

<b>Committee</b>	<b>Dated:</b>
Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood & Queen's Park Committee	5 September 2018
<b>Subject:</b> Model Boating Pond Island Future Access Arrangements	<b>Public</b>
<b>Report of:</b> Superintendent of Hampstead Heath	<b>For Decision</b>
<b>Report author:</b> Jonathan Meares – Open Spaces Department	

### **Summary**

As part of the Hampstead Heath Ponds Project the Model Boating Pond underwent major landscape changes, which involved the creation of a small peninsular. Locally the peninsular is referred to as the Model Boating Pond Island. The construction phase of the Ponds Project was completed in October 2016.

The Island was originally designed to protect seven mature trees, and it was intended to allow public access. However, following a decision by the Hampstead Heath, Highgate Wood & Queen's Park Committee in March 2017, the Island has remained closed to the public for 14 months while an ecological survey was undertaken.

Over the 14 months that public access to the Island was restricted, the mature trees have flourished, and an abundance of native vegetation has grown. A reduction in compaction, due to restricted public access, is thought to have significantly contributed to the improve health of the trees and vegetation growth on the Island. In addition to this, the results of the survey show that the Island is well used by a number of bird species and is already providing an important refuge.

This report sets out the options for the future management of the Island. These options were presented to Members of the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee at their meeting on 16 April 2018, where Members supported the option for fencing to be installed. Following discussion at the last meeting of this Committee on 23 May 2018, Members requested some additional ecological information. Your Committee also requested legal advice on the enclosure of a part of the Heath and the exclusion of the public from that land. This advice is included as Appendix 1 in the non-public section of the agenda.

It is recommended that the option to install fencing around the Island to preclude public access be agreed by Members.

### **Recommendations**

#### **It is recommended that**

- Members agree the preferred option for the future management of the Island as set out in paragraph 22.

## **Main Report**

### **Monitoring the vegetation and wildlife on the Model Boating Pond Island**

1. The Model Boating Pond Island (which is connected to land by a small causeway) occupies an area of approximately 2200m<sup>2</sup>. The Island is conical in profile with the ground sloping away from the group of mature trees located in the centre. The wildflowers seeded onto the Island have established well and will be attracting a variety of invertebrates. Nine dragonfly and damselfly species have also been recorded in and around the new planting.
2. Since the end of January 2017, the Heath's Ecology Team have monitored the birds on the Model Boating Pond Island on a weekly basis. Any birds perching on the Island, in the aquatic vegetation around the Island or in the trees on the Island were included in the monitoring. However, the numerous gulls perched on the tops of the fence posts around the Island were not included.
3. The results of the monitoring showed that the number of waterfowl increased over the spring, when 29 were sighted, including goslings and ducklings, the maximum number seen on any one occasion. However, numbers of waterfowl then declined to around 5-10 in the summer months and around five or fewer in the winter. The birds observed were mostly coot, moorhen, mallard, and Egyptian and Canada geese; and herons, which were seen on 15 occasions. A great crested grebe nested at the edge of the fence but was unsuccessful in raising young. No swans were noted.
4. Few numbers of non-aquatic birds, such as crows, pigeons and magpies, were noted. Gulls on the ground were included and were commonly sighted at the start of the monitoring, when the ground was still bare. For the latter part of the monitoring sightings rarely exceeded a couple of birds.
5. A trail camera was placed on the Island over a two-week period in February and March 2017 with the primary aim of assessing usage of the new access points through the fencing created to the north of the Island. The camera was also positioned to the south to look at the use by wildlife there, as well as recording any nocturnal wildlife activity on the Island.
6. The access points to the north were heavily used, with coots, moorhens and Egyptian and Canada geese regularly going to and from the pond from these points. Although, activity was largely confined to the morning, black-headed gulls were also recorded in moderate numbers (up to 10) feeding on the bank edge, as well as a few recordings of crow, mallard, feral pigeon and a single recording of a heron.
7. One or more foxes visited the Island on most nights, being recorded on nine of the 13 nights the camera was in position. On a number of nights, a fox was seen to spend several hours seemingly feeding off worms and on other occasions was merely seen searching around. The regular presence of a fox will probably prevent the Island from being used for any nesting by wetland bird species.

8. Dogs were recorded running around the Island on four mornings and are thought to have swum across to the access bays. On all occasions the dogs were wet and once a dog was recorded emerging from the water.
9. Humans were recorded on the Island on three occasions with all these visits taking place in the evening, after dark.

### **Results of the monitoring and likely impact of public access**

10. Due to its relatively small size and sloping ground the Island is very vulnerable to compaction and erosion, both of which will quickly degrade the site's habitat value. Public access would quickly lead to trampling and degradation of the wildflower areas and loss of ground cover. The seven mature trees that were retained on the Island would also be negatively impacted by the regular presence of people, and over time the rooting environment of the trees would be compacted and be subject to erosion. The combined effects would significantly reduce the ecological value of the Island and also lead to a reduction in bird species using the site.
11. The data recorded shows that the Island provides a valuable refuge to waterfowl, especially in the spring and early summer. The occurrence of herons and a great crested grebe is encouraging. If the Island is designated as a wildlife refuge much of the outer fencing on the eastern side of the Island would be removed, and duck-sized holes made in the inner fencing. This would provide suitable nesting and feeding habitat for waterfowl and better access to the Island. Ground nesting and nocturnal roosting and feeding on the island itself would probably be restricted due to visits by foxes and the occasional dog and human.
12. The near absence of non-aquatic birds was not surprising given the lack of shrubby habitat; establishing some groups of shrubs, especially hawthorn, and erecting bird boxes should attract more non-aquatic birds.
13. If public access were to be allowed, it would severely restrict the use of the Island by bird life due to disturbance, to the extent that there would be almost no use by waterfowl except perhaps a few coots and moorhens in the vegetation. Even if only half the Island were to be made accessible and dogs were prohibited few birds would use the half where public access was restricted, especially the less common species such as grebes and herons.

