



Scottish Natural Heritage

**LOCH SHIEL**  
**Site of Special Scientific Interest**

**SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

Site code: 1053

The Governor's House  
 The Parade  
 Fort William  
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**Purpose**



This is a public statement prepared by SNH for owners and occupiers of the SSSI. It outlines the reasons it is designated as an SSSI and provides guidance on how its special natural features should be conserved or enhanced. This Statement does not affect or form part of the statutory notification and does not remove the need to apply for consent for operations requiring consent.

We welcome your views on this statement.

This statement is available in Gaelic on request.

<b>Natural features of Loch Shiel SSSI</b>	<b>Condition of feature (and date monitored)</b>	<b>Other relevant designations</b>
Oligotrophic loch	Favourable - maintained (September 2004)	
Native pinewood	Favourable - maintained (March 2008)	SAC
Upland oak woodland	Unfavourable - no change (June 2008)	SAC
Bryophyte assemblage	Unfavourable - declining (September 2005)	
Black-throated diver	Unfavourable - no change (July 2009)	SPA
Chequered skipper butterfly	Favourable - maintained (June 2006)	

<b>Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features</b>	<b>Condition of feature (date monitored)</b>	<b>SAC or SPA</b>
Alder woodland on floodplains	Unfavourable – no change (May 2008)	SAC
Mixed woodland on base-rich soils associated with rocky slopes	Unfavourable – no change (July 2008)	SAC
Otter	Favourable - maintained (November 2004)	SAC

## Description of the site

Loch Shiel SSSI is one of the largest oligotrophic (low nutrient levels) glacial lochs in Scotland with extensive remnants of ancient woodland adjoining the loch on the steep north-western slopes. Loch Shiel is of European importance for its native pinewood, upland oak woodland, alder woodland on floodplains, mixed woodland on base rich soils, otters and for its breeding population of black-throated divers. In addition it is of national importance for its bryophyte assemblage, oligotrophic loch habitat and chequered skipper butterfly.

The native deciduous woodland around Loch Shiel is among the most extensive and least disturbed in North Lochaber. Several types of woodland are present and three types of deciduous woodlands are part of Loch Moidart and Loch Shiel Woods Special Area of Conservation. The woods are rich in plant species and support a particularly species-rich community of mosses and liverworts, including the nationally rare liverwort *Radula carringtonii*, as well as nationally scarce species and species with an Atlantic distribution. The condition of the oak woodland habitat is assessed as being unfavourable due to its poor structure and lack of regeneration caused by browsing pressure (deer), local invasion of rhododendron and a fire in May 2008 affecting Gaskan Wood. This has also contributed to the unfavourable status of the bryophyte, alder woodland and mixed woodland features.

There are small stands of native Scots pine *Pinus sylvestris* at the northern end of the loch. Together with other stands in northern Ardgour they contribute to the most important remnants of Scots pine woodland in Lochaber and form a component of the South West Group of native pinewoods which are considered to be genetically distinct from those found elsewhere in Scotland. The native pinewood was assessed as being favourable at the last survey, although there is concern about the browsing levels and the seeding of non native conifers at the site.

Loch Shiel is one of the best examples of a large, nutrient-poor loch in North Lochaber. It has been less affected by human activities than other similar water bodies locally. The marginal wetlands are an important component of the aquatic system. These include small stands of common reed, which is an uncommon plant in Lochaber, and provide a habitat for nationally rare and scarce plant species. The site supports an internationally important population of otters.

Loch Shiel supports a rich community of breeding birds including the nationally rare black-throated diver and the nationally scarce species red-throated diver. The condition of the diver feature is currently unfavourable due to a drop in breeding success.

Invertebrates found at the site include the nationally rare chequered skipper butterfly which has a distribution restricted to the north west of Scotland. Other notable invertebrates include 9 species of dragonflies and damselflies, including nationally rare species. Highland darter and black darter dragonflies breed around Loch Shiel.

Several nationally rare and scarce plants occur on the margins of the loch and on its banks including the nationally scarce orchid, Irish lady's-tresses *Spiranthes romanzoffiana* and nationally scarce bog orchid *Hammarbya paludosa*. Loch Shiel is the only remaining natural site in Britain for pigmyweed *Crassula aquatica*.

## **Past and present management**

Most of the SSSI ground on the northern shore of the loch is managed as part of deer-stalking estates. Cattle and sheep use the common grazings, which include parts of the loch banks, at the western end of the loch. Sheep are grazed on ground within the SSSI west of Gaskan on the loch's northern shore. In the past, sheep also grazed the area of the Loch Shiel woodlands northeast of the Glenaladale River.

