

## The Proportion of Scotland's Protected Sites in Favourable Condition 2013

### An Official Statistics Publication for Scotland

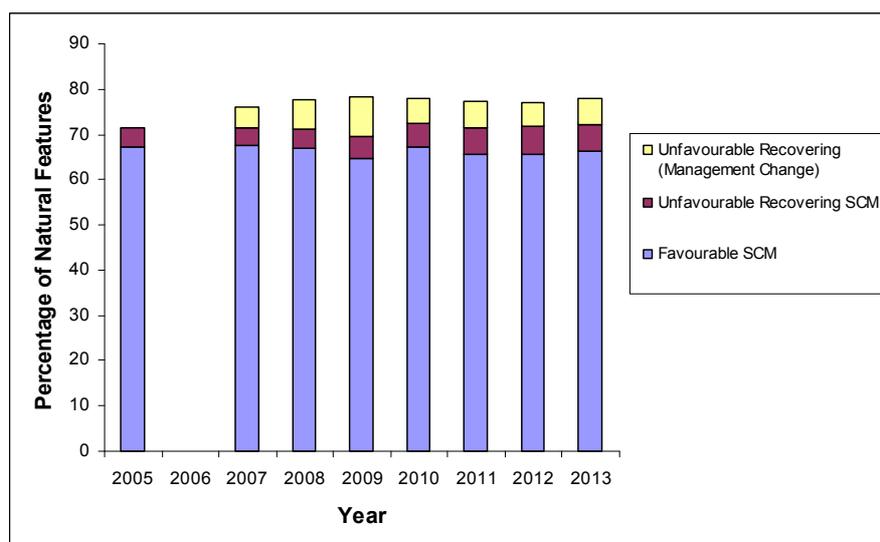
Scotland has a rich and important diversity of biological and geological natural features. Many of these species populations, habitats and earth science features are nationally and/or internationally important. There are a series of nature conservation designations at national (Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)), European (Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA)) and international (Ramsar) levels which seek to protect the best examples. There are a total of 1,872 protected sites in Scotland, although some of their boundaries overlap, which host a total of 5,367 designated natural features.

#### Evidence

The condition of features on designated sites in Scotland is determined by Scottish Natural Heritage's (SNH) Site Condition Monitoring (SCM) programme. SCM is a 6 year rolling programme of monitoring which aims to assess the condition of a sample of designated natural features each year. SCM acts as a trigger mechanism for follow-up work when an unfavourable assessment is concluded.

Figure 1 indicates how the proportion of features in favourable condition has changed since the baseline was established in 2005. The current protocols for tracking the progress being made to put in place remedial management measures for unfavourable natural features were started in 2007. The figures presented are the latest assessment for all those features which have been assessed by the 31<sup>st</sup> March of the relevant year.

**Figure 1: The Proportion of Features in Favourable Condition<sup>1</sup> at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013**



#### Assessment

- The proportion of natural features in favourable condition<sup>1</sup> on protected sites at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013 was 78.1%. This figure comprises:
  - SCM Condition Assessment - Favourable 66.2%
  - SCM Condition Assessment - Unfavourable Recovering 6.0%
  - Unfavourable Recovering Due to Management Change 5.9%
- The proportion of features in favourable condition has increased by 6.7% between 2005 and 2013.
- The proportion of features in favourable condition has increased by 0.9% in the last year.

<b>Change (2012 – 13)</b>	<b>Stable</b>
<b>Long term trend (2005 - 13)</b>	<b>Increase</b>

<sup>1</sup> For definitions of condition categories see 'Source data and updates' section

## Commentary

As SCM is a rolling programme of monitoring, so the proportion of features in favourable condition changes frequently. This movement reflects new condition assessments being completed, and unfavourable features benefitting from remedial management so that they are considered to be 'unfavourable recovering due to management change' (URDTM). The figures presented here are, therefore, a snapshot of the position at 31<sup>st</sup> March in the given year. By 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013, out of the 5,367 features hosted on designated sites, the condition of 5,195 had been assessed and forms the Official Statistic. As new SCM assessments are completed (either first or repeat assessments), they are used to update the proportion of features in favourable condition.

