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Complaint regarding the safeguarding of the Vega Archipelago World Heritage Area and its bird fauna

BirdLife Norway, which is a nationwide organization for nature and bird conservation, has been informed that The Norwegian Federation of Cultural Heritage Organisations has lodged a complaint regarding Norway's obligations to follow up its commitments in the Vega Archipelago World Heritage Area, and at the same time complained about the fact that the regulations defined in the national Planning and Building Act and the Biodiversity Act have been disregarded when siting aquaculture installations. BirdLife Norway are pleased that the complaint has been made and support The Norwegian Federation of Cultural Heritage Organisations.

BirdLife Norway would like to point out that no scientific impact assessments by impartial bodies have been carried out that could justify the siting of aquaculture installations within the World Heritage Area and the protected areas within.

BirdLife Norway are of the opinion that it is highly irregular that protected areas and World Heritage Areas are not automatically considered to be exempt from activities from aquaculture.

BirdLife Norway wish to emphasize the area's importance for birds. The rich bird fauna and the over 1,000 year old tradition of harvesting of down from eider ducks are the most important contributing factors for being granted world heritage area status. BirdLife Norway would like to point out the following as regards the area's bird fauna:

Function of the Vega Archipelago World Heritage Area for birds

The Vega Archipelago World Heritage Area is important for ducks and seabirds throughout the year. The many shallow bays and the myriad of islands make the area attractive as a breeding, moulting and wintering area. Large flocks of Common Eiders winter in the area. A number of other bird species also that live on marine organisms find their food in winter, particularly European Shag, Great Cormorant and various diving duck species.

There are many seabird colonies of varying sizes in the area. Colonies of 2,000-3,000 pairs of Great Cormorant can be found in the outermost and northernmost parts. Flocks of moulting Greylag Geese and various ducks dominate during summer, about 4000 Greylag Geese moult in Vega municipality. Barnacle Geese stage here during the spring migration, with between 1,000-2,200 birds within the World Heritage Area during the past decade. The number of Barnacle Geese in spring is in decline due to cessation of traditional farming activities and fewer grazing sheep, and most Barnacle Geese now stage farther north in Helgeland. However, turnover of individual geese can be high, and in some years

a large proportion of the entire Svalbard breeding population of Barnacle Geese may stop briefly in the World Heritage Area.

Due to management and activities on the traditional eider farming islands, the population of Common Eiders in the area has increased, as shown by counts in the area. In 1999, a survey was carried out in connection with Vega's management plan for Common Eiders on numbers nesting on the eider farming islands. A total of 465 incubating females were reported. This increased to 967 pairs in 2006 and to 1,647 pairs in 2014. Note there was a slight decline in 2015 to 1,300 incubating females, perhaps due to a cold spring and early summer. In the area of Lånan alone the population has, due to management increased from 150 pairs in 1999 to over 700 pairs in recent years (Rita Johansen, Vega Archipelago World Heritage Foundation pers. comm.). A total of 2,700-3,500 pairs of Common Eiders breed within the World Heritage area. The population development is extremely positive in the light of the species' decline in Trøndelag and Central Norway inclusive Nordland county. Common Eider has currently a status of near-threatened (NT) on the Norwegian Biodiversity Information Centre's current national red list of species. Common Eider is also listed as near-threatened on the global red list prepared by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUN), last evaluated in October 2015. The global status is the result of a drastic decline in, for example, Sweden and Finland, but also in Norway. The Vega Archipelago has with this background strengthened its importance as a major site for the Common Eider. This in itself is worthy of note.

Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA)

The Vega Archipelago World Heritage Area in its entirety is included within an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA), including important bird sites such as Lånan/Flovær nature reserve, Hysvær/Sola area of outstanding natural beauty, Muddværet wildlife protection site, Holandsosen nature reserve and Kjellerhaugvatnet nature reserve are included within the IBA. Link: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=3163>. The IBA network of globally important bird sites and biodiversity areas are all sites that are identified based upon internationally accepted criteria. These areas have been identified by BirdLife International in cooperation with BirdLife Norway. These areas are of considerable importance in terms of their biodiversity, in particular in terms of birds, including in an international perspective. The purpose of establishing such IBAs is to identify, safeguard and manage a network of areas that are of importance for the long-term survival of naturally-occurring populations of birds. It is the occurrence of Barnacle Geese, Common Eiders and Great Cormorant that make the area qualify for IBA status. The occurrences of Great Northern Diver, Black Guillemot and Purple Sandpiper are also of interest in terms of IBA-criteria, although for these there is a lack of good updated counts.

