

SHEEP ISLAND - SPECIAL PROTECTION AREA (SPA)

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CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

Document Details

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Prepared By	<i>Ian Enlander</i>
Approved By	<i>Mark Wright</i>
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Contact	cdp@doeni.gov.uk

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Version	Date	Summary of Changes	Initials	Changes Marked
V1	21/12/1992	Internal working document	IE	
V1.1	August 2013	Review	IE	
V2.0	February 2015	Draft	IE	Complete review

Site relationship

To fully understand the site conservation requirements for this site it may be necessary to also refer to other site Conservation Objectives

See also Boundary Rationale

1. INTRODUCTION

EU Member States have a clear responsibility under the Habitats and Birds Directives¹ to ensure that all habitats and species of Community Interest are maintained or restored to Favourable Conservation Status (FCS). Natura 2000 sites have a crucial role to play in achieving this overall objective since they are the most important core sites for these species and habitats. Each site must therefore be managed in a way that ensures it contributes as effectively as possible to helping the species and habitats for which it has been designated reach a favourable conservation status within the EU.

To ensure that each Natura 2000 site contributes fully to reaching this overall target of FCS, it is important to set clear conservation objectives for each individual site. These should define the desired state, within that particular site, of each of the species and habitat types for which the site was designated.

Once a site has been included in the Natura 2000 network, Member States are required to implement, on each site, the necessary conservation measures which correspond to the ecological requirements of the protected habitat types and species of Community Interest present, according to Article 6.1 of the Habitats Directive. They must also prevent any damaging activities that could significantly disturb those species and habitats (Article 6.2) and to protect the site from new potentially damaging plans and projects likely to have a significant effect on a Natura 2000 site (Article 6.3, 6.4).

Conservation measures can include both site-specific measures (i.e. management actions and/or management restrictions) and horizontal measures that apply to many Natura 2000 sites over a larger area (e.g. measures to reduce nitrate pollution or to regulate hunting or resource use).

In Northern Ireland, terrestrial/inter-tidal Natura 2000 sites are usually underpinned by the designation of an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) under the Environment (NI) Order 2002 (as amended).

2. ROLE OF CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

Conservation Objectives have a role in

- Conservation Planning and Management – guide management of sites, to maintain or restore the habitats and species in favourable condition
- Assessing Plans and Projects, as required under Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive - Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRA) are required to assess proposed plans and projects in light of the site's conservation objectives.
- Monitoring and Reporting – Provide the basis for assessing the condition of a feature, the factors that affect it and the actions required.

¹ 92/43/EEC and 2009/147/EC (codified version of Directive 79/409/EEC as amended)

3. DEFINITION OF FAVOURABLE CONSERVATION STATUS

Favourable Conservation Status is defined in Articles 1(e) and 1(i) of the Habitats Directive:

The conservation status of a natural habitat is the sum of the influences acting on it and its typical species that may affect its long-term natural distribution, structure and functions as well as the long term survival of its typical species. The conservation status of a natural habitat will be taken as favourable when:

- Its natural range and areas it covers within that range are stable or increasing, and
- The specific structure and functions which are necessary for its long-term maintenance exist and are likely to continue to exist for the foreseeable future, and
- The conservation status of its typical species is favourable as defined in Article 1(i).

For species, favourable conservation status is defined in Article 1(i) as when:

- population dynamics data on the species concerned indicate that it is maintaining itself on a long-term basis as a viable component of its natural habitats, and;
- the natural range of the species is neither being reduced nor is likely to be reduced for the foreseeable future, and;
- there is, and will probably continue to be, a sufficiently large habitat to maintain its population on a long term basis.

3.1 DEFINITION OF FAVOURABLE CONDITION

Favourable Condition is defined as “**the target condition for an interest feature in terms of the abundance, distribution and/or quality of that feature within the site**”.

The standards for favourable condition (Common Standards) have been developed by JNCC and are applied throughout the UK. Achieving Favourable Condition on individual sites will make an important contribution to achieving Favourable Conservation Status across the Natura 2000 network.

