



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad

NORTH RONA AND SULA SGEIR
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1240

**Scottish Natural
Heritage**
32 Francis Street
Stornoway
Isle of Lewis
HS1 2ND

Tel. 01851 705258
western_isles@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.

This Statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Natural features of North Rona and Sula Sgeir SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Seabird colony	Favourable, maintained July 1999	SPA
Fulmar <i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	Favourable, maintained May 2004	SPA
Gannet <i>Morus bassanus</i>	Not assessed for SCM to date	SPA
Great black-backed gull <i>Larus marinus</i>	Favourable, maintained June 1998	SPA
Guillemot <i>Uria aalge</i>	Unfavourable, recovering June 1998	SPA
Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Favourable, maintained June 1998	SPA
Leach's petrel <i>Oceanodroma leucorhoa</i>	Unfavourable, declining June 1998	SPA
Puffin <i>Fratercula arctica</i>	Favourable, maintained July 1999	SPA
Razorbill <i>Alca torda</i>	Unfavourable, recovering June 1998	SPA
Storm petrel <i>Hydrobates pelagicus</i>	Unfavourable, no change July 2001	SPA
Grey seal <i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	Favourable, maintained October 2002	SAC

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	SAC or SPA
Reefs	Not assessed for SCM to date	SAC
Sea caves	Not assessed for SCM to date	SAC
Vegetated sea cliffs	Not assessed for SCM to date	SAC

Description of the site

North Rona and Sula Sgeir are of special nature conservation and scientific importance within Britain and the EC for the large colonies of breeding seabirds on both islands and for the breeding grey seal population on North Rona.

The islands support internationally important breeding populations of storm petrel, leach's petrel, gannet and guillemot. As well as its importance for the large colonies of individual species, the site is also of national importance for the number of different individual species of seabirds which breed there. The islands support about 130,000 individual sea birds of fifteen species, including fulmar, shag, great skua, lesser black-backed gull, herring gull, great black-backed gull, kittiwake, razorbill, black guillemot, puffin and Arctic tern. The bird interest on North Rona and Sula Sgeir merited the islands being designated both as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Protection Area.

North Rona is also of international conservation importance for its breeding colony of grey seals, its reefs, sea caves and vegetated cliffs, and qualified as a Special Area of Conservation for these interests.

A number of seabird species on the North Rona and Sula Sgeir have suffered population declines in the recent past, namely razorbill, guillemot, Leach's petrel and storm petrel. These birds have suffered declines at sites throughout the British Isles and although the reasons are unclear, it is thought that there is a correlation with the declining sand eel populations. These particular birds are largely dependent on strong sand eel populations.

Past and present management

North Rona was inhabited until approximately 1844 and there are numerous remains of human habitation, some of which are scheduled monuments. The village area was extensively cultivated and the feannagan still remain. Since it became uninhabited, it has been rented by crofters from Lewis who use it for sheep grazing.

At present, the island is visited annually by tenants to undertake stock management; by the Northern Lighthouse Board in April/May to maintain the lighthouse; by the Met Office to visit the weather recording station and by the Sea Mammal Research Unit (SMRU) during October/November to monitor and conduct research on the grey seal colony.

A party of men from Ness visit Sula Sgeir during August each year to harvest approximately 2000 young gannets (gugas) just before they fledge. The harvesting of gannets is a traditional right that has been exercised by Ness people for at least several hundred years.

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

features)

The SAC and SPA designations oblige the government to maintain the breeding seabird and seal populations in favourable condition.

North Rona and Sula Sgeir provide internationally important habitats for breeding seabirds, and North Rona provides suitable sites for seals to come ashore to pup. The surrounding area provides fishing grounds which support these seabird and seal populations. The fishing grounds which support these populations are outwith the designated SPA.

Oil pollution from a shipping accident or accidental spillage poses a potential threat to seabirds and seals. Although the risk may be small, the consequences of a large scale oil spill would be severe. Booms would be ineffective in the sea conditions found in this area and chemical dispersants could damage the marine animals that live on the reefs and in the sea caves, and the fish stocks that the birds and seals feed on.

Seabirds are especially vulnerable during the breeding season, as they dive underwater for prey and rest on the surface in rafts. They also congregate in rafts before going ashore in spring, and in late summer when young are first fledged and the adults are moulting. Seals are particularly vulnerable to pollution when they begin to gather round the coast of North Rona prior to coming ashore to pup and during pupping, between September and late November.

Mammalian predators such as mink, feral cats and rats, can cause significant damage to seabird colonies by preying on eggs and chicks. Mink would be a particular problem due to their habit of killing more than they need and storing the excess. The likelihood of these animals reaching North Rona may not be as remote as it first seems, A lot of boats that go out there will have spent at least one night at a pier before travelling out to these offshore islands. This makes it easy for mink and rats to get aboard, where they have been known to remain undiscovered for some time. There is nowhere suitable for boats to tie up at Rona, so these animals are unlikely to leave the boat out there, unless it goes aground, or they are discovered unexpectedly and get chased off the boat.

The old buildings within the village and the fank at Fianuis provide nesting habitat for storm petrels which prefer to nest in storm buildings or stone beaches. Alterations or reinstatement works to historic buildings during the breeding season (May to September) could damage or expose the eggs or young, so this period would need to be avoided.

Visitor pressure is thought to be fairly low at the moment. North Rona and Sula Sgeir are accessible by private boat or charter boat, but bad weather limits access to the islands even during summer. Yachts and charter boats are usually limited to 12 people and they only stay for a short time, which minimises disturbance. Larger cruise ships could potentially land large numbers of people and could cause more of a problem for accessible breeding birds. However, as long as people take reasonable care whilst ashore on Rona, disturbance should be minimised.

Visitors are discouraged from landing on Sula Sgeir during the bird breeding season because of the potential for disturbing large numbers of breeding seabirds. Nesting birds cover the entire island, and once ashore, visitors would have to walk between densely packed fulmar nests. As visitors approach within range of a fulmar, it tends to

projectile vomit an unpleasant smelling liquid at them. Beyond this area the gannet colony, and guillemot ledges, are too accessible to visitors. Visitors walking into this area can cause massive disturbance, causing large numbers of eggs and young chicks to be destroyed when the adult birds fly off en masse. Disturbance can be minimised by viewing the gannets and auks from a boat, and it is much easier to get good views.

Fianuis on North Rona, which is where the seals haul out during the breeding season, experiences relatively low levels of disturbance. SMRU have carried out research on the individuals within the colony for the past 20 years.

The guga harvest on Sula Sgeir does not appear to be causing a decline in the number of gannets and is therefore considered to be compatible with maintaining the seabird populations in favourable condition. If the gannet population were to decline then the quota would have to be re-assessed.

The maritime vegetation is in good condition. Some areas of grassland are slightly undergrazed and although the island could probably support more stock than have been present in recent years, the undergrazing is not damaging the interest of the site. A lot of the excess vegetation is removed over the winter either by the action of the seals, or winter storms.

We wish to work with the owner 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 and to monitor the effectiveness of the nature reserve agreement.

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, where 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. Maintain the breeding seabird populations in favourable condition, including the population size of individual species and the number of different breeding species.
2. Maintain the breeding seal population in favourable condition.
3. Maintain the reefs, caves and vegetated sea cliff habitats in favourable condition.
4. Raise awareness of the National Nature Reserve.
5. Raise awareness of the damage that could be caused by alien predators such as rats, cats and mink colonising the island.
6. Explore ways to minimise the risk of oil pollution.
7. Maintain the condition of the marine habitats and fish stocks.
8. Minimise disturbance during the bird and seal breeding seasons.