Forest Enterprise is carrying out management to promote the expansion of native pine woodland through natural regeneration by removing exotic conifers and controlling deer. The management objectives for Loch Shiel forest on the south-east side of the loch include the expansion of the native broadleaved woodland.

The most extensive remnants of native woodland occur on the western/southern shore of the loch. The woodlands here are grazed by sheep and provide shelter for deer. The condition of these woodlands currently indicates that the grazing pressure is a little too high to allow for a natural structure to the wood by impeding regeneration. There are some fenced woodland enclosures in the north-west, to promote the regeneration of native deciduous woodland under a Management Agreement with SNH. There are some patches of rhododendron. The moss and liverwort flora is also currently considered to be in unfavourable condition because it is closely correlated with the structure of the wood.

Colonies of the chequered skipper are associated with native woodland on both the northern and southern banks of the loch. Active management, such as glade clearance, is not considered necessary at present.

Marine Harvest Scotland has smolt-rearing cages near Glenfinnan and Dalelia.

Boat-based angling takes place from Glenfinnan, Dalelia and Acharacle and shore-based angling occurs near the mouth of the loch. During the summer months regular boat trips run between Acharacle and Glenfinnan and the loch is used for canoeing and for dinghy sailing. Occasionally wind-surfing and jet-skiing take place on the loch.

The Forest Enterprise track along the north-eastern shore of the loch is a popular footpath and cycle route.

The naturally nutrient-poor status of Loch Shiel has a key influence on its characteristic flora and fauna with phosphorus being considered to be the key nutrient determining productivity. The principal artificial source of nutrients within the loch is fish farming. Nutrient input from this is in the form of waste food and faecal material. The other major source of nutrients from artificial sources is forestry operations. Approximately 25% of the catchment is afforested. Biennial monitoring of water quality at 6 sites along the length of the loch has been carried out for Marine Harvest Scotland since 1986.

Black-throated divers are encouraged to nest by providing rafts and the nesting success is monitored on an annual basis. The condition of the diver feature is currently unfavourable due to a drop in breeding success. This is thought to be due to disturbance and egg loss, possibly from predation. Increased recreational use of the loch could result in increased disturbance. An operating code which identifies a number of zones within the loch was agreed with the cruise boat operator and there has been

liaison with Marine Harvest Scotland with the aim of minimising disturbance. There has also been mink trapping in the local area to reduce the number of these non native mammals, which affect the success of the black throated divers as well as the otter population.

**Objectives for Management** (and key factors influencing the condition of natural features)

We wish to work with owners and occupiers to protect the site and to maintain and where necessary enhance its features of special interest. SNH aims to carry out site survey, monitoring and research as appropriate to increase our knowledge and understanding of the site and its natural features and monitor the effectiveness of the management.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid, in SACs and SPAs, the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species, as well as disturbance of the species for which the areas have been designated, in so far as such disturbance could be significant in relation to the objectives of these Directives. The objectives below have been assessed against these requirements. All authorities proposing to carry out or permit to be carried out operations likely to have a significant effect on the European interests of this SSSI must assess those operations against the relevant Natura conservation objectives (which are listed on our website through the SNHi - SiteLink facility).

**1. To restore the oak woodland habitat to favourable condition by:**

- ensuring that grazing and browsing levels are in balance with the establishment of seedlings and saplings to ensure a good woodland structure.
- removing rhododendron and other non-native invasive species (conifers, beech and sycamore).
- safeguarding against fire.

**2. To maintain the extent and condition of the pine woodland habitat by:**

- continuing to manage grazing appropriately.
- continuing to remove non-native coniferous species and other non-native invasive species.
- safeguarding against fire.

**3. To restore the population of black-throated divers into favourable condition by:**

- promoting a code of conduct for users of the loch to avoid disturbance to the birds.
- maintaining or increasing the provision of nesting rafts
- controlling non-native predators such as mink

**4. To maintain the populations of chequered skipper butterfly by:**

- continuing to maintain open glades within the woodland.
- avoiding significant disturbance to the site.

**5. To restore the condition of the bryophyte assemblage by:**

- maintaining or enhancing suitable woodland habitat for bryophytes by removing non-native invasive species.
- safeguarding against fires.
- ensuring a good woodland structure through managing grazing and browsing

**6. To maintain the oligotrophic loch habitat by:**

- safeguarding against increasing phosphorus levels from aquaculture and forestry operations.
- maintaining the natural hydrological regime of the loch by maintaining the extent of associated wetlands.

Date last reviewed: 15 July 2010