

The Proportion of Scotland's Protected Sites in Favourable Condition 2021

An Official Statistics Publication for Scotland

The diversity of Scotland's biological and geological natural features is a particularly rich and valued natural resource. A series of nature conservation designations aim to protect the best examples nationally and internationally of the nation's wildlife populations, habitats and earth science features:

- National: Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI);
- European: Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Protection Area (SPA);
- International: Ramsar

In total these designations cover 1,878 sites protecting nature across Scotland, although some of their boundaries overlap. They host 5,460 designated natural features*.

*Figures at 31st March 2021. Figures exclude offshore marine sites and features in Scotland beyond 12nm. All candidate SACs are also excluded from these figures.

Assessment

The proportion of natural features in favourable condition on protected sites at 31st March 2021 was 78.3%*. This figure comprises:

- *Site Condition Monitoring (SCM) Condition Assessment – Favourable* 65.1%
- *SCM Condition Assessment – Unfavourable Recovering* 6.4%
i.e. monitoring has detected signs of recovery but favourable condition has not been reached
- *Unfavourable Recovering Due to Management Change* 6.7%
i.e positive management is in place that is expected to improve the condition of the site but this has not yet been assessed on the ground

*The 78.3% figure is rounded to one decimal place and this is the reason that it is 0.1 percentage points more than the sum of the 3 components.

Change (2020 – 21) **Stable***
Long term trend (2005 - 21) **Increase**

*A difference of less than +/-1 percentage point from last year's figure suggests that the position is more likely to be maintaining than showing any change.

Key points

- The proportion of features in favourable condition as measured by the indicator has decreased by 0.5 percentage point in the last year from 78.8% to 78.3%.

- The proportion of features in favourable condition as measured by the indicator has increased by 6.9 percentage points between 2005 and 2021 from 71.4% to 78.3% and by 2.3 percentage points between 2007 and 2021.
- The proportion of features in favourable condition has decreased by 2.1 percentage points since 2016 when it peaked at 80.4%.

