
WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

VEGAØYAN - THE VEGA ARHIPELAGO (NORWAY) ID N° 1143

Vegaøyan - The Vega Archipelago of the Norwegian Coast has been nominated as a "Cultural Landscape".

1. DOCUMENTATION

- iv) **Additional literature consulted:** Nordic Council of Ministers, 1996, **Proposals for new areas for the UNESCO World Heritage List**, Nordic Council of Ministers, Copenhagen; M. Heath, M. Evans eds., 2000, **Important Bird Areas in Europe: Priority Sites for conservation**, Vol. 1: Northern Europe, Birdlife International; G Kelleher, C. Bleakley and S. Wells, Eds. 1195, **A Global Representative System of Marine Protected Areas**, Vol. 1, GBMPA, IUCN, WB.
- v) **Consultations:** 1 external reviewer. The IUCN mission met with the Mayor of Vega Municipality, a representative of the County Governor of Nordland, representatives of the Directorate of Nature Management, and a number of local inhabitants.
- vi) **Field visit:** M. Helminen (IUCN), August 2003, and B. Johansson (ICOMOS), September 2003.

2. SUMMARY OF NATURAL VALUES

The nominated area, the Vega Archipelago, consists of 96,880 ha of sea and 6,930 ha of land. The land area is made up of the mountainous and some coastal parts of the main island of Vega, but excludes most of the farmed part of the island (which forms part of the buffer zone). The rest of the nominated land area includes about 6500 islands, islets and skerries. Thus the dominant natural element is the sea, more particularly the productive shallow sea of the Strandflat, which provides rich fish and bird populations, which have been available for human use. The distinctive features of human life that have evolved during millennia are adaptations to these ecological conditions.

The Norwegian Strandflat is essentially a broad wave-cut platform cut out of the bedrock, ranging between 100m in altitude and 100m in depth. It is found along the Atlantic coast of Norway between the 59th and 72nd latitudes. According to the information provided, it is most typically developed in the Helgeland coast, and the largest continuous block is located around the island of Vega.

An important feature of the Strandflat is the many small islands and skerries, which typically form sub-archipelagos. The markedly uneven distribution of islands has had important implications for terrestrial flora and fauna as well as for human occupation. This is because islands in these sub-archipelagos provide some shelter to each other, so creating conditions suitable for a single family to occupy certain islands and use adjacent ones. The cultural and ecological significance of these sub-archipelagos is demonstrated by the fact that they have been given a specific Norwegian name: "oyvaer".

A notable and valuable feature of the Vega Archipelago is the wedge-shaped mountains or "monadnocks"¹. There are two of them on the main island of Vega and a third one forms the

¹ Monadnocks are isolated hills that stand above the surrounding plane.

island of Sola. The highest of them, Gullvågssellet (737m) on Vega, remained uncovered by the continental ice mass during the Quaternary era, even when the westernmost margin of the glacier was far out to sea; accordingly it retains deep layers of eroded material not moved by ice. The southwestern slopes of the monadnocks provide sheltered sites for some plant species, which generally occur only in more southern latitudes; examples are hazel and wych elm, which are found in the Eidemslia nature reserve on Vega – this is one of the most northernmost sites in Norway (as well as in Europe).

The Vega Archipelago contains important biodiversity, although there are no endemic species. Bird fauna is especially rich both in species diversity and numbers of individuals. Some 110 bird species have been reported as breeding, or are presumed to be breeding, in the area. It is most famous for its large eider duck population. Eiders have been traditionally used sustainably for eggs and down, and specific techniques were used to attract the birds to nest in close groups under purpose-built shelters. This traditional way of eider management is culturally important and demonstrates the bird's unusual ability to adapt to artificial nesting sites. It is interesting that the breeding success of the eiders utilizing the nesting shelters has been better than that of the birds breeding in the open.

About 4000 pairs of cormorant breed within the area. Nordvaeret, in the outermost part of the archipelago, contains the largest ground nesting colony of cormorants in the world: the entire treeless island is coloured white by the faeces of the birds. There are also 450 pairs of breeding greylag geese, while up to 10,000 barnacle geese utilize the Vega Archipelago as a resting and feeding area on their migration route between Scotland and Svalbard. There are also significant populations of grey seals, water voles and otters.

The beautiful scenery of open sea, small islands and magnificent monadnocks is essentially a natural one, the cultural element being an important additional factor. The area has correctly been nominated as a "cultural landscape". Moreover, both the terrestrial and marine areas are essential parts of the nomination.

3. COMPARISONS WITH OTHER SITES

It is claimed in the nomination that no similar geological, hydrological and ecological conditions are to be found anywhere else on earth. There are, however, several other North Atlantic island groups with some similar characteristics. For example, the Lofoten Islands to the north have a broadly similar position off the main Norwegian coast but they are far more mountainous, and differ in terms of economy and their cultural and social history. There are also a number of archipelagos in the Baltic off the Swedish and Finnish coasts, but the Baltic is a very different environment from the Atlantic, and the island groups are much less exposed to the elements. Superficially similar features can be found in the island groups off the north and west of Scotland (Hebrides, Shetlands, Orkneys), but none has the Strandflat topographical feature. Island groups elsewhere in the world have very different physical and/or cultural characteristics. Therefore, taking into account its glacial history, the high latitude, the exposure to oceanic storms, and the warming influence of the Gulf Stream, it would seem that the natural values of the Norwegian Strandflat – so well exemplified in the Vega archipelago - are indeed very distinctive.

4. INTEGRITY

4.1 Boundaries and the buffer zone

The boundaries of the nominated area follow mostly the administrative boundaries of the Vega municipality. In the southern and western edge of the area there is an ecological justification for this proposal. However, the ecological case for using the administrative boundary of the nominated area is less convincing toward the north-eastern limit.