4 GENERAL INFORMATION

COUNTY: Antrim

G.R. D049 459

AREA: 3.5 ha.

5 SUMMARY SITE DESCRIPTION

The site comprises Sheep Island only. The island is a major dolerite intrusion, one of many along this coast. This hard-wearing rock results in vertical cliffs. The sparse grass vegetation on the island supports the Cormorant breeding colony, the majority of nests occurring along the southern edge. Access to the island is very difficult.

5.1 BOUNDARY RATIONALE

The boundary is coincident with the ASSI boundary. It takes in the entire island. As there is no intensive usage of adjoining sea areas by the Cormorant, no marine area has been included.

6 SPA SELECTION FEATURES

Feature Type (i.e. habitat or species)	Feature	Designation Population (5 year average of apparently occupied nests 1992-96)	Population at time of designation (ASSI)	Population at time of designation (SPA)	SPA Review population	Common Standards Monitoring baseline
Species	Cormorant breeding population ^a	249 pairs	‘7% Irish pop.’	‘7% Irish pop.’	249	299
Habitat ¹	Habitat extent					

Table 1. List of SPA selection features.

¹ Habitat is not a selection feature but is a factor and is more easily treated as if it were a feature. Habitat extent is also used for breeding birds reported either as a linear extent for cliff sites or as an area for other sites.

² Designation population given as five year running mean of apparently occupied nests 1992-96

Notes on SPA features – may not be applicable to all SPAs

The above table lists all relevant qualifying species for this site. As the identification of SPA features has and continues to evolve, species may have different status but all should be considered in the context of any HRA process. Ultimately all SPAs will be renotified to formalise species features.

^a – species cited in current SPA citation and listed on current N2K dataform

^b – species selected post SPA designation through UK SPA Review 2001

^c – species highlighted as additional qualifying features through the UK SPA Review 2015 or the UK marine SPA programmes.

6.1 ADDITIONAL ASSI SELECTION FEATURES -

There are no additional ASSI selection features at this site.

5. CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES

The Conservation Objectives for this site are:

To maintain each feature in favourable condition.

For each feature there are a number of component objectives which are outlined in the tables below. Component objectives for Additional ASSI Selection Features are not yet complete. For each feature there are a series of attributes and measures which form the basis of *Condition Assessment*. The results of this will determine whether a feature is in favourable condition, or not. The feature attributes and measures are found in the attached annexes.

8 SHEEP ISLAND SPA CONDITION ASSESSMENT 2014

Species	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	CSM	5 yr mean	% CSM	Status
Cormorant	212	182	141	100	117	299	150.40	50.30	Unfavourable

9 SPA SELECTION FEATURE OBJECTIVES

- To maintain or enhance the population of the qualifying species
- Fledging success sufficient to maintain or enhance population
- To maintain or enhance the range of habitats utilised by the qualifying species
- To ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained;
- To ensure there is no significant disturbance of the species and
- To ensure that the following are maintained in the long term:
 - Population of the species as a viable component of the site
 - Distribution of the species within site
 - Distribution and extent of habitats supporting the species
 - Structure, function and supporting processes of habitats supporting the species

Feature	Component Objective
Cormorant breeding population	As above
Cormorant breeding population	Fledging success sufficient to maintain or enhance population
Habitat extent	To maintain or enhance the area of natural and semi-natural habitats used or potentially usable by Feature bird species, subject to natural processes.

Table 2. SPA Component Objectives

10. MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

See also Views About Management for relevant ASSIs

Owner/Occupier's – Sheep Island is owned solely by the National Trust.

11. MAIN THREATS, PRESSURES, ACTIVITIES WITH IMPACTS ON THE SITE OR SITE FEATURES

Notifiable Operations - Carrying out any of the Notifiable Operations listed in the schedule could affect the site. The list below is not exhaustive, but deals with the most likely factors that are either affecting Sheep Island SPA, or could affect it in the future. Although, features 1, 2, 3, 4 etc, are the qualifying SPA features, factors affecting ASSI features are also considered.

Generic site/feature issues

These principally relate to the SPA features.

