

**SCOTTISH  
NATURAL  
HERITAGE**



**DUALCHAS  
NADAIR  
na h-ALBA**

**SANDSIDE BAY**  
Site of Special Scientific Interest

**SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT**

Site code: 1405

Main Street  
Golspie  
Sutherland  
KW10 6TG  
Tel. 01408 633602

Email  
north\_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.

This Statement is available in Gaelic on request.

<b>Natural features of Sandside Bay SSSI</b>	<b>Feature Condition (date monitored)</b>
Sand dunes	Favourable, maintained (July 2004)

**Description of the site**

Sandside Bay Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) lies just north of Reay, on the north coast of Caithness. The site is in two parts. The main part of the site includes the foreshore, dunes, dune slacks and the banks of the Burn of Isauld. The second part of the site, known locally as the Sahara, is an area of herb-rich grassland within Reay Golf Course. The site has been notified for the sand dune habitat and associated plant species.

The dunes are dominated by marram grass, with herb species such as lady's bedstraw, field wood-rush and bird's foot trefoil on the stabilised back slopes. The links have species-rich turf which includes plants such as thyme, selfheal, eyebright and silverweed. Uncommon species, including alpine meadow-rue, autumn gentian and cowslip are found on parts of the site with cowslip growing in particularly large numbers. The nationally scarce curved sedge is found in short vegetation near the back of the sand dunes. A small number of Scottish primrose *Primula scotica* plants were found on the Sahara area of the golf course during 2007. The site has high conservation interest due to the large area of typical dune vegetation.

Monitoring of the sand dunes in July 2004 identified healthy populations of characteristic plants of dune grasslands. Marram grass was common on the part of the dunes closest to the sea and there were numerous flowering plants including yellow

rattle, thyme, red clover, bird's foot trefoil, eyebright and lady's bedstraw in the fixed dunes and dune slacks further inland. There were no significant concerns with the spread of invasive or non-native plant species, although there were some nettles and thistles, particularly in an area where the ground had been enriched by past dumping and disturbed by rabbits. There was an appropriate level of grazing that allowed plants to flower and set seed. Large numbers of cowslip were found in parts of the site and globeflower was found near the Burn of Isauld. The feature was found to be in favourable condition.

Herb rich grassland at Sandside Bay	Cowslip
	

The Isauld Burn, at the east end of the site, supports tall fen vegetation containing globeflower and an impressive stand of lesser pond sedge. This is the only known site for lesser pond sedge in Caithness.

### **Past and present management**

A large proportion of the site is managed as Reay Golf Course. The golf course management has been designed, in discussion with SNH, to avoid adverse impacts on the SSSI. Golf is played on a mown community of fine grasses and herbs. The regular cutting of the vegetation to different heights during routine management of the golf course encourages the development of a variety plant communities in this area.

The dunes along the top of the beach benefit from the current minimal management intervention. Parts of the site are grazed by rabbits.

The UKAEA are undertaking radiological monitoring on Sandside beach. Current survey techniques do not affect the notified interest of the site.

The beach is used by the public for recreation, although this has reduced in recent years following the discovery of radioactive particles on the foreshore. A toilet block, two car parks and associated notice boards have been provided for visitors. The ease of access to this site presents some problems. There have been issues in the past with rubbish dumping, sand excavation and recreational three wheel and motorbike use on the site, all of which can cause serious damage to the vegetation.

As well as their botanical interest, the dunes play an important role as a natural sea defence. Damage to the marram grass vegetation from vehicle use can lead to erosion of the dunes, threatening the integrity of the sea defences. Any vehicle damage to the dunes should be reported to the Police at the earliest opportunity.

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

We wish to work with the owners and land managers 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.

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 sand dune habitats in a favourable condition** by continuing present low levels of active management over the part of the dunes close to the sea and the low intensity of mowing/grazing by cattle or rabbits further inland. No fires should be started on the site or allowed to spread onto it as any burning would damage the dune vegetation, increasing the risk of erosion and encouraging encroachment by gorse. Vehicle use should be avoided on dunes where the main vegetation is marram grass because this could lead to large blow outs in the dunes and erosion that would be very difficult to control.

The ongoing losses of small areas of natural habitats may become a significant issue on this site in future due to their cumulative impacts. Proposals for further modification of natural vegetation will be assessed with this in mind and SNH's aim will be to halt any further loss.

### **Other factors affecting the natural features of the site**

- (1) Coastal Erosion: Part of the SSSI has been subject to erosion from the burns that flow through the site, particularly when flooding occurs at high tide. This erosion may require management in the future to protect the golf course. Any such management needs to be appropriate for the special natural features of the site as well.
- (2) Gorse: Gorse occurs in some parts of the site and encroachment by this species is a potential long term threat. The site would benefit from gorse being cut back periodically. Burning is not considered to be a good control option for gorse as this creates larger bare areas for gorse to seed into and encourages gorse seed lying in the soil to germinate.

Date last reviewed: 17 March 2008