



Scottish Natural Heritage

MONIACK GORGE
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1182

EAST HIGHLAND AREA
Fodderty Way
Dingwall Business Park
Dingwall
IV15 9XB

Tel: 01349 865333
Fax: 01349 865609
Email: EAST_HIGHLAND@snh.gov.uk

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.

Description of the Site

Moniack Gorge, which lies near Inverness, is a semi-natural wooded gorge, deeply cut through overlying boulder clay on top of Moine and old red sandstone rocks. It is a mixed upland ash woodland with abundant birch and hazel. Alder also occurs on the slopes and runs all the way down to the flat valley floor, where it favours the wetter conditions. A wide variety of other native trees and shrubs occur including willows, aspen, rowan, Scots pine and juniper. The widespread occurrence of whitebeam here is unusual. In the north of the site are some impressive planted exotic species, particularly Douglas fir, one of which is currently the tallest tree in Britain. These trees are of considerable amenity interest but are not notified features of the SSSI.

The lichen communities are a feature for which the site has been notified, with 181 lichen species having been recorded, including 31 nationally scarce species. In the north, fragments of willow and ash have significant populations of the *Lobarion* community such as the Caledonian pannaria *Fuscopannaria ignobilis* which is nationally rare and the *Fuscopannaria mediterranea* which is nationally scarce. This has now spread to planted trees that have matured over the last 30 years and lichens from this community can now be seen on the lower branches of firs, for example. Further south, the steep, sheltered gorge and the willow, ash and hazel in particular, provide good conditions for lichens to thrive. This is particularly so in the glades, where higher light levels have produced the richest lichen areas within the site.. For

example, the bark of hazel is noted for a different lichen assemblage and the abundance of this tree provides the right substrate for lichens of the *Graphidion* community. More specifically, the nationally rare Speckled script *Schismatomma graphidioides* was found on hard dry bark of a mature ash tree and *Buellia violaceofusca* was found on rugged birch during survey's conducted in 2004.

Although not specifically a notified interest, the site also supports a very rich range of vascular plants due to the variety of conditions and soil types found here. Over 250 plant species have been recorded including maidenhair spleenwort, intermediate and serrated wintergreens, creeping ladies tresses and parasitic broomrapes.

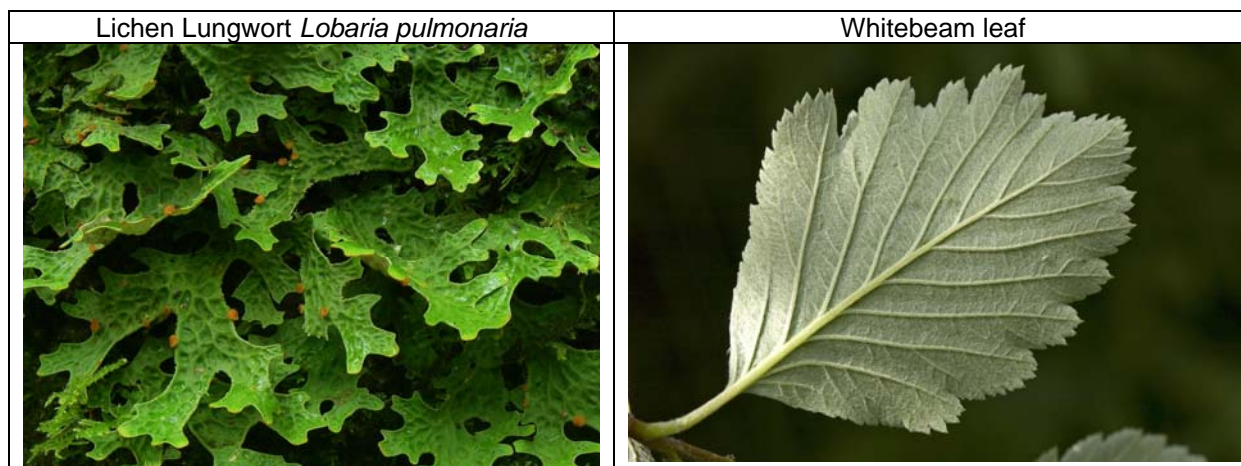
The damp and shaded environment is favoured by mosses and one in particular, the green shield-moss is currently only found at a small number sites in Britain, all in Scotland. It occurs on this site in the lower section of the gorge, Reelig Glen. In the UK it is restricted to well - decayed wood, particularly conifer logs. This species is rare and declining in Europe and the Reelig Glen section of the SSSI has therefore been designated a Special Area of Conservation, under the EU Habitats and Species Directive.