No	Issue	Threat/comments	Local considerations	Action
7	Boating activity – recreational	Disturbance and potential for impact especially from jet skis. Generally relevant to particularly sensitive areas within site.	Limited potential for disturbance at nest site.	Liaise with appropriate authority with codes of good practice, zoning and use of by-laws as necessary. Consider the collective impact.
10	Cull of birds off-site	Licensed selective culling of birds feeding on waters significant for salmonid populations. Licensed by NIEA.	Presently licensed shooting of selected birds on River Bush as action to limit impact on salmonids.	NIEA to review all licenses. Assess ongoing cull against population status. Consider the collective impact.

No	Issue	Threat/comments	Local considerations	Action
14	Fishing – commercial or recreational	Minimal disturbance consideration but may represent ‘competition’ for piscivorous birds.	Off site consideration. See 10 above.	Liaise with DARD and fishing authority as required. Liaise with angling clubs as required.
19	Habitat extent and quality - breeding	Alteration of habitat area or quality through inappropriate use or absence of site management.	Breeding site is not managed.	Assess needs of breeding species. Liaise with owner or appropriate authority to adjust or introduce site management if necessary.
23	Predation.	Mainly of concern on bird breeding sites.	Not thought to be an issue, rats being the main concern.	Must be dealt with as part of wider countryside management considerations. Carry out appropriate site management.
24	Recreational activities.	Disturbance is the main consideration Apart from disturbance of birds themselves, breeding birds, especially seabirds, are vulnerable to disturbance as absence of adults can often result in predation or chilling of young with a reduction/loss in fledging success..	Inaccessible nature of site makes this unlikely.	Liaise with local authorities and other managing parties.
25	Research activities.	Census and ringing activities especially have the potential to impact on bird populations, particularly at breeding sites.	Annual island based counts carried out by NIEA staff	Census and ringing activities to be undertaken by competent individuals, appropriately trained. In case of ringers, appropriate license must be held.

Table 3. List of site/feature management issues

12. MONITORING

Monitoring of our Special Protection Areas takes place at a number of levels, using a variety of methods. Methods for both Site Integrity Monitoring and Condition Assessment can be found in the Monitoring Handbook (To be written).

Maintain the integrity of the site. Undertake Site Integrity Monitoring (SIM) at least annually to ensure compliance with the SPA/ASSI schedule. The most likely processes of change (e.g. dumping, infilling, gross pollution) will either be picked up by Site Integrity Monitoring, or will be comparatively slow (e.g. change in habitat such as growth of mussel beds). More detailed monitoring of site features should therefore be carried out by Site Condition Assessment on a less frequent basis (every 6 years initially to pick up long-term or more subtle changes). A baseline survey will be necessary to establish the full extent of the communities present together with the current condition of the features, against which all further condition assessments will be compared.

In addition, detailed quality monitoring or verification monitoring may be carried out from time to time to check whether condition assessment is adequate to detect long-term changes that could affect the site. This type of quality monitoring may involve assessment of aerial photographs to determine site morphological changes. Methodology for this is being developed.

12.1 MONITORING SUMMARY

1. Monitor the integrity of the site (Site Integrity Monitoring or SIM) – to ensure compliance with the SPA/ASSI schedule and identify likely processes of change (e.g. habitat changes, increases in the rat population). This SIM should be carried out once a year.

2. Monitor the condition of the site (Condition Assessment) - Monitor the key attributes for each selection feature (species, assemblage, habitat, etc). This will detect if the features are in favourable condition or not. See Annexes I and II for SPA and Additional ASSI Features respectively.

The favourable condition table provided in Annex 1 is intended to supplement the conservation objectives only in relation to management of established and ongoing activities and future reporting requirements on monitoring condition of the site and its features. It does not by itself provide a comprehensive basis on which to assess plans and projects, but it does provide a basis to inform the scope and nature of any appropriate assessment that may be needed. It should be noted that appropriate assessments are a separate activity to condition monitoring, requiring consideration of issues specific to individual plans or projects.

