

Severn Estuary Partnership



The Severn Estuary Bridge connecting the English and Welsh coast of the estuary.

Janet Brown,
WWF-UK

Involving Stakeholders on a Large Marine Site: Lessons Learned on the Severn Estuary

The Severn Estuary is one of the biggest estuaries in the UK and therefore subject to a diverse range of activities and management regimes. A large proportion of the Estuary is designated under the International Ramsar Convention and is a SPA (Special Protection Area) and pSAC (possible Special Area of Conservation) under European Conservation Directives.

The Estuary is situated on the west-facing Atlantic coastline and its dynamic environment boasts the second highest tides in the world. Extensive mudflats and the low-lying rural 'levels' in Wales on the north coast and Somerset on the English coast are just two features that vie for space with major cities, many commercial ports, and towns that rely on tourism for their economic survival. Coupled with this, north and south coasts have different regional governance and share some, but not all government agencies. For instance, government agencies for nature conservation, tourism and Regional Development Agencies (concerned with economic development) are different on each coast. Wales has its own regional governance in the National Assembly for Wales whereas south west England is governed from national Parliament with some planning powers devolved to the Government for South West of England. The Estuary also has 12 local authorities

each managing their own stretch of coastline. Three regional offices of the Environment Agency have responsibilities on the Severn Estuary including those for waste management, water quality, fisheries and coastal defences.

In 1995 it became obvious to some of the organisation on the Severn Estuary that more formal co-operation and integration was necessary to aid future sustainable management of this area. At the time, the government's conservation agencies were supporting the development of estuary and management plans. The Environment Agency had a commitment to produce a Local Environment Agency Plan or LEAP for the site, and local authorities on the Estuary were sharing expertise on estuary management with others in Europe through the Estuaries network. As a result, a partnership project known as the Severn Estuary Strategy (SES) was initiated. The key aim of the partnership was to develop a non-statutory management strategy for the estuary that would also serve as the overarching LEAP.

Whilst attempting to follow international ICM (Integrated Coastal Management) principles, the SES aimed to:

- Improve communication, understanding and co-operation between agencies, users and local people.

Table 1:
Membership of the Severn
Estuary Strategy Steering
Group

- Chair = Planning Officer from a Local Authority
- Confederation of British Industry
 - Country Land and Business Association
 - Countryside Council for Wales
 - English Nature
 - Environment Agency
 - Gloucester Harbour Trustees
 - Government Office for the South West
 - Institute of Civil Engineers
 - Local Agenda 21 Officers (Based within Local Authorities)
 - Local Authorities
 - Ministry of Fisheries and Foods
 - National Assembly for Wales
 - Ports Technical Panel
 - Severn estuary Coastal Cell Group (Concerned with coastal defence)
 - Severn Estuary Conservation Group
 - Severn Estuary Levels Research Committee (Concerned with Archaeology)
 - Sports Council for Wales
 - Universities
 - Wales Tourist Board
 - Water Companies

- Provide opportunities for wide ranging community involvement.
- Co-ordinate and monitor implementation of plans within the Estuary.
- Establish a permanent management group to include and interact with local, regional and national policy process.

Management Structure

An Estuary Officer and Project Assistant were employed in 1995 to provide a focal point for co-ordination, provide a secretariat service and promote the activities of the project. The beginning of a database of contacts was developed. Key organisations formed a Steering Group to oversee and guide the project and to endorse each stage of the process.

Membership of the Steering Group included organisations with and without statutory responsibilities. To ensure inclusive participation by as many stakeholder groups as possible, and to provide a balance of representation from both sides of the Estuary, the Steering Group was large, eventually increasing to around 50 members. Efforts were made to include stakeholders who had responsibility for or an interest in management of the Estuary, or whose activities might affect the health or future management of the Estuary. For instance, farmers and landowners were identified as being key to management of rural coasts and

were recruited to the group as the project moved forward. Some interest groups from each coast agreed to be jointly represented by one member. Tourist boards were an example of this. Others organisations felt it was important that they played a full and active role in the process, for example the conservation agencies: English Nature and Countryside Council for Wales. The Steering Group met four times a year. Each meeting took place in a different area of the estuary in order to minimise the inconveniences of travel. The comprehensive membership of the Steering Group enabled regular mailings of information and progress to reach this wide range of interests. However a different mix of 20-25 members attended each meeting, and although provided with necessary paperwork in advance, discussions about this complex estuary were often revisited at meetings, lengthening the time taken to reach major decisions. The organisations represented on the Steering Group are listed in Table 1.

