Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba
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North Harris
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1236

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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.

Natural features of North Harris SSSI	**Condition of feature** (and date monitored)
Bryophyte assemblage	Not yet been monitored
Subalpine wet heath	Unfavourable, recovering (April 2007)

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	**Condition of feature (date monitored)**	**SPA or SAC**
Acid peat stained lakes and ponds	Not yet been monitored	SAC
Acidic Scree	Favourable, recovered (July 2007)	SAC
Alpine and subalpine heaths	Unfavourable, recovering (September 2006)	SAC
Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar)*	Unfavourable, recovering (October 2004)	SAC
Blanket bog	Unfavourable, recovering (April 2007)	SAC
Clear water lakes or lochs with aquatic vegetation and poor to	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)	SAC

moderate nutrient levels		
Depressions on peat substrates	Favourable, recovered (September 2006)	SAC
Dry heaths	Unfavourable, recovering (April 2007)	SAC
Freshwater pearl mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera)*	Unfavourable, declining (October 2003)	SAC
Montane acid grasslands	Unfavourable, recovering (July 2007)	SAC
Otter (*Lutra lutra)*	Favourable, maintained (April 2004)	SAC
Plants in crevices on acid rocks	Favourable, maintained (April 2007)	SAC
Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath	Unfavourable, recovering (April 2007)	SAC
Golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos)*	Favourable, maintained (June 2003)	SPA

Description of the site

North Harris site of special scientific interest (SSSI) is an outstanding area of international importance, supporting a large population of eagles, various types of peatland, montane and freshwater habitats and other associated species such as otters, salmon and freshwater pearl mussels.
The site supports one of the highest densities of breeding golden eagles in Britain and also has a high breeding productivity for the west coast of Scotland. This is considered to be one of the best areas in Britain for eagles and was chosen as a Special Protection Area (SPA).
North Harris was also chosen as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for the extensive oceanic wet heath habitat, which is one of the outstanding features of this site and is considered to be one of the best examples in the United Kingdom.
These Northern Atlantic wet heaths with cross-leaved heath occur in cool oceanic regions on mainly acidic, nutrient poor, shallow peat or sandy soils with impeded drainage. The North Harris site represents the most extreme oceanic forms of wet heath in the UK and possibly in Europe. Woolly hair moss is characteristically abundant along with cross leaved heath, a variety of bog mosses, and the large endemic moss *Campylopus shawii*. The wet heath is one of the main elements in the vegetation cover, proportionally more extensive than anywhere else in Britain. Wet heath on North Harris is not confined to wet hollows or gentle slopes, as would be expected, but is also found on steep slopes. Other peatland habitats that are listed in the Habitats Directive are also present within the site including: blanket bog (listed as a priority habitat), peat depressions, and dry heath, and these habitats qualify as SAC interests.

The site is considered to be one of the best areas in the UK for montane acid grasslands. These grasslands are found on acidic soil, at high altitude, where there is severe exposure, such as summits of hills and high ridges. The vegetation is confined to grasses (mainly mat grass), sedge, rushes, and woolly fringe moss – species that can withstand these conditions. The site also supports three other montane habitats of international importance including; steep acidic scree slopes (upland slopes covered with fragments of acidic rocks, with ferns and mosses growing between the rocks); acidic rocky crags with rare alpine plants growing in the crevices; and alpine and sub

alpine heath (found at high altitude – heather forms a short flattened mat, interspersed with lichens and woolly hair moss).

North Harris is considered to be one of the best areas in the UK for dystrophic lochs (peat stained, acidic lochs and pools, with low nutrients). Other lochs within the site are classified as oligotrophic to mesotrophic (clear water lochs with low to moderate nutrients and aquatic plants) and this habitat is also listed on the Habitats Directive, so they qualify as an SAC interest.

The North Harris SAC is considered to be one of the best areas in the UK for the rare freshwater pearl mussel. This species is declining throughout Europe, and many UK sites have also been lost or are no longer producing young mussels. The site also supports populations of otter and salmon (both listed on the Habitats and Species Directive) that are considered to qualify as SAC features.

Sron Ulladale	Atlantic salmon (*Salmo salar)*
	

Past and present management

The site is predominantly managed by North Harris Trust, and consists of an area of hill land that is managed for deer stalking and angling. Amhuinnsuidhe Castle Estate hold fishing rights.

Within the site there are seven entire common grazings, part of another common grazings and one crofting township. The common grazings are used for rough grazing of sheep and cattle, but this livestock also have access to the deer forest as it is not fenced.

Scottish Salmon have a salmon hatchery at Amhuinnsuidhe (NB043082) and there is a hydroelectric power station (NB060092) with a dam at Loch Chliostair (NB069099).

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

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

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 maintain the extent of wet heath, dry heath, alpine and sub alpine heaths, blanket bog, peat depressions, dystrophic lochs, oligotrophic to mesotrophic lochs, montane acid grassland, montane acidic rocky crags and montane acid scree habitats by managing grazing at an appropriate level, primarily by reducing grazing pressure.

2. To maintain populations of freshwater pearl mussels, salmon and otters by maintaining freshwater habitats in favourable condition.

3. To maintain the breeding golden eagle population by managing disturbance and ensuring adequate food sources.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

The montane and upland habitats are all compatible with a low intensity grazing regime, but are vulnerable to damage from overgrazing and inappropriate muirburn. These can cause the conversion of heathland to grass communities. Stock density in North Harris may be relatively low compared to other habitats, but the combined stocking density of sheep and deer has resulted in damage in some habitats. This is partly due to the time stock spend sheltering in north facing slopes from the prevailing south westerly winds.

A reduction in grazing pressure would cause an improvement in the peatland and montane habitats, and reduce the pressure on the rarer mossy communities. Grouse and hares feed on heather and would benefit from improved heather growth, increasing their population size. More prey species would be available for eagles all year round and would compensate for the reduction in carrion. An increase in live prey for chicks is also known to increase the eagles breeding success. Reducing grazing pressure would have a range of other benefits throughout the area, revegetated river banks would improve the insect populations which would in turn benefit fish, otters and mussels.

Fencing off large areas to remove stock would not be practical or desirable as it would increase the overgrazing and trampling damage outside the fenced area. A reduction in deer numbers by culling more animals and a low intensity stocking level with sheep would be more effective at reducing damage.

The site is popular with hillwalkers and others, there are good access arrangements in place with a variety of different tracks and both self guided and guide led routes. The range of wildlife interests present, make this an excellent site to encourage access to the countryside and to raise awareness of the natural heritage.

Date last reviewed: 25 March 2011