

Marine Important Bird Areas



Implementing Natura2000 in the marine environment

International workshop, September 2005, Lisbon.

NOTE: This document is a summary of the discussions held at the Lisbon meeting. It was prepared for distribution at SEO's meeting "Conserving our seabirds: how to identify IBAs in the marine environment", in November 2005.

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SPEA will produce a shorter version for BirdLife to distribute amongst partners by December 2005.

1. Cross-cutting issue: spatial scale

Many of the discussions in Lisbon centred (explicitly or implicitly) on the subject of spatial scale. Many terrestrial IBA definitions can be applied to the marine environment conceptually, but in practice they might result in enormous IBAs. This issue affects discussions about:

- Whether congregations of dispersed pelagic seabirds can be defined as IBAs.
- Whether seaward colony extensions can be used to protect the feeding areas of breeding seabirds.
- Whether migration corridors along, for example, continental shelves could be declared as IBAs.

There are several reasons for designing an IBA network which occupies a relatively small proportion of the area under consideration: (1) IBAs are intended to be a site-based approach to conservation, which can be combined with a separate landscape-level approach. This implies that IBAs will represent a relatively small hotspot area within a wider landscape (which may itself be of high conservation value). (2) IBAs need to remain 'special', to maintain their credibility. (3) In practice, it may not be possible to manage IBA's that are extremely large. Conversely, it is important that areas holding key concentrations of birds are not omitted from the network simply because they are large.

It may be sensible to fully discuss the issue of spatial scale, perhaps reaching a consensus on the desired maximum IBA size, or proportional coverage, before proceeding to discuss the detailed points below.

2. Species for which marine IBAs can be defined in Portuguese EEZ

The decisions about which species trigger IBA criteria will be data-driven, and therefore it is not necessary to have a formal list of 'species under consideration' at the beginning of a Marine IBA project.

The widespread ship-based and aerial surveys that are planned will capture data on all species that are present, giving the opportunity to discover sea areas with high species richness and bird densities. Data from remote-tracking will come from a small number of focal species.

Is the aim to identify marine IBAs solely for seabirds, or can they be based on their importance for other birds? (e.g. migration corridors for terrestrial birds, or areas used by Eleonora's falcon feeding at sea). From the point of view of the global IBA programme, and Natura2000, all birds should be considered. However, the current project is unlikely to identify non-seabird sites.

The Portuguese government supports and makes use of the IBA process, but will not automatically equate IBAs with SPAs. Decisions regarding the designation and delimiting of SPAs should be kept separate from the management issues that might subsequently arise.

3. Discuss and refine as necessary the 4 types of Marine IBAs currently adopted

a) Seaward extensions of breeding colonies IBAs:

- In the UK marine SPA exercise, waters adjacent to colonies that are important for 'maintenance behaviours' (preening, courtship, rafting etc) have been used to define seaward extensions. These are species-specific, but not site-specific. It may be possible to apply this approach to the different species found in Portugal.
- Seaward extensions have also been used to capture some feeding areas in the UK exercise, while other feeding areas have been captured using 'offshore concentration' criteria.
- Species' feeding ranges are not consistent across colonies and between years, nor are all sea areas within the maximum feeding radius equally used by foraging birds. To what extent should one take a pragmatic and precautionary approach, using generic 'typical foraging radii', to define semi-circular seaward extensions? This has a danger of creating very large IBAs, substantial parts of which are little used by birds, and which are therefore indefensible as Protected Areas when there are strong competing interests.
- Should seaward extension criteria be applied solely for those species that forage relatively close to the colony (if so, what would the cut-off distance be?)?

b) Non-breeding waterbird concentrations:

- This criterion cannot be used to define marine IBAs for truly pelagic (Southern European) seabird species.

c) Migration hotspots:

