SHEIGRA – OLDSHOREMORE
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1419

Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba
All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdair air fad airson Alba air fad

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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 Sheigra – Oldshoremore SSSI	**Condition of feature** (and date monitored)	**Other relevant designations**
Sand dunes (vegetation)	Favourable – Maintained (July 2007)	SAC (Special Area of Conservation) 'Dune grassland' and 'Shifting dunes with marram' interests
Machair	Favourable – Maintained (July 2007)	SAC 'Machair' interest

Description of the site

Sheigra – Oldshoremore Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located on the west coast of Sutherland, 3km north west of Kinlochbervie. The site includes three bays: Sheigra, Oldshore Beg and Oldshoremore. All three bays face southwest which means that they are exposed to the prevailing wind. The bays are separated by rocky ridges of Lewisian gneiss and Torridonian sandstone. This site has the best examples of species-rich dune and machair habitats in Sutherland and has some of the most species-rich machair systems in Britain. Both the sand dune and machair habitats are internationally important.

Sand dunes (vegetation)

The dunes at Oldshoremore and Oldshore Beg lie behind sand and shingle beaches. These beaches have a high proportion of shell sand which means that they have a high lime content. Plants such as sea rocket and common orache can be found growing on the strandline.

The dune ridge rises to crests of up to 4m and is fairly stable. There are a few blow outs in areas where wind erosion has prevented vegetation from becoming established.

The vegetation cover is relatively sparse in the dunes that are closest to the beach, with marram grass, wild angelica, wild carrot, bird's-foot-trefoil and smooth meadow grass. At Oldshoremore, the vegetation cover in the sand dunes gradually increases inland. Here, established marram grass tussocks provide shelter for a wide variety of plants including common mouse-ear, northern marsh-orchid, red fescue and lady's bedstraw. At Oldshore Beg, there is a sharper transition to machair vegetation on the landward side of the dune ridge.

The beach at Sheigra is exposed to south-westerly winds and waves. There is a small amount of shore sand which grades quickly into a boulder storm beach. The exposure and limited sand supply mean that there are no large sand dunes in this bay. Behind the storm beach, there is a very low, open community of sand couch grass, with sand sedge, creeping thistle and silverweed. This beach has more erosion caused partly by human recreational activities and partly by the exposure to wind.

The sand dunes were monitored in July 2007 and found to be in favourable condition. The extent of the sand dunes had been maintained, and any changes were due to natural coastal erosion. Plant species typical of sand dunes were present and no significant damage was noted.

Machair

Machair is one of the rarest habitats in Europe, found only in the north and west of Britain and Ireland. The high quality machair habitat on this site is therefore of international importance. The sand has a high shell content which is rich in calcium carbonate. This influences the soils and allows a diverse range of plants to grow there. Machairs are also strongly influenced by agricultural practices, particularly stock management. Low intensity stock grazing regimes help to maintain this rich and diverse flora.

Oldshoremore has the largest and best area of machair in Sutherland. Although this is a relatively small area of machair, it is exceptionally rich in flora with over 200 species of flowering plants. It is notable in supporting a large population of globeflower. Other species of interest include northern marsh-orchid, moonwort, mountain everlasting, several species of gentians, Scots lovage, common twayblade, frog orchid and the nationally scarce hair sedge. Oldshoremore machair also supports a rich diversity of mosses, including shaggy moss, springy turf-moss and cypress-leaved plait-moss. Dog lichen is found growing amongst the mosses.

The machair at Oldshore Beg is fenced to protect it from burrowing by rabbits which was leading to very serious erosion which was threatening the site and adjacent areas. Over 180 species of flowering plants are found here, many of which are listed above. Cypress-leaved plait-moss is the most common species of moss in this part of the site. Controlled grazing may need to be introduced in the near future to ensure that some of the smaller plant species are not crowded out by taller and more vigorous plants, such as hogweed which has spread since the area was fenced.

Sheigra has a very small area of machair, with transitions from dry to damp machair, lime-rich to acid soil, and arable to fallow land use. Most of the vegetation is similar to that of the other two beaches but the machair at Sheigra also includes moss campion. Most of the machair here is divided into narrow strips of land, historically used as in-bye land for the various crofts. Each strip has a distinctive flora which reflects the earlier cultivation. The area is divided by historic drainage ditches which are no longer maintained, allowing a damp machair habitat to form with common knapweed, marsh

marigold and a variety of orchid species. Grasses and reeds growing in this part of the site include Yorkshire fog, sweet vernal grass and dwarf common reed.

