



Scottish Natural Heritage
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MORVEN AND MULLACHDUBH
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1194

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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 notified 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

The site combines the isolated high top of Morven, rising to 870 metres, the surrounding subsidiary hills of Roar to the south-east, the spur of Mullachdubh to the north-west, and the basin which forms the upper catchment of the Morven Burn to the west. The underlying rock is mainly gabbro, which is covered by glacial drift and peat.

The site is important for its overall assemblage of upland habitats, including three individual habitats in particular, and for the assemblages of vascular plants and breeding birds that these support. Two of the three individually important habitats are characteristically eastern in their distribution. Firstly, juniper scrub, which occurs extensively in the Morven burn basin and on the SW slopes of Morven itself. These areas are of European importance as qualifying habitat of the SAC. Further areas of juniper occur on the slopes of Mullachdubh and on the slopes to the east and north of Morven. Secondly, the exceptional examples of lichen-rich alpine heath with stands of prostrate heather, which occur mainly on the summit and upper slopes of Morven, with further areas on the ridge west of Mullachdubh and on the eastern slopes of Morven above Balhennie. Small areas of snow-bed heath dominated by blaeberry are also found. The third individually important habitat, blanket bog, mainly occurs on Mullachdubh and on the ridge west of Mullachdubh to Mona Gowan, with smaller areas on the hill slopes. Extensive areas of sub-montane heath and acidic grassland are also found. This heather-dominated heath includes dry heath, locally with bearberry, damp heath with bog mosses, and smaller areas of wet heath.

A wide range of types of sub-montane acidic grassland types are present. In the basin of the Morven Burn, a base-rich influence is locally evident, with one of the largest areas of species-rich mat-grass grassland in Grampian. Other habitats found include springs, flushes and fen-meadows, and small areas of least willow/bryophyte snowbed and snowbed grassland.

This wide range of upland habitats supports a diverse assemblage of vascular plants, with a number of rare species, such as twinflower, intermediate wintergreen, hairy stonecrop, small cranberry and interrupted clubmoss. Sheathed sedge and least cinquefoil have also been recorded.

The site is used by many typical upland breeding birds including raptors and waders and all three species of upland grouse.

Natural features of Morven and Mullachdubh SSSI	Feature condition (date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Alpine heath	Favourable, maintained (August 2000)	SAC
Moorland juniper	Favourable, maintained (September 2008)	SAC
Blanket bog	Not yet assessed	
Upland assemblage	Not yet assessed	
Vascular plant assemblage	Not yet assessed	
Breeding bird assemblage	Not yet assessed	

SCM results for River Dee SAC of which there is a small overlap with Morven and Mullachdubh

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Feature condition (date monitored)
Atlantic salmon	Favourable, maintained (September 2004)
Freshwater pearl mussel	Unfavourable, no change (August 2003)
Otter	Favourable, maintained (September 2004)

Site condition monitoring of the juniper scrub carried out in 2005 for cycle 1 of SNH's programme assessed the feature was as Unfavourable, declining. This was mainly due to (a) the localised loss of patches of juniper, to muirburn, by the site boundary to the north and north-west of Morven Lodge, (b) extensive browsing (c) dominance of older, taller bushes, over younger, shorter bushes, less than 75cm tall and (d) lack of viable seed production.

Following this, a more detailed survey of the life-class profile of the juniper scrub and of the impacts of herbivores was carried out in 2008, for cycle 2. This concluded that the juniper population is slowly increasing, with many more healthy pioneer bushes (29%), than ailing, dead or veteran bushes (8%), but noted concerns about the low numbers of seedlings (5%), not being enough to maintain the population in the long term. Fruiting bushes were found to be widespread across the area. Additional concerns were also noted about the predominance of moderate to high browsing levels in older shoots, which was attributed to sheep returning to the hill in the spring. A visit to the north-west of the site in 2010 estimated that less than 1 ha of ground with juniper had been affected by muirburn in that part of the site. Following these surveys, the

condition status of the juniper feature has been re-assessed as favourable, maintained.

The alpine heath and subalpine heath were monitored in 2000 and 2005 respectively. Concerns were noted about burning on fairly thin soils on a relatively steep slope at one location and about the width, approaching 3.5 m, of the footpath on Morven but these habitats were in favourable condition overall.

Past and present management

Grouse moor is the principal land use, with associated muirburn. Red grouse are driven, and shot from butts, and black grouse and ptarmigan were shot in the past. Red and roe deer and hare are also shot for sport. There are a number of vehicle tracks around the edge of the site, which are maintained using locally won materials. In the past, hand cutting of peat occurred on Mullachdubh and on Mona Gowan.

Summer cattle grazing is concentrated around Morven Lodge and The Tom, while sheep grazing is more extensive, occurring along the southern flanks of Morven hill and on the northern slopes in the summer months. Some land drainage previously took place on the slopes around the Morven Burn.

A small section of White Cow Mire, at the north of the site, was included in a mountain bike trail developed by Forest Enterprise in Bunzeach Forest. A hill race to the summit of Morven from Balhennie farm takes place annually and parts of the site were occasionally used for small-scale military exercises.

The burning of small areas of juniper was carried out in one small part of the site between 1999 and 2004 and subsequently without consent in another part of the site in 2005.

Objective 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 to monitor the effectiveness of its 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).

To maintain the overall assemblage of upland habitats and in particular the habitats of European and national importance and the flora and fauna that these support

Amongst the assemblage of habitats, the site is of particular importance for its juniper scrub and alpine heath.

Most of the juniper is associated with grassland and browsing levels are moderate to heavy. The relative impact of domestic livestock, as opposed to wild animals such as red and roe deer and mountain hare, is not clear but the 2005 survey attributed browsing damage mainly to sheep. At the same time, grazing can benefit juniper by creating open areas for regeneration.

Muirburn can maintain the condition of heather-dominated dry heath communities but can reduce the abundance of juniper and other fire-sensitive species and can damage alpine heaths. The moss layers of other habitats such as damp heath and blanket bog can also be damaged. It can also potentially lead to erosion. It is therefore important that good muirburn practice is carried out and is directed at the appropriate heather-dominated heath communities and, specifically, away from the most sensitive locations and habitats, in particular areas of dense or young juniper alpine heath, areas of blanket bog and higher altitude damp heath, breeding sites of ground-nesting raptors, and patches of twinflower/other fire-sensitive species.

To avoid erosion, the following habitats should continue to be avoided: areas of exposed peat, areas with thin soils and very steep slopes greater than 1 in 2.

Careful attention should also be given when carrying out muirburn on steep slopes between 1 in 2 and 1 in 3, and in the vicinity of the most sensitive habitats. Appropriate precautions for protecting sensitive habitats include only burning when conditions for fire control are optimal and fire control staff and equipment are on hand, and the careful burning of firebreak strips, swiping or using foam barriers.

The estates should be encouraged to continue to produce muirburn plans.

Lichen-rich alpine heath is fragile, slow to recover when damaged, and is also vulnerable to use by vehicles and trampling.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

These include recreational use, and potential impacts from atmospheric pollution and global warming. Morven is well used by walkers.

The Morven Burn and the lower reaches of two of its headwaters form part of the River Dee SAC. In addition, some of the headwaters of the Tullich and Dinnert Burns, which are also part of the River Dee SAC, rise in the south and east of the SSSI. Works along or adjacent to these watercourses, for example on the track along the Morven Burn, could affect the River Dee SAC. SNH will work with the estates to ensure that the River Dee SAC is not affected by any such works.

Date last reviewed: 31 August 2011.