

National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee
NRW 2015 – 22
Natural Resources Wales – Annual Scrutiny 2015
Response from Tim Birkhead

4 April 2015

Dear Sir/Madam

My experience with NRW in relation to the monitoring of guillemots on Skomer Island NNR.

Skomer Island, Wales is one of the most important Welsh seabird colonies and one of only a handful of key sites for monitoring the fortunes of seabirds in the UK. Skomer's seabirds are therefore important both from a Welsh and an international perspective.

For the past 43 years I have organized and maintained a long-term programme of monitoring the population of common guillemots *Uria aalge* on Skomer Island, Wales. The monitoring has comprised annual measures (since 1972) of the population size, survival rate (the proportion of birds surviving between years), breeding success, timing of breeding and the rate at which juvenile guillemots are fed, as well as their diet. These parameters not only allow us to establish the status of the Skomer guillemot population, almost as importantly, they allow us to assess the quality of the marine environment in the Welsh waters of the south Irish Sea.

The guillemot monitoring programme run by myself and the University of Sheffield, at an extremely modest cost to CCW (that didn't come close to the full economic cost) provided the most detailed and accurate monitoring of any seabird on Skomer.

Until 2013 and for the previous 25 years, this monitoring programme was funded by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW). In late 2013 when CCW was disbanded and replaced by NRW, the funding for the guillemot monitoring programme was terminated. The timing of this termination of funding was unfortunate because in late January and February 2104 severe storms on the west coast of Europe caused a massive mortality of seabirds and referred to as the seabird wreck, in which a minimum of 40,000 seabirds died, including many of Skomer's guillemots. The full impact of these storms, the consequence of climate change, is still being assessed and I will produce a report towards the end of 2015.

In addition to my long-term guillemot monitoring programme, other seabirds are monitored on Skomer, albeit not in as much detail. The monitoring of these other species is funded by JNCC – some of which is subcontracted to Professor Christopher Perrins and Dr Matt Wood. The JNCC funded work also includes counts of guillemot study plots (that I established in 1972) to monitor guillemot

numbers, and in addition, for reasons I am unaware of JNCC also fund monitoring of guillemot breeding success. This work is undertaken by JNCC-employed individuals. Results from this monitoring purports to show that guillemot breeding was declining year on year. In 2010 I examined and analysed the guillemot data collected by the JNCC employees and I showed that the decline in guillemot breeding success was an artifact. Data from our own study showed no such decline in guillemot breeding success. It was also apparent from my analyses of the JNCC data that not only has there been any supervision of the way JNCC employees on the island collect data, the methodology had strayed considerably from that originally specified. Together these two findings meant that the funds JNCC spends on monitoring guillemot breeding success has been completely wasted. In the present economic climate this is scandalous. I presented my findings to JNCC at a meeting with them and CCW at Cardiff in 2010. Despite this however, in subsequent years JNCC continued to employ people to monitor guillemot breeding success.

It was because JNCC were monitoring guillemot breeding success so poorly and with no supervision and with no sense of the quality of the data, that when NRW terminated the funding for the Sheffield monitoring programme, I wrote on 3 March 2014 to Emyr Roberts and to Professor Peter Matthews to explain why continuing our programme was vital. I received neither an acknowledgement, nor a reply, which I consider completely unprofessional.

As a result, together with colleagues including the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wakes (WTSWW), I organized a one-day meeting in Cardiff in April 2014 at which everyone involved in monitoring seabirds on Skomer attended (many at their own expense) to help make a case to NRW about the crucial nature of the monitoring programmes being undertaken there. Many of those that attended or spoke at the meeting are among Britain's most eminent scientists and conservation biologists, including two Fellows of the Royal Society. Their presence should have been a very clear signal to NRW about the concern for and the international importance of the monitoring being undertaken on Skomer. NRW attended, but made no attempt to engage with anyone at the meeting, and allegedly when they returned home said that nothing they had heard would make them change their minds about reinstating the funding for the long-term guillemot project.

I have said publicly on several occasions that if JNCC (or anyone else) was undertaking the monitoring in a scientifically acceptable manner, with appropriate supervision and independent assessment of their data, I would have accepted NRW's decision to terminate my funding. However, NRW has said repeatedly in public that:

'The long term increase in guillemot numbers at Skomer Island, and the fact that this species will continue to be monitored under the JNCC contract, reassures me that there will be no loss of data or information about these birds' [Letter from Carl Sergeant 14 October 2014 to William Powell, Chair of the Petitions Committee].

This, despite my pointing out to JNCC in 2010 that their methodology is flawed and their conclusion meaningless. I have made the same point to NRW – but without eliciting in a response. At a time when funding for environmental issues is tight, it seems deeply perverse that NRW should continue to support JNCC's flawed methodology, yet terminate the funding for a study that provides high quality, reliable, meaningful data. So much for NRW's 'evidence based' policy decisions!

My overall experience of NRW therefore has been extremely frustrating. NRW's discourteous lack of response to my correspondence, their political intransigence and their total disregard for whether the information collected by their sister organisation, JNCC is of any value beggars belief.

In response to NRW's termination of funding for the Sheffield long-term guillemot study, I was asked by the internationally renowned scientific journal *Nature* to write a summary of the situation. The article was published in *Nature* on 23 October 2014. The response was international disbelief and outrage at NRW's short-sightedness. This in turn allowed me to launch a web-based campaign to secure funding that would allow the monitoring programme to continue for another year to establish the consequences of the seabird wreck. It is a measure of the strength of feeling about NRW's behavior that the funds were raised in just two weeks.

However, it is NRW's responsibility to look after the welfare of its Welsh wildlife. Moreover, the funds I and others have raised are sufficient for the monitoring of only the forthcoming (2015) guillemot breeding season. What is required is a commitment by NRW to long-term (ten or twenty years) funding, and preferably at a level that covers its full economic cost, together with a reappraisal of the way monitoring is conducted and analysed.

I look forward to your response.

Yours faithfully

Professor T R Birkhead