There is considerable variation in the proportion of features in favourable condition across the different natural feature types, as can be seen in Table 1. A detailed breakdown of the proportion of individual feature types in favourable condition can be seen in Annex 1.

**Table 1: Proportion of Natural Features in Favourable Condition by Feature Type at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013**

Feature Category	Number of Features	Proportion Favourable	Change from 2012
Earth sciences	644	97.4%	+0.5%
Habitats	2408	75.3%	+1.8%
Species	2143	75.4%	+0.1%
All Feature Types	5195	78.1%	+0.9%

During 2012/13, the condition of 149 natural features improved which had a positive effect on the indicator. This is as a result of either new SCM assessments resulting in a change from unfavourable to favourable condition, or unfavourable features benefitting from remedial action to improve condition which are thereby considered to be URDTM. During the same period, the condition of 71 natural features deteriorated. In these cases, we assessed previously favourable/unfavourable recovering natural features as unfavourable no change or declining, or features we assessed for the first time were unfavourable. The net effect is a 0.9% increase in the proportion of natural features in favourable condition during the last year.

The largest positive influence on the proportion of features in favourable condition is due to 75 natural features moving from unfavourable to URDTM. There are now 306 natural features considered to be URDTM - a net increase of 37 natural features during 2012/13. The majority of these improvements relate to the conclusion of work with land managers to address grazing issues on upland sites. This has resulted in 18 upland heath, 12 grassland and 10 wider upland habitats moving to URDTM during the year.

In addition to the improvement in the number of natural features which are considered to be URDTM, we assessed 27 previously unfavourable natural features as favourable through a new SCM assessment. Upland features form a significant component within these natural features with improved condition status. They also include significant improvements to the proportion of vascular plant populations in favourable condition. This positive effect on the

proportion in favourable condition has been bolstered by 47 natural features whose first condition assessment has been favourable.

In contrast 71 natural features have declined in condition in the year. We assessed 61 of these as unfavourable, either because their condition has declined or because we assessed that the remedial management was no longer sufficient to move the natural feature into favourable condition. In addition, 10 features we assessed for the first time were in unfavourable condition. The main natural feature types declining were woodland (18 natural features) and bird populations (17 natural features), the latter being mainly seabird populations.

### **No On-Site Remedy**

Amongst the unfavourable natural features which have not yet fully benefited from remedial management, there are a group where there are no pressures on the protected site itself, or nearby, and yet the feature remains unfavourable. There are, therefore, factors outwith local management control which are influencing condition. The majority of the 393 natural features which fall into this category are sea bird populations, where the reasons for declining populations are thought to be due to changes in prey distribution and abundance rather than issues within the protected area itself. These changes in the distribution and abundance of prey are likely to be brought about by a combination of factors, including climate change and interactions with fisheries. As there is no immediate action which can be taken to relieve these wider pressures and conditions on the protected area are appropriate to support the feature, they are considered favourable for the separate purpose of Biodiversity reporting (to align with United Kingdom Biodiversity Action Plan reporting). Working on this basis, the overall proportion of natural features in favourable condition rises to 85.6%. This figure represents the proportion of natural features where on, or near site, management is possible to maintain or improve feature condition, which are currently considered to be in favourable condition.

### **Negative Influences**

The most common negative influences (known as Pressures) on natural features on protected sites which contribute to unfavourable condition can be seen in Figure 2. Individual natural features on a site may be adversely affected by one or more pressures. The figures show that there has been little change to the most common pressures identified during monitoring. There has, however, been a significant rise in the proportion of assessments which are recording invasive species as pressures.