A core Working Group of twelve was drawn from membership of the Steering Group and met each month to work closely with the Project Officer and Assistant. Guidance and support from these dedicated people with expertise in nature conservation, academia and local authority planning was key to the successful running of the project.

This management structure was maintained to the point of production of the strategy in 2001.

The Process

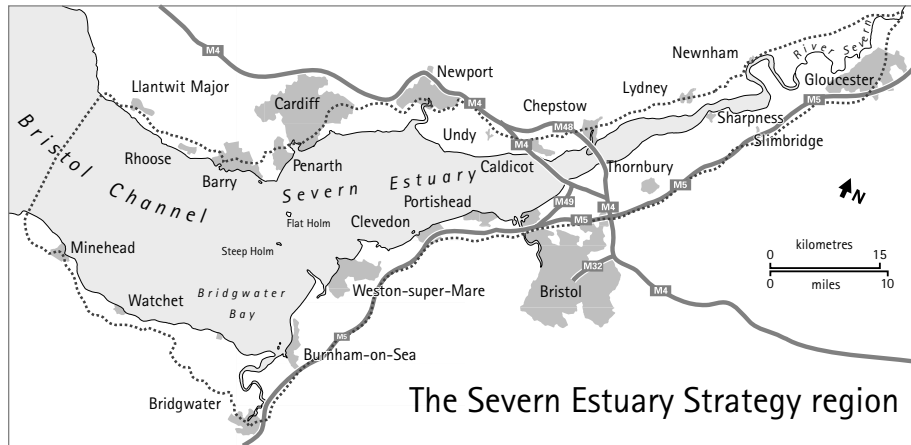
Key milestones of the process leading to production of the "Strategy for the Severn Estuary" were to:

- Gain support from key organisations,
- Identify the issues of concern that should be addressed on an estuary-wide basis,
- Prioritise the issues in order of importance to stakeholders,
- Develop policies that addressed the issues,
- Publish a Consultation Draft of the Strategy,
- Produce the first completed Strategy for the Severn Estuary.

Achieving Stakeholder Involvement in the Process

One of Project Officer's first tasks was to present the initiative to key stakeholder organisations on the Estuary by holding meetings with individuals and groups.

As already noted, the Steering Group became established to represent key interests. However,



Cartographic Unit, Department of Maritime Studies and International Transport, Cardiff University

within the constraints of project resources, efforts were made to reach some of the one million-plus people living close to the shores of the Estuary, and to enable participation by local communities.

Organisations and interest groups were invited to register their interest in the Estuary and their concerns about its management. The sheer number of organisations and individual contacts within each organisation presented a challenge to project personnel in the design and maintenance of the database. However, the SES database became one of the most important management tools of the project. The database aided an exchange of information, was a swift method of contact between diverse stakeholders, and was utilised by partner organisations who needed a list of contacts for their own consultations.

A first series of Public Meetings was held around the Estuary in 1995 to scope for issues of concern to stakeholders. The five meetings were three-hour workshops, where attendees were invited to form small groups with a mix of interests and work with a facilitator to identify their concerns. This was an opportunity for decision-makers from the Steering Group to interact with local stakeholders, and to hear their views face to face. At the meetings, it became apparent that some participants were sceptical that their views would be noted, acknowledged and acted upon. However, all views recorded and fed into the process. Input of the attendees was invaluable, but the organisers were aware that this was only the "tip of the iceberg" of local communities that could be involved in future management of the Estuary if the principles of ICZM and sustainable development were to be fully realised.

The results of registers of interest, the aforementioned meetings and many communications

were produced as the Severn Estuary Joint Issues Report in 1997, a report produced with the Environment Agency, who endorsed the document as part of their LEAP process. The Report identified 150 issues on the Estuary, and was also highly valued for its background history of the Estuary, and for its overview on "what was happening" currently in each topic area. Topic Chapters included: Planning and Management, Ports, Tourism, Agriculture and Water Quality.

