From Linda Homan, January 25th 2024

Interested Party reference number for the Sunnica Energy Project 20030043.

Re: The Secretary of States request for mor information on Stone Curlews

The Stone Curlew is an extremely rare and endangered bird. In 2004 a study by Thompson et al. noted the estimated breeding population of under 300 pairs of Stone Curlew and that in the UK. This low number was attributed to a marked decrease in the numbers mainly due to **habitat change or loss**, resulting in the bird no longer breeding on many of its traditional nesting grounds. Today (2024), the estimated breeding pairs of these birds is just 365. This was last documented by the British Ornithological Society in 2020 (BTO, 2020). So, as it is clearly evident from the low figures, just +65 in 20 years, I urge the Secretary of State to say no to the Sunnica scheme to save these rare birds. As noted in the report from 2004, changes to breeding habit is the main cause of decrease in breeding.

In light of the damage to habitat, including the areas surrounding the actual spots where these birds breed, I would like the Secretary of State to remember the government's commitment to halt land degradation by 2030. The Sunnica scheme would degrade the land for 40 years from being suitable for this rare breed of bird. Also, this is unique land which has a combination of factors which these birds are known to favour- open ground (Gov.UK, 2023) (***not*** ground covered in solar panels), and in particular "spring sown crops and pig fields" (Hawkes, et al, 2021), all of which have been the surrounding farm land for many years on these proposed sites; and these have been shown to be selected by these birds for night time foraging (ibid).

Due to the rare status of these birds, a 2004 scheme in the Chilterns area of South England, recommended that farmers are paid to create habitats for the Stone Curlew (Green, 2000). Although I have no update on this, it can be seen by the 2020 latest figures that an increase in just 65 pairs since 2004 evidences that these birds still struggle to exist. Hawkes et al. (2021) studied the foraging range of Stone Curlews by tagging with GPS trackers and found that their "foraging locations were close to the nest-site during the nesting period (90% within 1 km) or day-roost during post-breeding (90% within 5 km), but birds travelled up to 4.1 km from these sites during nesting and 13 km post-breeding." This emphasises the importance of not disturbing the landscape for up to 13km surrounding the nesting sites.

Conserving natural habitats, especially in light of known endangered species, echoes recent government attention. In the Environment Improvement Plan 2023, the government state how they have made commitments during the UK's Presidency of the UN Climate Summit COP26, and signed a pledge to halt deforestation and land degradation by 2030. They also agreed a new global deal for nature at the UN Nature Summit COP15 in Montreal, Canada, which sets a framework for turning the tide and restoring our global environment (Gov.UK, 2023).

I urge the Secretary of State to take into considerations all of the evidence that has been presented before now, and to leave this land alone, but also add to note the very real concerns of the impact of this scheme for this rare bird.

References

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