Figure 2 shows that the most significant pressure on natural features remains overgrazing. This can be by wild herbivores such as deer, feral goats or rabbits; or farm stock; or a combination of both wild and domestic grazers. Insufficient grazing to maintain the balance of species in the habitat has also been frequently identified. Delivering remedial management on protected areas where over or under grazing is an issue can often be complex, particularly where the issue involves the management of wild deer herds, which regularly move across ownerships depending on the season, weather conditions and forage availability.

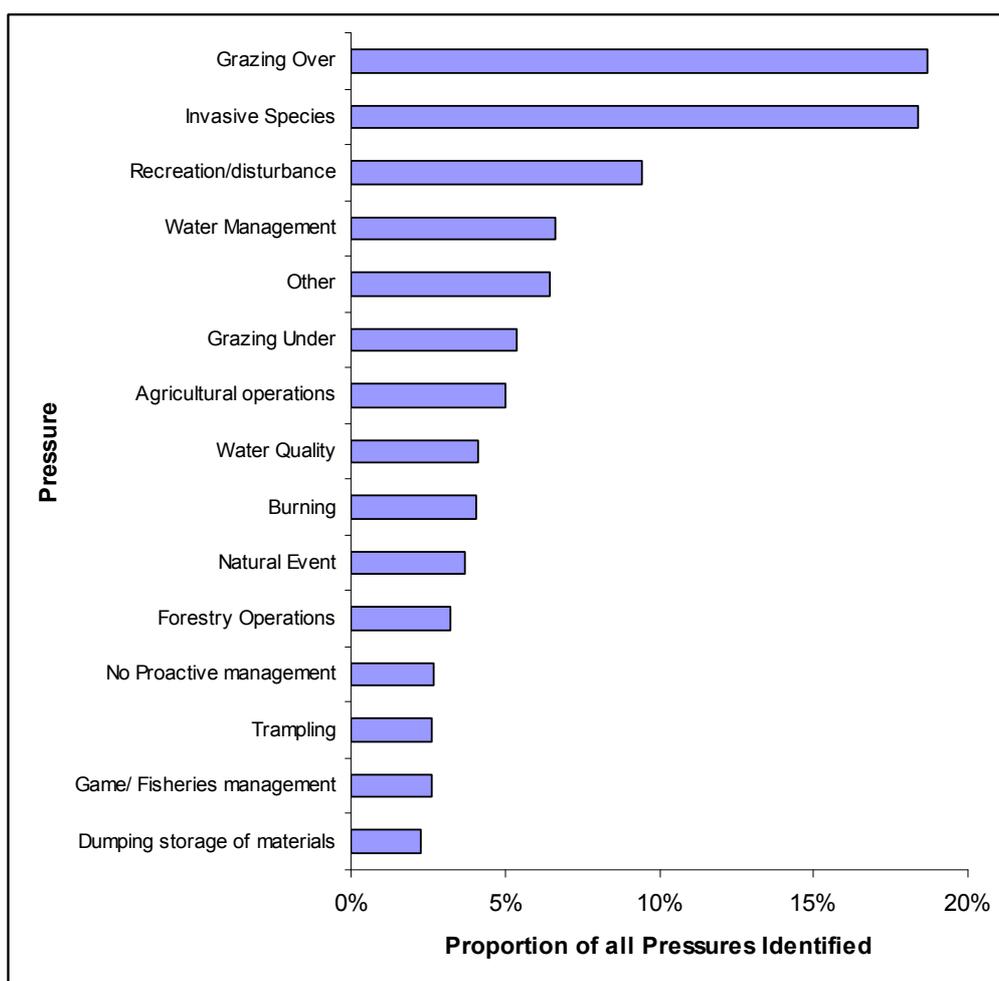
The second most common pressure on natural features is the presence, or expanding area, of invasive species, both native (e.g. bracken) and non-native (naturalised) (e.g. Rhododendron) species. Different feature types appear to be affected by different types of invasive species, with woodland and freshwater habitats adversely affected mainly by non-

native species (e.g. sycamore, Rhododendron or Canadian pondweed), whereas lowland grassland and coastal habitats are affected by the spread of invasive native species such as gorse, bracken and nettles.