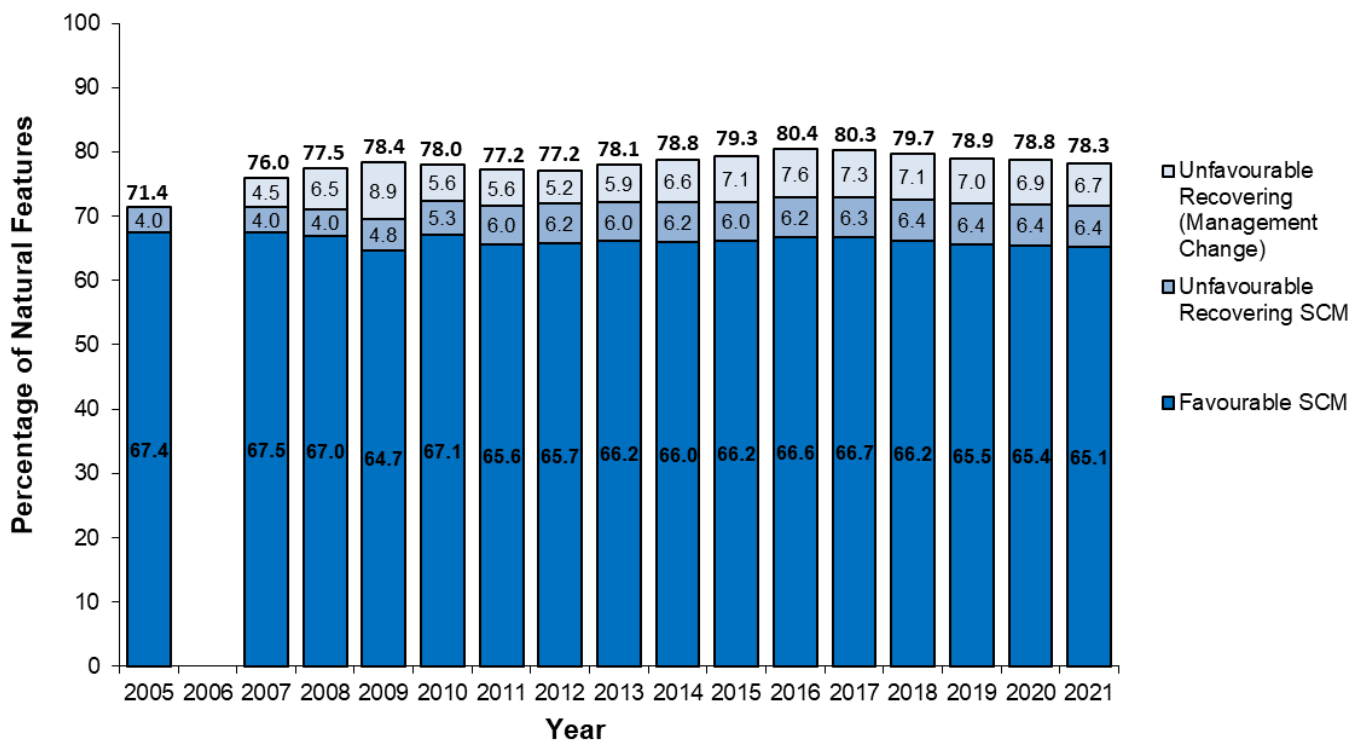
Evidence

The condition of the features on protected sites in Scotland is assessed by NatureScot's* [Site Condition Monitoring \(SCM\) programme](#). SCM is a rolling programme of monitoring which aims to assess the condition of a sample of designated natural features each year and acts as a trigger mechanism for follow-up work when an unfavourable assessment is concluded.

*NatureScot became the operating name of Scottish Natural Heritage with effect from August 2020.

Figure 1 indicates how the proportion of features in favourable condition has changed since the baseline was established in 2005. Where features have been found to be in unfavourable condition, remedial management measures are put in place with the aim of improving them and progress is tracked according to methodologies established in 2007. The figures presented below are the latest assessment for all those features which have been assessed by 31st March of the relevant year.

Figure 1. The Proportion of Features in Favourable Condition at 31st March 2021*



* Assessments were not undertaken in 2006. For definitions of condition categories see 'Source data and updates' section.

Commentary

SCM is a rolling programme of monitoring and the proportion of natural features in favourable condition is dynamic. This movement reflects new condition assessments being completed, and unfavourable natural 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 31st March in the given year.

By 31st March 2021, of the 5,460 designated natural features on protected sites, the condition of 5,301 had been assessed and thus form 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 natural features in favourable condition across the different natural feature categories, as can be seen in Table 1. A more detailed breakdown of the proportion of individual natural feature types in favourable condition within these categories is in Annex 1.

Table 1. Proportion of Natural Features in Favourable Condition by Feature Type at 31st March 2021

Feature Category	Number of Features 2020	Proportion Favourable 2020	Number of Features 2021	Proportion Favourable 2021	Change in percentage points from 2020 to 2021
Habitats	2,447	78.7%	2,444	78.3%	-0.4
Species	2,202	73.1%	2,191	72.5%	-0.6
Earth sciences*	666	97.4%	666	97.3%	-0.1
All Feature Types	5,315	78.8%	5,301	78.3%	-0.5

*Earth sciences includes geological outcrops and landforms, fossil beds and caves

101 SCM feature assessments were completed in 2020/21. Site visits to assess features were limited in the year due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions with the result that most of these were the completion of assessment reports from previous years.

As a result of these 101 completed assessments in 2020/21, the condition of 14 natural features improved to favourable or recovering condition (however only 8 of those had an impact on the indicator, see below). These are made up of:

- 5 natural features which have moved from unfavourable to URDTM. There are now 355 natural features considered to be URDTM. These improvements relate to the work with land managers to address negative pressures. Natural feature types impacted: heath (2), wetlands (2) and freshwater (1).
- 3 natural features, which were previously in unfavourable condition, were assessed as favourable through new SCM assessment. Natural feature types impacted: upland (1), woodlands (1) and wetlands (1).

- 6 natural features which were previously URDTM but have now been assessed as favourable through new SCM assessment. These have had no impact on the headline 'Proportion of Features in Favourable Condition' as both categories are considered to be in favourable condition for this purpose. However, they demonstrate that the remedial management at these sites have worked and the condition has improved. Natural feature types impacted: upland (4) and heath (2).

A further 9 natural features were assessed for the first time and were found to be in favourable condition. Natural feature types impacted: birds (7), upland (1) and marine mammals (1).

During the same period, the condition of 32 natural features deteriorated to unfavourable condition, made up of:

- 23 natural features which were previously in favourable condition but were assessed as unfavourable through new SCM assessment. Natural feature types impacted: birds (12), grasslands (4), coastal (2), wetlands (2), upland (1), earth sciences (1) and freshwater (1).
- 9 natural features which were previously in URDTM but it was concluded that the remedial management in place was not sufficient to address all the negative pressures and move the natural feature into favourable condition. Natural feature types impacted: grasslands (2), upland (2), wetlands (1), freshwater (1), woodlands (1), coastal (1) and vascular plants (1).