A second series of Public Meetings were arranged around the Estuary in 1997 to present the Joint Issues Report to local stakeholders and assure them that their views had been included. The report was distributed to as many organisations as possible and made available in public libraries. A summary document was published in English and Welsh. Responses to the report were compiled on a database that allowed responses to be sorted by subject matter. This meant that the secretariat could easily provide a short report for partner organisations to use in their own work. For instance, all comments on marine mineral extraction could be collated and used specifically for management purposes.

Before the drafting of the Strategy could begin, it was necessary to prioritise the 150-plus issues. However noting that no issue should be completely ignored. The SES project had a commitment to ensure that all the concerns of its stakeholders were addressed, either through the Strategy document or by confirmation from partner organisations that they were dealing with them.

Stakeholders were invited to participate in workshops to prioritise the issues. Academics at the University College, London were commissioned to design and facilitate a methodology known as 'Stakeholder Decision Analysis' (SDA). Attendance

Private Sector

Country Land and Business Association

- National Farmers Union
- Chemical Industries Association
- Ports Technical Panel
- Wessex Water
- Hyder (water company)
- British Marine Industries Federation
- British Marine Aggregates Association.

Public Sector

- English Nature/Countryside Council for Wales
- Environment Agency
- Local Agenda 21 Officers
- Severn Estuary Coastal Cell Group (dealing with coastal defence)
- HM Coastguard

Voluntary Sector

- Severn Estuary Conservation Group/RSPB
- Friends of the Earth
- Ramblers
- National Federation of Sea Anglers
- British Association of Shooting and Conservation
- Council for the Protection of Rural England/CPR Wales
- Royal Yachting Association

Table 2:
Representatives involved in
prioritising the issues

was limited to a maximum of 25 participants. Great efforts were made to include a balance of representatives from public, commercial and voluntary organisations. Participants worked through the SDA methodology at three meetings to develop and agree criteria against which the issues were scored and prioritised. Professional facilitators were essential for this process, and some participants felt they were the subject of an academic process that bore little relationship to the actual management of the Estuary. Nevertheless, as a result of participation in the SDA process, participants developed an in-depth understanding of the issues and management needs on the Severn Es-

tuary. Another great benefit was that 75% of participants continued to be involved in drafting the Strategy and made valuable contributions to its development. The interests they represented are listed in Table 2.

The "Consultation Draft Strategy for the Severn Estuary", was published early in 2001 and widely distributed. A great deal of time and effort had been invested to ensure stakeholder comments were incorporated throughout the process leading to the Draft Strategy. It can be argued that benefits of these efforts were realised when no serious conflicts arose during consultation on the Draft Strategy.

The Way Forward

It is important that the time and effort invested in the project and production of the Strategy for the Severn Estuary results in real long-term benefits for the estuary's natural features and its community. The erstwhile Steering Group, now known as the Severn Estuary Partnership, continues to meet. An Action Plan is under development to implement the policies of the Strategy. Following a gap in the employment of an Estuary Officer, it is hoped that the Severn Estuary Partnership will act as a focal point for all estuary-wide issues with improved links with the public and all bodies from European level down to local council level.

Key groups on the Estuary are currently in discussion on how they might share a common secretariat and database, and how they can co-ordinate meetings and agendas in the future. Key groups include those involved with implementation of the Habitats Directive, planning coastal defence, and contingency planning for pollution incidents. Table 3 summarises the benefits of the SES project to date.

Conclusion

The secretariat of full-time Project Officer and Assistant were the minimum personnel requirements necessary to complete the initial project on a such a large and complex site. The project enabled a diverse range of stakeholders to work together and engage in open discussions about their concerns and management needs, with the common aim of completing the Strategy. This process has immeasurable benefits in raising awareness and understanding of the estuary, and building working relationships where otherwise there may be conflicts. However, throughout the pro-

cess, there was concern that the outputs took a comparatively long time to complete.