Whether native or non-native, invasive species can have a detrimental effect on important habitats and the flora and fauna they support by competing for nutrients and light and ultimately changing the ecology of the habitat.

**Figure 2: Summary of the main pressures on natural features on protected sites**

*Data correct as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013*



### Source data and updates

To measure progress towards the Scottish Government target of improving the proportion of natural features in favourable condition, the following are taken into account:

- the results of SCM,
- actions which have been taken to put in place remedial management to improve the condition of the feature.

Where remedial management can be put in place on, or near the site, SNH staff and partner organisations engage with land managers and statutory bodies to identify and implement the appropriate measures to promote recovery. Such measures to date have included Rural

Stewardship Schemes, Scottish Forestry Grant Schemes, Natural Care Schemes, individual management agreements negotiated by SNH and, latterly, Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) funding. Voluntary Control Agreements under the Deer (Scotland) Act 1996 have also been widely used to facilitate recovery of unfavourable features in upland areas.

For the purposes of the Condition Target, 'favourable condition' includes natural features which are assessed through SCM as being in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition. It also includes previously unfavourable features where necessary management measures have been put in place since the last SCM assessment, so that in SNH's expert judgment the natural feature will in due course reach favourable condition. This means that, as an interim measure, natural features where remedial management has been put in place to address all the known causes of unfavourable condition are counted as favourable until such time as a subsequent SCM assessment verifies the condition, or identifies further work which may be required to further improve condition. Such natural features are categorised as 'unfavourable recovering due to management change'.

The 2005 SCM results set the baseline against which progress towards the Condition Target is measured.

The framework for making a SCM assessment is the Common Standards Monitoring Guidance<sup>1</sup>, published by Joint Nature Conservation Committee. This Guidance provides a common approach to the monitoring of natural features across the whole of the United Kingdom.

The SCM condition assessments are stored on a corporate database by SNH and are combined with data on remedial management through the Remedies database to produce the overall Condition Target results. Condition data for individual sites/features can be accessed at SNHi<sup>2</sup>.

The proportion of protected sites in favourable condition will next be updated in May 2014.

Official Statistics are produced in accordance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

## References

<sup>1</sup> JNCC, (2003), Guidance for Common Standards Monitoring  
(<http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-2199>)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.snh.gov.uk/publications-data-and-research/snhi-information-service/>

**Annex 1: The Proportion of Natural Features in Favourable Condition by Broad Type at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013**

Natural Feature Type	Number of Features	Proportion Favourable (%)	Change from 2012
<b>Habitats</b>			
Coastal	330	86.1%	+0.3%
Freshwater	221	78.3%	+0.7%
Grasslands	222	66.7%	+5.0%
Heath	378	67.7%	+4.8%
Marine	100	98.0%	no change
Upland	320	81.9%	+3.4%
Wetland	343	78.1%	+2.3%
Woodlands	494	65.6%	-1.6%
<b>Habitats Total</b>	<b>2408</b>	<b>75.3%</b>	<b>+1.8%</b>
<b>Species</b>			
Amphibians	12	50.0%	no change
Birds	1496	72.3%	-0.8%
Butterflies	28	96.4%	no change
Dragonflies	26	100%	no change
Fish	46	80.4%	no change
Invertebrates	173	83.8%	+0.1%
Marine Mammals	28	64.3%	no change
Non-vascular Plants	138	77.5%	+1.9%
Terrestrial Mammals	50	94.0%	no change
Vascular Plants	146	82.2%	+6.1%
<b>Species Total</b>	<b>2143</b>	<b>75.4%</b>	<b>+0.1%</b>
<b>Earth Science</b>			
Earth Science	644	97.4%	+0.5%
<b>Earth Science Total</b>	<b>644</b>	<b>97.4%</b>	<b>+0.5%</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>5195</b>	<b>78.1%</b>	