12.2. ADDITIONAL MONITORING ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN FOR SITES IN UNFAVOURABLE CONDITION

Monitoring actions set out in section 6 and Annex 1 will use, amongst other attributes, bird population data to determine site condition. In the event of a significant population decline being detected, a series of subsequent actions will be initiated. The following list is not exhaustive, actions will be site dependant, but the order of these points IS hierarchical i.e. consider point 1, then 2, etc.

1. Assess the site population in a wider geographical context – Northern Ireland, Ireland, UK, world. Refer to BTO ALERT limits etc. Liaise with other competent bodies to meaningfully assess wider pattern. No site action if site decline mirrors regional pattern the cause of which is not related to the site. Action may be required at regional or larger scale. If the cause of the regional population decline (e.g. eutrophication) is found at the site then action may be necessary, but this may need to form part of a network of strategic species action. Further research may be required.
2. Assess the site population in a wider geographical context – Northern Ireland, Ireland, UK, Europe, world. Determine if site losses are balanced by gains elsewhere e.g. breeding terns. Review site condition to determine if losses are due to site deterioration. Determine if possible whether population has relocated

within SPA series (national, biogeographical, European). Note that the reasons for such locational changes may not be readily identifiable. Further research may be required.

3. For passage/wintering species assess breeding information. No site action if site decline is due to breeding ground failure, unless breeding ground failure is related to poor adult condition resulting from factors affecting wintering / passage birds.
4. Determine whether a major incident has affected the site e.g. toxic impact on prey items, predation event or geographical shift in available prey. Ability to respond to impacts may be limited.
5. Assess condition of principal site habitats e.g. vegetational composition and structure, change in habitat balance e.g. mudflats reduced by encroaching mussel beds.
6. Assess prey availability. Issues to consider are both within site e.g. water quality, broad site management, and without site e.g. climatically driven factors.
7. Assess whether there have been any changes in any other site features or management practices (see Table 3) that may have affected populations of site selection features.
8. Long-term site value must be considered even when it is found to be in unfavourable condition for a number of reporting cycles. This is particularly important for breeding seabird and wader sites where ongoing appropriate management may ultimately encourage re-establishment of a favourable population.

13. SELECTION FEATURE POPULATION TRENDS

A summary statement of site population trends, together with wider geographical trends. Date of completion is given as well as information sources used. Site trends are reported as % increase/decline from designation population (1996/97) using running 5 year means of the annual count of apparently occupied nests. Other trends are generally limited to terms such as 'consistent increase/decline', 'variable with overall increase/decline', 'no discernable trend'.

SPECIES	SITE TREND	NI TREND	IRISH TREND	UK TREND	COMMENTS
Cormorant (breeding)	+7% (1999-2000)	Consistent increase (Seabird numbers and breeding success in Britain and Ireland, 1999. Upton <i>et al.</i> 2000)	Data unavailable	No discernible trend (1994-99 Breeding Bird Survey)	

ANNEX I

Feature 1 (SPA) – Breeding waterfowl

* = primary attribute. One failure among primary attribute = unfavourable condition

= optional factors – these can be in unfavourable condition without the site being in unfavourable condition

Attribute	Measure	Targets	Comments
* Cormorant breeding population	Annual count of apparently occupied nests based on existing monitoring. See also Gilbert <i>et al.</i> (1998). Determine count of apparently occupied nests each year. Calculate new five year running mean. Plot running five-year means.	No significant decrease in the breeding population against national trends	Requirement that annual data is collected, then apply 5 year mean criteria. Decline to a level below the Common Standards Monitoring baseline over a five year period may indicate unfavourable condition of the site.
# Cormorant fledging success	Determine number of fledglings raised and add to total number of fledglings raised over previous four years and divide by five to obtain average. This should remove variation from season to season, e.g. in response to bad weather.	>1 fledgling per pair successfully raised per year over five year period	Appropriate level of fledgling survival to be determined

Non-Avian Factors

Attribute	Measure	Targets	Comments
* Habitat extent	Area of natural and semi-natural habitat	Maintain the area of natural and semi-natural habitats used by notified species, within the SPA, subject to natural processes.	Monitor once every reporting cycle by aerial photography.