Coast planning and management: the Northumberland approach (UK)
Aménagement et gestion du littoral: l'approche du Northumberland (RU)

Paul MORRISON
Northumberland County Council
County Hall - Morpeth
Northumberland NE 61 2EF - UK

Abstract: The presentation deals with four main topics:
1 - an introduction to the characteristics of the UK (and Northumberland) coastline,
2 - a review of the United Kingdom policy for coast management,
3 - an outline of the coast management structure in Northumberland, and to what extent it reflects national policy,
4 - future directions of coast zone management in Northumberland.

Keywords: Northumberland - Coast management and planning

Résumé: L'exposé s'organise autour des quatre thèmes suivants:
1 - une présentation des caractères des côtes britanniques et plus particulièrement du Northumberland,
2 - une étude de la politique du Royaume-Uni en matière de gestion du littoral,
3 - une esquisse de la structure de gestion de la côte du Northumberland ; dans quelle mesure reflète-t-elle la politique nationale ?,
4 - les tendances à venir.

Mots-clés: Northumberland - Aménagement et gestion du littoral

The UK coastline is more than 15 000 km in extent. It is a coastline which is widely acknowledged as being amongst the most diverse in Europe. This coastline also accommodates an array of often competing interests including fishing, agriculture, harbours, navigation, recreation, oil, gas and mineral extraction, coastal settlements, coastal engineering, waste disposal and wildlife conservation.

The Northumberland coastline itself extends 115 km from the estuary of the River Tyne in the south to the border with Scotland in the north. This is a coastline of great landscape beauty which has natural and historic habitats and features of both European and international importance. The qualities of the mainland and island coastal areas are matched by the richness and diversity of the offshore coast waters which have recently been proposed as a Special Area of Conservation.

Although renowned as an unspoilt coastline, the variety of the Northumberland coast is continually under pressure from both natural and human forces. Predominantly a soft coastline, the Northumberland coast experiences substantial erosion. The presence of rich marine, agricultural and mineral resources is reflected in the continuing pressure on natural habitats. The high scenic quality of the greater part of the Northumberland coast results in a seasonal influx of many thousands of visitors.

I - THE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK

Within the United Kingdom, arrangements for coastal zone planning and management have lacked co-ordination. Local authorities and over 30 government departments, statutory bodies and agencies have responsibilities within the coastal zone. The majority of these organisations have strictly defined areas of responsibility which inhibit their ability to provide an overview of coastal issues. For many coastal local authorities it is a matter of frustration that their planning jurisdiction ends at the low water mark and they have no powers to control development in near shore waters. During this decade, there has been a continuing national debate about coastal planning and management. The most important contribution to this debate is generally recognised to have been a report by the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment in 1993. This Report concluded:

« Coastal protection planning and management in the United Kingdom suffers from centuries of unco-ordinated decisions and actions at both national and local levels. We found that there are inadequacies in legislation, anomalies in the planning system, a lack of central guidance and..."
overlapping and conflicting policies and responsibilities among a host of bodies with poor coordination between them ».

Recommendations contained in this report included the implementation of a system of coastal plans at national and regional levels, a review of coastal legislation and organisational responsibilities and the extension of planning controls offshore.

The response of the Government to this (in United Kingdom terms) radical report has been to seek the improved operation rather than fundamental review of existing arrangements for coast management. A number of discussion papers have been issued concerning the management of and development within the coast zone. In addition, the Government has initiated a review of local byelaw-making powers, has established a national Coastal Forum and is preparing a Best Practice Guide on coastal zone management.

Common to all these national Government initiatives is an emphasis on the need for the development of local solutions to coastal issues. The Government has not endorsed calls for the development of a statutory framework of national and regional coast plans. Support is expressed, though, for the development of management plans which secure their objectives through agreement rather than by control. The Government has not proposed a fundamental review of the present fragmentary arrangements for the management and regulation of activities and development within the coast zone but, instead, seeks to promote greater co-operation between relevant authorities, agencies and organisations.

In parallel with the development of national thinking on coast issues, Northumberland has introduced its own structures and arrangements for the management of the County coastal zone.