### **The wider issue of habitat loss and the threat to species diversity in the UK**

14. Hampstead is located just seven kilometres from central London. The site is surrounded by urban development and provides an important refuge to a number of wildlife species, including bats, grass snakes, hedgehogs and a range of bird species such as kestrels, owls and kingfishers. A number of these are priority species.
15. All these species rely on specific habitats and a degree of isolation from human activity. In the 2013 'State of Nature' Report, evidence was presented showing a

60% overall decline in priority species across the UK. The report based its evidence on a revised version of the 'Watch List' a methodology developed in 1995 and revised in 2007. A selected list of 155 species all priority species were assessed within the report and findings discussed.

16. In the headlines section at the beginning of the report there are a series of statements, including 'The threats to the UK's wildlife are many and varied, the most severe acting either to destroy valuable habitat or degrade the quality and value of what remains.'
17. So much of the conservation work on Hampstead Heath is centred around the principle of creating and conserving viable habitats where wildlife species will thrive. Hampstead Heath's conservation value is principally because it has a relatively wide range of different habitats relative to its area.
18. Part of the Ponds Project's success was due to the ecological and conservation improvements incorporated alongside the engineering work. The Model Boating Pond was the centrepiece of the Project, and the Island originally perceived as a landscape feature. Since the works were completed the Island's value as a wildlife refuge has been realised, widely supported by the public and validated by ecological monitoring.
19. In 2007 visitor number were measured at seven million per year, and in the the ensuing 11 years we know that these numbers have increased significantly. As Conservationists we are increasingly aware of the impact of rising visitor numbers and this has been incorporated into the new Draft Management Plan (2018 Plan) with the Commitment 'A mosaic of natural habitats is maintained and flourishes' under the overall Aim of 'A flourishing green space and historical landscape'.

### **Public feedback**

20. Over the course of the last year, comments have been received from members of the public in writing (email) and verbally via calls to the Superintendent's Office at Heathfield House. Generally, the feedback from members of the public has been to keep the Island closed to people.
21. The Marylebone Bird Watchers made a representation at the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee Meeting on 13 March 2017, in relation to the Island to becoming a Wildlife Sanctuary with no public access. A petition was received at the time of the same meeting signed by 5,333 supporters calling for the Island to become a wildlife sanctuary.

### **Options for the future management of the Island**

22. The following options have been considered by Officers, following 14 months of monitoring.
  - A. Preclude public access to the Island and install a timber fence to the western side of the Island. In addition, further low-level planting to be

carried out. This option will protect the seven mature trees from compaction, and as a secondary outcome will facilitate and encourage a greater variety of bird species to use the Island and will improve the nesting habitat on the Island. Retaining the fencing will increase the chances of successful establishment of ground cover planting this winter.

**This option is recommended by Officers and was supported by Members of the Hampstead Heath Consultative Committee.**

- B. Open the Island fully to allow public access. This option will result in compaction damage to the seven mature trees on the Island, due to the increase in footfall. Due to the island's relatively small size and sloping ground, the site is very vulnerable to compaction and erosion, both of which will quickly degrade the site's habitat value. It will also lead to a reduction in the number of bird species due to the presence of people. **This option is not recommended by Officers.**
  
- C. Allow public access on half the Island, by removing the current fence line and installing a post and rail fence to create a section of the Island that cannot be access by people. This option will still result in a degree of compaction and will curtail the growth vegetation on the side of the Island which is accessible to people. In addition, the results of the monitoring have shown that close proximity to members of the public and dogs will result in the Island being underutilised by bird species, and it is likely that few bird species will continue to use the Island, including herons and grebes. **This option is not recommended by Officers.**

### **Legal Implications**

- 23. See Appendix 1 in the non-public section of the agenda.

### **Corporate & Strategic Implications**

- 24. This Policy contributes towards the achievement of the three aims set out in the City of London Corporate Plan 2018-23. Contribute to a flourishing society (1-2), Support a thriving economy (5) and Shape outstanding environments (11-12).
  
- 25. The Policy also meets the three objectives and outcomes set out in the Open Spaces Business Plan 2018-19 (a) Open spaces and historic sites are thriving and accessible, (b) Spaces enrich people's lives and (c) Business practices are responsible and sustainable.

### **Conclusion**

- 26. The Model Boating Pond Island presents an opportunity to protect the seven mature trees from compaction due to footfall from members of the public. As the Island was originally designed to ensure these trees were protected, it seems appropriate for the Island to be managed in this way.

27. It is therefore recommended that public access to the Island is restricted. This recommendation is supported by ecological monitoring data, and local public opinion.

## **Appendices**

- Appendix 1 – Legal advice (non-public).

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