

NEVER LOSE FOCUS ON BIRD AND BAT SURVEYS SAYS RSK

As understanding bat and bird movements becomes increasingly important to wind farm environmental impact assessments (EIA), finely tuned surveys are producing more meaningful data faster, at lower cost and to planning authorities' satisfaction.

These principles are at the heart of RSK's environmental survey strategy, which it uses widely in the UK and Eastern Europe, according to principal consulting ecologist, Simon Boulter.

PROJECT RELEVANCE

Wind farm developers and consenting authorities no longer want inventories of every species within 20 km; they need to know what their project could actually affect. Relevance is very important.

"Our aim is to provide the precise information clients need to make key decisions. That includes identifying specific species and accurate assessments of what impacts, if any, a development could have on ecological receptors during construction and operation." says Boulter.

UNDERSTANDING CLIENT GOALS

"We talk to clients at the outset to understand their individual goals and develop strategies that will generate vital information. We work with the designers to understand the constraints or drivers that could dictate turbine locations. Then we scope the habitats present before, even at this stage, starting to identify the potential ecological receptors."

SURVEY STRATEGY DESIGN

"The next stage is to design an appropriate and proportionate survey strategy based on the relevant guidelines and conservation legislation to collect information for a robust impact assessment."

"Everyone wants data that answers specific questions about potential impacts, enables projects to continue and guides mitigation strategies that benefit the species concerned." he concludes.

TEAM SKILLS

With 30 full-time members, RSK manages one of the UK's largest dedicated ecological teams. *"We pride ourselves on being pragmatic and experienced, while keeping abreast of legislative changes and technical advances."* explains Boulter.

Recent RSK projects reflect this expertise. The team has been involved in the Law Commission's review of UK wildlife legislation and has reviewed the Polish Wind Energy Association's bat guidelines. The latter highlights RSK's growing involvement with the Eastern European wind sector.

INTERNATIONAL WORK

"International work helps us to interpret UK legislation more effectively and to explore its origin. We compare each country's interpretation of European Directives. When the European Commission reviews its legislation, we note from the comments how future legislation may change in other countries. This can potentially avoid costly resurveys." Boulter says.

KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Work in Eastern Europe brings other advantages. The Black Sea coast is a major flyway for birds and large areas of its western limits are designated as sites of European importance for birds.

"These Natura 2000 sites require separate site-specific assessments to define any impacts on site integrity. Identical processes apply to UK sites, so such experience helps with similar UK projects." Boulter notes.

The team is equally experienced with bat surveys and well-versed in Bat Conservation Trust's 'Bat Survey' guidelines. Used in conjunction with Natural England's advice, planning policy and conservation legislation, these ensure the consideration of bats during the planning stage.

APPROPRIATE SURVEY SCALE

In reflecting the spirit of various guidelines, RSK believes that all survey efforts should be appropriate to the scale of the potential impacts.

Where sites warrant comprehensive surveys, these involve site-specific survey strategies and, often, the use of species-specific surveys, for example, for barn

owls, marsh harriers and noctule bats. Technological advances such as automated SM2 bat detectors enable the collection of more site information to inform impact assessments while reducing collection costs.

ESSENTIAL SKILL

"The essential skill" says Boulter *"is in understanding both the ecological receptors and the real potential impacts of construction and operation before integrating the two perceptively."*

"Ecologists, engineers and designers must co-operate to collect data relevant to the impact assessment. Not all sites warrant a belt-and-braces approach depending on numerous factors only understood by the project team."

TRUST AND EXPERIENCE

Boulter adds *"We want clients to trust us and our experience. When a full suite of site surveys is appropriate, they must know this is truly warranted and not because it is our standard approach."*

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