- In defining migration corridors, there may be practical problems of data availability and conceptual difficulties with capturing all types of migration within a single definition.
- At a few sites, there is a clear bottleneck, with migrants being constrained from both sides into a narrow front (straits). For some areas (headlands and capes), migrants are constrained on one side, and tend to concentrate into a relatively narrow band, but the outer (seaward) limits of this band are less well defined. In other areas, seabirds apparently migrate along a very broad front.
- IBAs are probably inappropriate for conserving wide migration fronts, but are appropriate for migration bottlenecks. However, seabird populations migrating along a continental shelf might not be well served by just a few IBAs at bottleneck sites, but no protection along the rest of the migration front.
- Exploring and defining the difference between stopovers, bottlenecks and corridors is critical.
- Procellariiform tracking indicates that many species do migrate, even pelagically, across relatively narrow corridors. However, data availability limits our ability to define precise migration corridors in open waters, even where these do exist.
- When considering migration corridors, it is also important to look at use of the sea, as well as simply the number of birds moving past a fixed point. For many seabird observations, it is difficult to define whether one is recording a migrant or not. The ship-based counting method is also not very helpful here, because it records bird density, but not the number of birds moving past a given point per unit time.
- If attempting to define numerical thresholds that could apply for seabirds migrating through the Portuguese EEZ, would one use a fixed numeric threshold (e.g. 20,000 birds passing through in a season, cf. 'congregation IBAs'), or proportion (e.g. 1%) of a biogeographic population? For European marine IBAs, thresholds would have to be very high or most of the continental shelf of Western Europe would qualify. This project could test a variety of thresholds, to see how it would influence IBA designation.
- The concept of stopping stations during migration could apply to seabirds occurring in southern Europe.

d) Important areas for pelagic species:

Identify standard approach/methodologies to be used with seabirds occurring in Portuguese EEZ.

- 'Tracking ocean wanderers' (and associated database) is a key step forward in establishing and standardising protocols for analysing remote tracking data. A key follow-up step will be to develop techniques for combining these data with ship-based survey data.

Can we define temporal and/or mobile offshore areas?

- The key issue for declaring sites based on ephemeral concentrations is number of birds and regularity of use. Data limitations are a major obstruction to determining regularity of use.
- Management prescriptions at some IBAs might be seasonal or ephemeral, coming into force only when birds are present.
- Offshore seabird concentrations change in location from year to year, due to environmental variations. The question of whether these spatial shifts are relatively large or small depends on the spatial scale at which they are being considered.
- Some bird species (e.g. Balearic shearwater) form very short-lived congregations that can constitute a very significant part of the population. These flocks occupy a very small area, but can develop anywhere in a vast sea area. It is not clear whether there is an appropriate IBA approach to this phenomenon.

Can we define marine biomes related to marine IBAs?

- The Marine Classification Criterion (MCC) defines areas that capture a significant proportion of the population under consideration, *and* where the density is high, relative to the regional density for that population. The threshold proportions and densities can be varied, to suit the exercise.
- Important considerations for this type of approach are: can it be used when data are relatively limited? How does one define the 'region' under consideration?
- In this project, MCC can perhaps be used successfully for the commoner species. Remote tracking can serve as a complement to MCC-type approaches, but is likewise data-limited.

4. IBA Criteria related to Portuguese needs.

- Explore how criteria A1, C1, C2 may be applied to Portuguese trigger species (*Pterodroma*) to identify provisional IBAs
- The definitions of A1, C1, and C2 are intended to give a degree of flexibility in interpretation: 'Other species of global concern' is intended to include 'near-threatened' and 'data deficient'. 'Regular' is intended to exclude casual use of a site by the species. The phrase 'known or thought to hold' means that patchy data can be used to make a precautionary assumption that a site holds a significant population.
- In terrestrial IBAs, the regular presence of one or more individuals of a CR or EN species is sufficient to trigger IBA designation. For VU species, the presence of a designated proportion of the population is required. Should this be retained for marine IBAs?
- Areas with a high bird density are only useful if they also contain a significant proportion of the population. Perhaps one should therefore use the presence of a high density in a given minimal area as a criterion. However, delimiting the area boundaries is difficult.
- It may be possible to use preliminary data on bird density to identify potential hotspots, and then attempt to refine and delimit these with further detailed surveys, combined with expert knowledge about the key environmental features that might define the hotspot.

- A3: The concept of Biome and its applicability to marine IBAs (though we realise that it is unlikely that any final conclusions will be reached)
- There are various ways of defining marine biomes: e.g. by climate, by oceanographic features (shelf-edge, open water, neritic etc), by biogeography. Several schemes already exist for European waters, but are not mutually consistent. For seabirds, the key areas may be the boundaries between regions.
- This criterion is potentially a useful tool to get around patchy data-sets, because one can infer the presence of rarer species from the presence of commoner species with which they are known to co-occur.

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