Input of the attendees at meetings and workshops was invaluable, but the organisers were aware that this only involved a small section of the local communities that should be involved in future management of the Estuary. In spite of the best efforts of staff resources, production of newsletters, a dedicated website and use of the media, many local people are still unaware of how the Severn Estuary could and should be managed as one ecosystem. Most local communities have yet to develop a sense of ownership for this large area of water, feel personally responsible for caring for its future health, or indeed recognise its value as a natural asset that requires sustainable management. Further action is needed if true Integrated Coastal Management (ICM) is to be implemented on a local scale. Looking further into the future, an estuary-wide community project may be needed, such as the successful ACAP (Atlantic Canada Action Programme) so that local communities can be truly involved in management of their coastal areas.

The emerging EU Recommendation for ICZM in Europe notes that "integrated management of the coastal zone requires strategic, co-ordinated and concerted action at the local and regional level, guided and supported by an appropriate framework at the national level."

ICZM is a comparatively new process in Europe. Many of its benefits are intangible and difficult to evaluate, i.e. conflict avoidance and raising understanding.

However, ICZM is in fact a management framework that can¹⁾:

- Ease implementation of the current complex legislation for coastal areas,
- Ensure sustainable management and development of coastal areas,
- Enable all interested groups to avoid conflict and develop beneficial working arrangements,
- Inform and educate on coastal processes,
- Promote further development of best practice through co-operation and collaboration.

The SES Project has achieved a major milestone of producing the first Strategic overview of all the management schemes and activities on the Severn Estuary. The security of long-term funding coupled with national support and guidance, following the principles of sustainable development and the EU Recommendation for ICZM would ensure full benefits of this project are realised.

¹⁾ WWF and Birdlife International Comments on the McKenna report on an ICZM Strategy for Europe (Recommendation) Second Reading vote – Wednesday 10 April 2002

Benefits of the SES project:

- Given structure to previous ad-hoc consultation between organisations and identified opportunities for collaboration;
- Provided a mechanism for working towards consensus in relation to management of the Estuary;
- Developed consensus on the key issues that need to be addressed on the Severn Estuary;
- Developed a clear structure with a logical progression for issues, prioritisation, policies and proposals for action;
- Helped promote awareness of each other's perspectives on issues;
- Promoted the importance of a strategic Estuary-wide view;
- Provided factual information on matters around the Estuary;
- Published the SES newsletter, *Severn Tidings*, bringing together news from the Estuary;
- Developed a database of organisations and individuals with an interest in the management of the Severn Estuary;
- Developed a web site with the potential for diverse use in the future;
- Raised the profile of the Severn Estuary area and its management.

Table 3:
Benefits of the SES project to date (various documents, Severn Estuary Strategy)

References

The following documents can be downloaded from the website: www.severnestuarystrategy.org.uk

- Severn Estuary Joint Issues Report (1997)
- Joint Issues Report Responses (1998)
- Study to Assess the Understanding and Awareness of the Severn Estuary Strategy by Stakeholder Organisations (Spring 2001)
- Consultation Draft of the Severn Estuary Strategy
- Consultation Draft – Strategy for the Severn Estuary: Responses Report (September 2001)
- Strategy for the Severn Estuary (2001)

The Canadian Atlantic Coastal Action Program is a community-based program that relies on local involvement and support can be found at: http://www.ns.ec.gc.ca/community/acap/index_e.html

Details on WWF's North East Atlantic Programme can be found at <http://www.wwfneap.org>

WWF-UK Marine and Coastal Policy information can be found at: <http://www.wwf.org.uk/researcher/programmethemes/livingseas/index.asp>

A proposal for a European Parliament and Council concerning the implementation of Integrated Coastal Zone Management in Europe (COM/00/545 of Sept.2000) and further information on ICZM in Europe can be found at: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/iczm/home.htm>

Knowles S Et Myatt-Bell L. (2001) The Severn Estuary Strategy: A Consensus Approach to Estuary Management Ocean & Coastal Management 22. 135-139

Janet Brown

Marine & Coastal Policy Team, WWF-UK, Panda House, Weyside Park, Godalming, Surrey GU7 1 XR
JBrown@wwf.org.uk

Janet Brown was Project Officer of the Severn Estuary Strategy from December 1996 to January 2001.