

**SCOTTISH
NATURAL
HERITAGE**



**DUALCHAS
NADAIR
na h-ALBA**

**PRIEST ISLAND
Site of Special Scientific Interest**

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1313

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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 Priest Island SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Storm petrel	Favourable - maintained (July 1999)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Maritime cliff (vegetation)	Favourable - maintained (September 2001)	

Description of the site

Priest Island Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located in the coastal waters of the Minch and is the outermost and most exposed of the Summer Isles. It lies approximately 22km west of Ullapool on the coast of Wester Ross. The site has nationally important coastal vegetation and an internationally important colony of breeding storm petrels.

The island rises to about 75m and has a range of habitats including numerous small lochs and a small amount of woodland, as well as the coastal cliff and heath communities for which the site is notified. Some of these, especially the heath around the coastline and cliff plant communities exposed to salt spray and bird guano, are rich in species such as thrift, sea plantain, common scurvygrass, spring squill and sea mayweed.

Maritime cliff (vegetation)

The maritime cliff vegetation was monitored in 2001 and was found to be in favourable

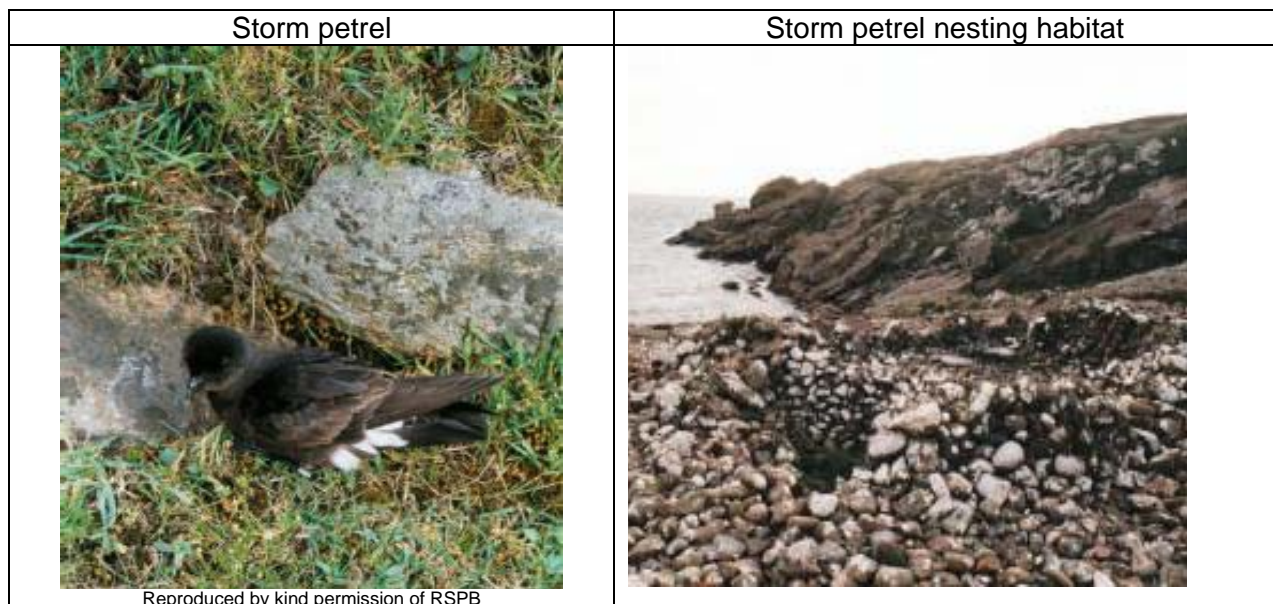
condition because the vegetation included only species that are typical of coastal habitats (i.e., there were no introduced species) and there was no damage to the vegetation from burning, trampling or overgrazing.



Storm petrel

There are boulder screes and boulder beaches in various locations across the island, which are crucial as nesting sites for the internationally important colony of storm petrels which nest in underground burrows throughout the island. The storm petrels were monitored in 1999 by using a tape playback method to elicit responses from breeding birds in burrows. There was no evidence in any loss of habitat as there was no decrease in areas of walls, boulder beach, rock scree or peat suitable for petrel burrows. The storm petrel feature was found to be favourable, with the breeding population estimated to be around 4640 pairs.

The island also provides an important habitat for a number of other species for which it is not notified, such as greylag geese which breed and feed within areas of acidic grassland on the island. These are joined in winter by migratory barnacle geese. Royal fern is found growing next to some of the lochs.



Past and present management

Priest Island SSSI is owned and managed by the RSPB as a wildlife reserve. With the exception of small scale measures to provide nest sites for storm petrels, management is largely by non-intervention. Principal activities relate to gathering information on bird numbers and distribution.

Winter grazing of sheep ceased in 2006. In the absence of any grazing, changes to the vegetation can be expected. The RSPB is monitoring the vegetation to assess any effect on the storm petrel colony.

The number of recreational visitors to the island has been increasing over the past few years although difficulty of access deters most visitors and therefore limits the numbers. Fraser Darling's writings about the island attract naturalists and birdwatchers. The island is also occasionally visited by boats and canoes with some camping taking place. There is some concern about the potential of the introduction of rats or other land based predators such as mink on to the island from visiting boats. The RSPB therefore monitor the island for any predator presence and will take action if necessary.

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

We wish to work with the owner 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 monitor the effectiveness of the management 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 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).

The list of Operations Requiring Consent, and the discussions on land management involved in the issuing of formal consents, are intended to minimise the threat of any damage to the natural features.

1. To maintain the condition and extent of the maritime cliff vegetation

Any future stocking with grazing animals should be of a pattern and at a level which avoids obvious trampling of the vegetation. The ideal level of grazing would be one that maintains a short sward but also enables the majority of plants to flower and seed to maintain the characteristic mixture of species. It is possible that the vegetation may become too rank in the absence of grazing on the island, which would suppress species that require a short, open sward. Grazing by greylag geese in summer and barnacle geese in winter is currently helpful in maintaining habitats with short, open

sward. Regular monitoring of the vegetation is desirable so that SNH can provide advice regarding management if the vegetation becomes rank in the absence of grazing by livestock.

Burning is not a desirable form of managing the coastal habitats on this site. Coastal heath, such as is found on Priest Island grows slowly in the harsh climatic conditions and rarely achieves any significant height. Burning of the cliff vegetation would cause serious damage and is contrary to the Muirburn Code.

If vehicles are used on this site, care should be taken not to break through the vegetation. It would be advisable to avoid wet areas, areas of stones where storm petrels nest and not to use the same route too frequently.

2. To maintain the size and distribution of the breeding population of storm petrel and to avoid significant disturbance to storm petrels during the breeding season

Storm petrels clearly depend on the sea for everything apart from their breeding colonies. Since land managers at Priest Island do not manage the marine environment, the following advice only relates to management of the land where the storm petrels breed.

Management of Priest Island that will benefit the breeding population of storm petrels should include not disturbing the rocky habitats where these birds nest, keeping the island free from mammals that might predate nesting storm petrels and avoiding disturbance to nesting storm petrels. Continuation of the existing management should achieve these objectives. Continued lack of intervention should maintain the extent and distribution of the storm petrel nesting habitat. The island should continue to be monitored regularly for the presence of mammalian predators and any mink or rats that may reach the island in future should be eradicated since these animals might damage storm petrel populations by eating petrel eggs or chicks. Monitoring methods for storm petrel should also be designed not to disturb these birds.

Date last reviewed: 14 October 2008