A further 2 natural features were assessed for the first time and were found to be in unfavourable condition. Natural feature types impacted: non-vascular plants (1) and upland (1).

The net effect is a 0.5 percentage point decrease in the proportion of natural features in favourable condition during the last year from 78.8% to 78.3%.

No On-Site Remedy

Amongst the unfavourable natural features there is a group where there are no pressures on the protected area 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 428 natural features which fall into this category are birds (399).

Sea bird populations (253) make up the largest proportion of these unfavourable bird natural features with no on-site remedy. The reasons for sea bird 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. The main other bird groups with no on-site remedy recorded are ducks, geese and swans (78); seaduck, divers and grebes (18); and waders (17).

There is no immediate action that can be taken to relieve these wider pressures and conditions on the protected area are appropriate to support the natural feature concerned. Consequently, to align with United Kingdom Biodiversity Action Plan reporting, these natural features are considered favourable (albeit in many instances it is the habitat supporting a species population which is favourable rather than the species population itself) for the separate purpose of Biodiversity reporting. Working on this basis, the overall proportion of natural features in favourable condition rises from 78.3% to 86.3%.

Negative Influences

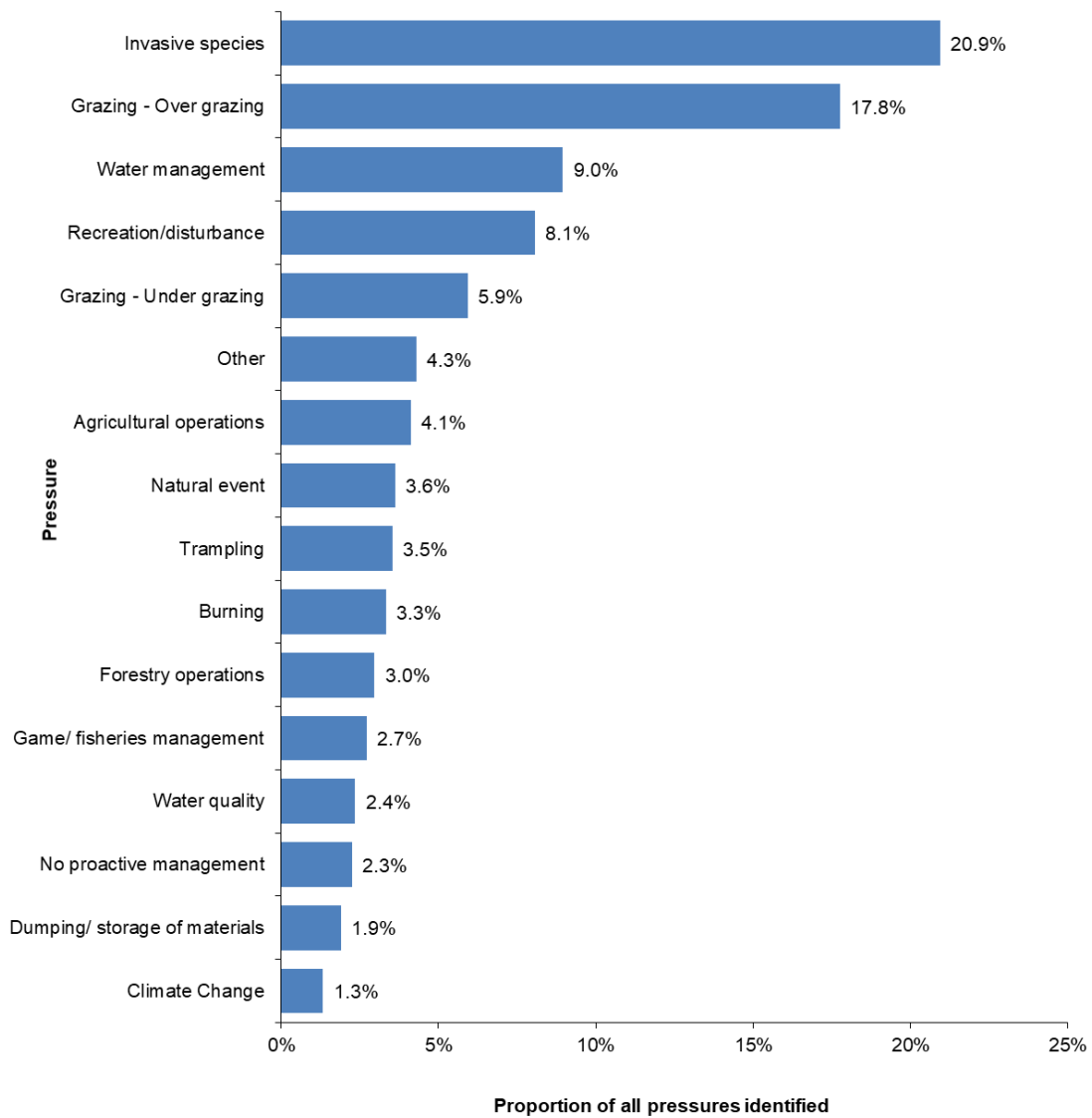
The most common negative influences (known as pressures) on natural features on protected sites that can affect condition can be seen in Figure 2. Individual natural features on a site may be adversely affected by one or more pressures.