The mixed ash woodland was monitored in April 2008 and assessed to be in unfavourable condition but recovering. Past grazing and bark stripping is thought to have adversely affected the features of the site and although grazing and stripping by roe deer and goats does still occur, this is not currently at a damaging level.

The arboretum in the north is dominated by exotics but this is not part of the site in which the qualifying woodland interest is found. However, beech regeneration is substantial in nearby areas of native woodland and this will be to the long term detriment of the interests of the site.

The lichen assemblage was monitored in May 2004 and considered to be in favourable condition. Recent rhododendron removal has been of benefit with natural regeneration now allowed to take place. Rhododendron is still present but is not threatening the lichen community at present. Beech is re-establishing itself in a previously cleared area in the north of the site and this could shade out willow and ash, which both support notable lichen assemblages. Stripping of hazel stems in the site observed in 2008 indicates damage by goats and this can impact on the many lichens which favour hazel. As stated above, this is currently at an acceptable level, but this will need to be re-assessed in the future.

When monitored in December 2003, green shield-moss was found to be in favourable condition. The green shield-moss requires rotting wood to grow on and therefore needs a supply of fallen timber. Current management of the Natura interest does not conflict with that required for the SSSI's natural features.



Natural features of Moniack Gorge SSSI	Condition of feature (date monitored)
Upland mixed ash woodland	Unfavourable – recovering (April 2008)
Lichen assemblage	Favourable – maintained (May 2004)

Features of overlapping Natura site that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Green shield-moss	Favourable - maintained (December 2003)	SAC

Past and Present Management

Stock grazing and local use of timber have probably occurred over a long period of time. During the 19th century James Baillie Fraser planted many of the specimen trees seen today at the northern end of the site, some of which were newly introduced from abroad. Parts of the gorge were also managed for sporting and amenity with various trails and features being created. More recently, there has been some underplanting of conifers.

Much of Moniack Gorge is surrounded by agricultural land and open heath. However, the north and north-western end of the gorge is contiguous with forest plantation.

Forestry Commission (Scotland) now manage part of Moniack Gorge to maintain and enhance the ground flora, to retain specimen trees of amenity value, to provide public access and to involve the local community, who now actively manage the adjacent woodland along the north-western boundary of the site. Timber production is now a lesser objective. Rhododendron and beech regeneration management has been undertaken in some areas and will need to be continued. A footpath and interpretive trail has recently been upgraded. The site is widely recognised for its exceptionally tall specimen trees, including Dougal Mor, a Douglas Fir, currently the tallest tree in Britain.

Upstream of Reelig Glen, little active woodland management occurs but firewood is occasionally taken. There is some rough shooting, roe stalking and pest control. Sheep occasionally access parts of the south of the wood from adjoining fields and the site is regularly used by a population of feral goats. Dumping of cars and other domestic items has occurred.

SNH has an active Management Agreement with one landowner which runs to 2011. The function of the management agreement is to exclude sheep from grazing within the site.

Scottish Water has a mains water supply pipe running west to east across the gorge near South Clunes.

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

We **wish** to work with the owners 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 SiteLink facility).

1. To maintain the extent of woodland habitats and ensure that these are in favourable condition by.

- Where necessary, controlling shading by rhododendron, exotic conifers and beech
- Where necessary, managing grazing levels by sheep, deer and goats.

2. To maintain the lichen assemblage.

- Ensure diverse woodland with different age structure. Continue removal of beech regeneration to allow ash and willow to thrive since these support rich lichen communities. Continue rhododendron removal to allow regeneration to take place

3. To maintain the population of green shield-moss.

- Maintain the distribution and extent of the moss and its supporting habitat. Avoid deterioration and significant disturbance of the population and its habitat. No felling and subsequent removal of trees to occur and dead trees to be left in place.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

None

Date last reviewed: 19 February 2009