Coasts are well suited to current policy demands. To the extent that three of the purposes are very close to the purposes of AONBs and National Parks (which as statutory designations carry more weight) there is no justification for re-imposing these Heritage Coast purposes as separate objectives within these statutory designations. (But, as noted further below, the one unique purpose of Heritage Coasts does require special attention).

However, the lack of a coastal focus on the way AONB and National Park purposes are delivered across most of these designated landscapes means that the distinctive needs and opportunities of coasts are often not being met within the broader strategic approach. Exceptions are where other designations (such as World Heritage Site or EU Marine Natura 2000 status) or other funding programmes (such as EU Objective I,

Leader + or Heritage Lottery Fund) have motivated a coastal focus. Heritage Coast status on its own does not do this (although it is often successful at attracting external funding).

The Management Plan process has proved successful in the past in prioritising actions in Heritage Coasts. The statutory AONB and National Park Management Plans provide the opportunity to do this again, but this is only likely to be realised if coastal needs and opportunities receive specific attention in these Plans.

Natural England should consider issuing guidance to AONB Units and National Park Authorities on how they can address the emerging coastal (and possibly marine) agendas through their statutory Management Plans.

3. **Heritage Coast purposes outside the statutory landscape designations.**

In the relatively small length of coastline lying outside AONBs and National Parks, it would appear that delivery of Heritage Coasts purposes depends on an ongoing commitment of national funding to Local Authorities. When this funding ceases, experience suggests that activity declines.

Natural England must make a decision as to whether it wishes there to be active programmes of management planning and delivery in these Heritage Coasts. The evidence from this study suggests that national funding to Local Authorities outside statutory protected landscapes can effectively deliver national environmental priorities for the coast.

4. **The Heritage Coast brand.** Even where Local Authorities are not particularly active in delivering Heritage Coast purposes, there is a

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. This is further reinforced by interest from a few Local Authorities in defining new sections of Heritage Coast.

If Heritage Coast status is to be maintained as a credible 'brand' standing for coastline of the highest scenic quality, there will be merit in Natural England retaining 'ownership' of the status as an active designation, albeit accepting that in most respects, the purposes of the designation will be delivered through the statutory landscape designations.

- 5. The inter-tidal and marine remit.** The third purpose of Heritage Coasts, relating to the environmental health of inshore waters, is not found in the other landscape designations and is

one that has yet to find full expression. However, the advent of the Marine Bill and the implementation of Integrated Coastal Zone Management give this purpose a new relevance.

Under the current situation, where AONBs and National Parks are uncertain about their remit beyond the mean low water mark, it seems unlikely that they will have a major role to play in these programmes. However, their pursuit of sustainable development and their ways of working through strategic partnerships suggest that they could make a valuable contribution.

If this is to take place, their role will need to be formally recognised and they will need national support from Natural England or Defra to gain the necessary technical expertise to allow them to contribute.