Invasive species is the single biggest negative pressure on natural feature condition. The proportion is 20.9% of all negative pressures in 2020/21 and has remained almost constant at this level (within 1 percentage point) for a number of years. The species can be both native (e.g. bracken) and non-native (e.g. Rhododendron) species. Different natural feature types appear to be affected by different types of invasive species. For example, woodland and freshwater habitats are mainly adversely affected by non-native species such as Rhododendron or Japanese knotweed. Conversely, 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 shows that the second largest negative pressure on natural features is overgrazing, at 17.8% of negative pressures in 2020/21. Overgrazing has also remained almost constant at this level (within 1 percentage point) for a number of years. 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.

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



*Data correct as of 31st March 2021. Pressures are recorded for all natural features assessed in all conditions. Figure 2 only lists pressures where the proportion is greater than 1%.

Source data and updates

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

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

Where remedial management can be put in place on, or near the site, NatureScot 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 Forestry Grant Schemes, individual management agreements negotiated by NatureScot, and 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 Official Statistic, 'favourable condition' includes natural features that are assessed through SCM as being in favourable or unfavourable recovering condition. It also includes previously unfavourable natural features where necessary management measures have been put in place since the last SCM assessment, so that in NatureScot'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. This is 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'. Where a feature has been partially destroyed (e.g. through a housing development) the rest of the feature is assessed in its own right.

The 2005 SCM results set the baseline against which progress being made under the Protected Areas National Performance Indicator is measured.

The framework for making an SCM assessment is the [Common Standards Monitoring Guidance](#), published by Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC). 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 held by NatureScot and are combined with data on remedial management through the Remedies database to produce the overall Condition Target results. [Access condition data for individual sites and features](#) from the Sitelink website.

The proportion of protected sites in favourable condition will next be updated in May 2022. Official Statistics are produced in accordance with the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#).

Annex 1: The Proportion of Natural Features in Favourable Condition by Broad Type at 31st March 2021

Habitats Natural Feature Type	Number of Natural Features	Proportion Favourable (%)	Change in Percentage Points from 2020
Coastal	335	86.9	-0.9
Freshwater	224	74.1	-0.5
Grasslands	222	73.0	-2.7
Heath	380	79.2	+0.5
Marine	103	98.1	no change
Upland	351	82.6	-0.8
Wetland	345	84.3	-0.2
Woodlands	484	64.3	no change
Habitats Total	2,444	78.3	-0.4

Species Natural Feature Type	Number of Natural Features	Proportion Favourable (%)	Change in Percentage Points from 2020
Amphibians	12	83.3	no change
Birds	1,510	66.9	-0.9
Butterflies	31	87.1	no change
Dragonflies	26	100.0	no change
Fish	46	80.4	no change
Invertebrates	181	85.1	no change
Marine Mammals	29	58.6	+1.5
Non-vascular Plants	147	77.6	-0.5
Terrestrial Mammals	51	88.2	no change
Vascular Plants	158	93.7	-0.6
Species Total	2,191	72.5	-0.6

Earth Science Natural Feature Type	Number of Natural Features	Proportion Favourable (%)	Change in Percentage Points from 2020
Earth Science	666	97.3	-0.1
Earth Science Total	666	97.3	-0.1

Total Natural Feature Type	Number of Natural Features	Proportion Favourable (%)	Change in Percentage Points from 2020
Total	5,301	78.3	-0.5