

Conservation Status of Oystercatchers around the World

Edited by Bruno J. Ens & Les G. Underhill

International Wader Studies 20

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Front cover photograph: An adult of the nominate subspecies of the Eurasian Oystercatcher. This is the most numerous of all oystercatcher (sub)species, yet it is also declining at the fastest rate. The bird pictured seems to contemplate what will happen to its progeny (if any) in a rapidly changing world, due to the impact of man on the local landscape and the global climate (photo: Harvey van Diek).

Back cover montage: A compilation of photos of all the oystercatcher (sub)species whose conservation status is assessed in this volume. 'RIP' is for the Canary Island Oystercatcher which became extinct in the 20th century. The photographers are duly acknowledged in the various chapters.

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Foreword

The coasts of the world would be much the poorer were oystercatchers not so widespread and, in some places, so numerous. With their striking colouring, large size and shrill, distinctive calls, they add an eye-catching fascination for the millions of people around the world who, for one reason or another, spend time on the coast. I can still remember my first encounter with oystercatchers some 55 years ago; wave after wave of low-flying oystercatchers emerging out of a thick mist on the east shore of The Wash. Because they are usually clearly visible in their open habitats and large enough for us to see what they are doing, oystercatchers have attracted numerous research biologists. Happily, they also attract the attention of shorebird conservationists committed to ensuring that enough of these wonderful animals will remain for future generations to enjoy.

This book will be invaluable to anyone interested in the ecology and behaviour of oystercatchers and, indeed, of shorebirds in general. But the primary motivation for producing it was to provide a resource to aid their conservation. The project was started during a workshop on the conservation status of oystercatchers around the world at the conference of the International Wader Study Group in La Rochelle, in September 2007. The workshop itself was set up because the organizers had the impression that, in many parts of the world, oystercatcher populations were in decline as a result of conflicts with human activities. Accordingly, the workshop had three objectives: to review the population status and demographic trends for all species and subspecies of oystercatcher; to review the threats faced by each species and subspecies and, finally, to provide recommendations for their management and for further research. The purpose of publishing the papers in a single volume was to make the findings and recommendations easily accessible to everyone.

The book draws our attention very clearly to the fact that we know very different amounts about the various species and subspecies. We know a huge amount, for example, about the Eurasian Oystercatcher but, in comparison, rather little about some of the others. We can hope that, by highlighting these differences, this book will stimulate people to fill in the important gaps in our knowledge of distribution, status and biology of all the species and subspecies.

Yet even in the species about which we know so much, such as the Eurasian Oystercatcher, many gaps in our understanding remain. While much is known about the factors – many of them of human origin – that have caused oystercatcher numbers in some places to decrease in recent decades (hunting, disturbance, habitat loss etc.), doubts still remain about the causes of the decline in other areas, even in the Eurasian Oystercatcher. Quite rightly,

the book argues that the causes need to be established if similar decreases are to be averted.

The objective assessment of the impact of people on oystercatchers is complicated by the benefits that oystercatchers have sometimes obtained from people – over and above those provided by conservationists themselves! An obvious example is, again, the Eurasian Oystercatcher. Following changes in agricultural practices, many now breed inland, leading to a massive increase in its breeding range. Similarly, oystercatcher feeding grounds have often benefited from the widespread practice of harvesting shellfish from the sublittoral zone and placing them in the intertidal zone where oystercatchers can exploit them. On the Exe Estuary, for example, most of the intertidal mussels owe their origin to the fishermen who laid the beds many decades ago to provide an income when inshore fishing was not possible. Without these fishermen of former times, there would be few mussels and many fewer oystercatchers on that estuary. Human activities can sometimes benefit these birds and shellfisheries can sometimes be managed not only to the benefit of the shellfishers but also the birds. But on the other side of the coin, shellfish stocks have sometimes been so plundered that oystercatcher numbers have suffered.

So an important point that emerges from this book is that human activities can have, and have had, and might have in the future, both positive and negative effects on oystercatcher numbers. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for conservationists to believe that any human activity simply must damage birds! For oystercatchers, this book says: “Well, often Yes, but sometimes No.” To foster oystercatcher conservation in the long run, we must provide sound and objective science to win the support of people whose activities may need to be constrained in the interests of maintaining oystercatcher populations; after all, conservation is just one of many forms of land use that are valued by people. As the standard of living rises over the next hundred years – some predict that, by then, the average person worldwide will be as rich as the average person in the UK is now – the many demands on the coast are going to increase still more. People whose legitimate rights and opportunities to improve their lives are constrained to help oystercatchers will need to be convinced that the evidence justifies the constraints and that any proposed mitigations will not only be necessary but effective. Even in the ultra-bird-friendly UK, this is currently not always the case and this risks losing public support upon which, in the end, everything depends. Reconciling the potential conflicts of interest between people and these wonderful birds will be a major challenge and one in which the basis provided by this book will play an important role.

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