II - THE NORTHUMBERLAND COAST MANAGEMENT PROJECT

Northumberland, as I have previously outlined, experiences many of the pressures upon its coastline which are typical to the United Kingdom and to other European coastal states. In common with the nation generally, our response to these management problems lacked coordination. Northumberland has 6 local authorities and the national range of other organisations exercising responsibilities within the coast zone. Designing a framework within which coastal issues could be addressed and achieving co-operation between these separate coast interests was the challenge for coast management in Northumberland.

A - The planning context

In addressing this challenge our first action was to formulate a Management Plan for the Northumberland Coast. Published in 1991, this plan was, at that time, unusual in its scope. Previous coast management plans produced by United Kingdom local authorities had mainly concentrated on issues relating to the conservation of the landscape within undeveloped areas of coastline. The Northumberland Coast Management Plan addresses issues within the whole County coastline, including areas which are industrialised and those which are largely undeveloped. In preparing the plan it was increasingly evident that balanced management of the coast required that both land and marine issues should be addressed. The plan therefore adopted a sea boundary which encompassed the coastal islands and near shore waters.

The plan contains a range of policies and action recommendations on issues including the conservation of the natural and historic resources of the coast, recreational and leisure uses, landscape enhancement, and community issues. Although the plan itself is non-statutory its proposals have been taken into account in the development of statutory policies with local authority Structure and District Plans. Proposals contained in the Plan have also resulted in detailed strategies and action programmes being developed to address particular subjects such as archaeological conservation and information provision and to focus on particular areas of the coast which are subject to outstanding pressures. Plans are now being developed by partner agencies to examine issues such as coastal defence and estuary management and also to take forward proposals in the Coast Management Plan.

B - Management structures

Developing recommendations contained in the Coast Plan, new structures have also been created to ensure effective co-operation between managing organisations.
A Coastal Advisory Committee was created to provide a forum for the elected representatives of the coastal local authorities. Meeting at regular intervals, the Committee provides a voice for the concerns of coastal communities and establishes and approves action priorities for the Coast Service. Committee meetings also provide the opportunity to inform elected representatives through invited experts of current initiatives and directions in coast management at regional and national level.

A Coast Technical Officers' Working Group has also been formed comprising officer representatives from the authorities, agencies and organisations with major coast management responsibilities. The group receives support and advice from a range of universities and other research institutions. This working group provides input to the work of the Coast Advisory Committee and ensures co-ordination of the action programmes of group members throughout the length of the Northumberland coast.

C - Action implementation

To achieve the implementation of action proposals contained in the plan, a Northumberland Coast Management Team has been established, jointly funded by the County and District Councils and the Countryside Commission. The team has access to a project budget and undertakes a programme of work throughout the coast area. Services provided by the Team include the design and implementation of conservation projects, improvements to public access provision, preparation of coast plans and strategies and the development of information and interpretation facilities.

A volunteer Coast Conservation Team supports the work of the full-time members of the service. This voluntary team undertakes a wide variety of management initiatives with a focus on maintaining the special natural character of the coast.

III - FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Northumberland approach to coast management has, I consider, proved relevant in addressing many issues within the County coastline. Pressures upon the coastline are, however, changing and it will be necessary for the project to adapt to new challenges. These challenges may, it is anticipated, include increased rates of coastal erosion, depletion of marine resources through exploitation and pollution, pressures for energy-related development and demands by new recreational activities.

During the development of the project there has been increased awareness of the limited nature of our understanding of the natural resources and processes within the coast and of human impact upon them. It is anticipated, therefore, that the project will direct increasing resources into coastal research and into promoting understanding of the outcome of such research. Current research effort ranges from site specific projects, to those with broader international links. I have prepared a list of research programmes currently being undertaken and copies are available at the reception.

It is within the marine environment where the shortcomings of United Kingdom coast management policies are most evident. Action upon European Commission directives and in particular the establishment of Marine Special Areas of Conservation is providing mechanisms through which the project may make an increased contribution to offshore management. Whilst the project will remain committed to co-operation, it will seek to influence Government to establish a framework for offshore coast management which is better co-ordinated and accountable.

Building on the co-ordination achieved between organisations concerned with coast management in Northumberland, the project recognises the special value in establishing links with coast authorities who experience similar management challenges and have explored other ways in which these challenges may be met.