The present nomination covers only part of the area proposed by the Nordic Council of Ministers in the report, "Proposals for new areas for the UNESCO World Heritage List"

(1996). This had proposed that a large "North Norwegian Archipelago" be nominated to include both the presently nominated area and additional areas to the south and extending north to the Lofoten Islands, totaling about 2500 km². The present nomination is, however, more convincing and practical, and better designed to ensure effective management and to meet integrity conditions.

As noted, the present nomination proposes a buffer zone in the eastern inhabited part of Vega Island and also in the archipelago between Vega and the continental coast. It would seem that the need to keep within the boundaries of the Vega municipality is the reason for there being no proposed buffer zone elsewhere, notably towards the northeastern margin of the site. The boundary separating the buffer zone and the nominated area on Vega Island seems appropriate, since the eastern farmed and settled part of the island differs sharply from the western mountainous part: for instance, it contains fairly large plantations of exotic Sitka spruce. On the other hand, including some smaller protected areas on the northern coast of the main island would increase the biodiversity value of the nominated site.

4.2. Management plans and threats

The nomination explains that only traditional means of livelihood or other low impact methods of resource utilisation will be allowed within the nominated area. However, all economic activities that cause an appreciable change in the landscape should be directed to the buffer zone, where the regulations will be less strict. This should apply in particular to aquaculture, which has been the cause of well-documented environmental damage elsewhere in Norway. A revision of the current management plan began in the beginning of 2003 and was due to be completed by the end of 2003.

Land tenure and legal protection are a cause for some concern. 90-95 per cent of the area is in private ownership. While this is not necessarily incompatible with effective conservation, natural heritage protection must then depend on a strong legal base, effective management planning and wide public support. After some recent additions, about 29 per cent of the area is legally protected for biodiversity reasons with related regulations: in effect this means that over more than two thirds of the property, management must rely on voluntary cooperation.

This is of concern because there is a general trend of people moving away from more remote areas towards urban areas. This trend has already resulted in many people leaving the Nordic archipelagos. Holiday use of former permanent homesteads cannot create the right conditions to maintain traditional land uses and related man-made habitats. The effect of such emigration is already readily visible in the outer islands of the Vega Archipelago, with formerly grazed vegetation returning to more natural condition, a process which leads to a loss of floristic biodiversity. As a result, the grass-eating wild geese are losing part of their feeding grounds.

The decline in the number of permanent human inhabitants also erodes the traditional eider duck's production. The spring collection of the eggs is no longer essential and has in fact been prohibited. Although the eider duck is at no risk if the traditional use of them ceases, it is highly desirable that the management of the eider populations should be continued, at least on a limited scale, since it is a classic example of sustainable utilization of a renewable natural resource.

A potential threat arises from increased tourism and other leisure time activities. The municipality aims to encourage a growth in tourism as a source of income. Existing buildings and harbours provide good opportunities for quality tourism, based on the natural and cultural heritage of the site. The Vega Sea Hotel and the accommodation provided in the old fishermen's houses in the Nes harbour are examples of the type of touristic development appropriate to the local conditions. The existing Eider Museum "E-Hus" should be maintained broadly in its present form. The planned "World Heritage Center" on Vega Island could also provide valuable information to tourists and help to promote low-impact tourism in the archipelago.

Although less than a third of the nominated archipelago area is legally protected for biodiversity reasons, this is to some extent compensated for by strong local commitment, which is fully supported by the regional and national authorities. An ambitious management plan is now under preparation, and actions have already been taken to build local support for the protection of natural heritage values.

5. IUCN SUMMARY

The landscape of the Vega Archipelago has great aesthetic value, with a shallow sea, scattered groups of low-lying islands and skerries, and three magnificent monadnocks appearing as dramatic visual features in the otherwise flat maritime scenery. The Strandflat is also an internationally significant geological and geomorphological feature. Finally the area's biodiversity is of great interest.

There are strong links between the particular natural conditions of the area and its cultural development. The human influence does not dominate the scenery but has contributed interesting small-scale features on the inhabited and formerly grazed islands. In the past, all utilization of natural resources has taken place within the carrying capacity of the area. Traditional management of the eider population is of particular interest from the biological point of view as well as culturally. A similar combination of the particular natural and cultural values cannot be found elsewhere.

Despite its great aesthetic and natural values, the nominated Vega Archipelago does not fully meet any one of the four natural criteria. Nevertheless, IUCN believes that those values are sufficiently high to add significantly to the case for inscribing the area as World Heritage Cultural Landscape.

While therefore supporting any recommendations from ICOMOS to inscribe the site, IUCN has several concerns and would advise ICOMOS and the State Party as follows:

- The State Party should be encouraged to consider extending the nominated area to include islands and marine areas to the north and north east, or at least to include these in the buffer zone;
- As an urgent action, it should extend the areas where biodiversity is subject to legal protection. This should apply to both marine and land areas.
- The new management plan should make clear how private owners will be encouraged to co-operate in its implementation, in terms of responsibilities, regulations and compliance arrangements;
- Aquaculture should be regulated so as to avoid or minimise environmental impact;
- It should develop or strengthen measures to support traditional forms of land management, notably grazing, in parts of the privately owned islands;
- Abandoned islands should be acquired for public ownership and managed to protect biodiversity;
- Nature-based tourism should be strictly regulated so as not to disturb bird and mammal populations;
- Interpretation of the area's natural and cultural values should be offered to all visitors; and
- There should be enhanced programmes of biodiversity-related research and monitoring, including the establishment of a seasonally active research station, to help in the better management of the site.