Aquaculture in the World Heritage Area

In their complaint, The Norwegian Federation of Cultural Heritage Organisations mention a number of aquaculture installations that are sited close to or even within the World Heritage Area. We have made particular note of the application to site an installation in the Sola/Hysværøyane area of outstanding natural beauty. Parts of this area are also of major importance to moulting seaducks, with large numbers of Common Eiders, Red-breasted Mergansers and Velvet Scoters. This area borders the Lånan/Skjærøya nature reserve in the north, which is also known as a particularly important for Common Eiders. A deterioration in the natural qualities of this protected area must not become a reality. The existing installation at Igerøy lies within the buffer zone of the World Heritage Area.

Activity and the change of use of the buffer zone will also have consequences for the area that is defined as a World Heritage Area, not least for birds that utilize the area for different functions throughout the day and at different times of the year.

BirdLife Norway consider that it is unacceptable to place these types of installations in important areas for wildlife. Aquaculture should not be placed in areas with World Heritage status or in protected areas. These are not areas where one can experiment as to how much their natural values tolerates such stress factors.

BirdLife Norway are concerned that a comprehensive plan as to where to site aquacultural installations does not exist. Many single concessions for aquaculture would result in a great strain, both in terms of their extent and in diminishing the marine environment. We consider the values relating to the Common Eider population in the area as important, as is the importance of the area for a number of maritime ducks and seabirds throughout the year. An evaluation of which natural consequences would result from concessions already granted, as well as those that are under consideration and any future planned concessions must be in place. Such considerations need to be related to the area's importance for birds.

More on the effect of aquaculture

In 2015 the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA) published a summary report on available knowledge on aquaculture and the effects on birds and sea mammals. The report concluded that the industry had an effect upon the environment, although knowledge in some fields was lacking. What was clear is that birds are often displaced from optimal sites for foraging, moulting and roosting. Birds are forced to alter their use of the area.

The report examined to concrete cases. The first of these was from Smøla, where Common Eiders swam away from an approaching boat at a distance of 700 meters. An increase in boat traffic is a direct consequence of the establishment of aquaculture. A further example, again from Smøla, showed a clear alteration in areas used by moulting Greylag Geese following the establishment of several aquaculture installations in what was formerly the core area for geese. This results in consequences for both where the birds feed as well as for hunting. When moulting geese or ducks are disturbed they use a lot of energy to swim to safety. During moult, the birds are flightless, and can swim for several kilometers before they feel safe. This requires a lot of energy, and if disturbance is frequent then they will avoid the area. New installations and physical barriers will have the same effect: the birds abandon the area and must then use less favorable areas with the consequences this entails. Disturbance during the establishment of aquacultural installations and during their period of operation are probably an underestimated negative factor. We know, for example from studies at offshore windfarms, that geese and ducks will go to considerable lengths to avoid unfamiliar objects. They are in other words particularly vulnerable in the open and important landscape around Vega. The cases at Smøla are particularly relevant in the Vega World Heritage Area. The large areas of shallow water, the numerous island which provide undisturbed protection, and the current situation with relatively little traffic are the main reasons why the Vega Archipelago is home to a large number of Common Eiders, geese and other seabirds.

An increase in areas used for aquaculture will in many places come in direct conflict with areas used by moulting Greylag Geese. It will also be in conflict with the areas that Common Eiders use for foraging. A more widespread presence from aquaculture can also be expected to alter the composition of bird communities in the area, where predators become more plentiful due to the availability of easy prey. We also fear a conflict between commercial interests and birds and sea mammals that cause damage in the installations. A vast amount of the biological production in the area occurs at sea. This is what ducks and seabirds thrive on. The fact that values under the sea surface are given less weight than that visible above the sea surface cannot be accepted.

Conclusion

The Vega Archipelago was inscribed onto UNESCO's list of sites of natural and cultural heritage in 2004 based upon the following background "*The Vega Archipelago reflects the way generations of fishermen and farmers have, over the past 1,500 years, maintained a sustainable living in a harsh environment near the Arctic Circle, based upon the tradition of harvesting eider down*".

There are currently plans to greatly increase aquaculture along the coast of Norway. This may lead to large-scale negative effects on the marine environment. This development comes in addition to an increase in boat traffic including traffic in new areas with the aid of GPS-technology, plans for wave energy and offshore windfarms, to name but some. The cumulative effect could be considerable. Clear guidelines need to be established in the Vega World Heritage Area, and existing guidelines need to be followed up.

The report from NINA points out that extensive risk assessments which are carried out during localizing of new aquacultural installations do not take into account the effects on birds and mammals. This cannot be in accordance with the goals for world heritage status. On the contrary, there are indications that

development is leading to non-sustainable use of the area, and is in conflict with the natural values already found. This is in sharp contrast to how the area has traditionally been managed, and which secured it world heritage status.

Yours sincerely,

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