The machair was monitored in July 2007 and was assessed as being in favourable condition. The area of habitat had been maintained, no non-native invasive plants were encroaching on the machair and an appropriate mix of plant species was recorded. The machair at Sheigra had some areas of damage from recreational use, notably erosion from vehicles, camping and irresponsible camp fires, and whilst this was of concern, only a small part of the entire site was affected.

Other interests

Some of the flushes and fens associated with the machairs support tall herb and meadow vegetation which was traditionally cut for hay. Common reed, soft rush, and several species of sedge are found in the wet flushes. The meadows are of importance for several species of breeding bird including lapwing, sedge warbler, snipe and skylark.

The shattered cliffs around Sheigra are the most important site in the country for the nationally scarce moss Wilson's pouchwort *Acrobolbus wilsonii*, which in the UK is only found in Scotland.

The great yellow bumblebee has been recorded at several locations on the site. Formerly widespread in Britain, it is now restricted to north and west Scotland, and remains threatened by agricultural change. The great yellow bumblebee is associated with extensive areas of herb-rich grasslands where red and white clover, meadow vetchling, knapweed and thistles are important food plants.

Sheigra beach showing the small area of machair inland of the beach	Great yellow bumblebee on kidney vetch
	

Past and present management

The SSSI is partly in private ownership and partly owned by the John Muir Trust. There are three crofting townships. A number of crofts within the three townships are privately owned. Three Common Grazings have interests in the site with over 50 crofts having grazing rights.

In order to control serious erosion, a stabilisation project was introduced by the John Muir Trust in the 1990s. Large scale re-seeding of exposed sand areas took place in 1990 and 1991, focusing mainly on Oldshore Beg and since 1999 on Oldshoremore. The project was successful in stabilising and restoring this important dunes and machair habitat.

Small-scale agriculture was the main land use on the machair until the 1970s. In-bye land around the crofting townships was divided between crofts and was intensively cultivated. Stock was grazed on this land in the winter. This management has declined recently and the cultivated land has reverted to grazings or has been left fallow. Areas of machair are currently managed as Common Grazings, carrying mainly sheep, although cattle are sometimes grazed here.

We encourage applications to schemes such as Scotland Rural Development Contracts – Rural Priorities that help to fund the conservation management of the site. Appropriate management options for this site include machair cropping, management of species-rich grassland, management of corncrakes and controlling erosion by rabbits. RDC funding is awarded on a competitive basis to ensure that contracts are given for proposals that are best able to deliver good conservation management.

The John Muir Trust (JMT) bought Sandwood Estate in 1993, and manage the land according to the JMT's objective to "conserve and protect wild places." The Trust employs a conservation manager for the estate. SNH has a management agreement with the John Muir Trust that covers most of this site. This ensures an agreed Management Plan is produced on a regular basis for the Sandwood Estate which will ensure the good conservation management of the land.

The three beaches are popular amongst locals and tourists. Access to the beaches is on paths crossing the machair and passing through the dunes. Small areas are used seasonally for campsites. Sheigra is the most accessible beach, with a driveable access track almost to the shore. Vehicle disturbance, fires and the use of foil barbeques directly on the machair are causing localised damage to this site. These activities are contrary to the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (see our website http://www.snh.gov.uk/ and type 'Access Code' into the Search box).

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

We wish to work with 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 and monitor the effectiveness of the management agreements.

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).

The list of Operations Requiring Consent forms part of the formal notification documents of the SSSI. These, 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, extent and distribution of the sand dune habitat
The dune system should be allowed to evolve naturally, allowing sand to erode or build up through the influence of wind and waves. This requires minimal human intervention except when serious erosion is being triggered by rabbits. Rabbits are a non-native species so if large numbers of rabbits build up, it can be necessary to control their numbers.

Any damage to the dunes from excessive vehicular use, human and stock trampling should be avoided. Livestock numbers on the dunes should be kept very low during the spring and summer, or stock should be removed altogether, to allow plants to grow, flower and spread their seeds. Monitoring the impact of rabbits on the area, and if necessary control of rabbit numbers, could be beneficial as rabbits can cause erosion or prevent plants from flowering and setting seed.

The level of grazing is a key factor in maintaining this habitat. Over most of the coastal areas stocking is at a level where there is no obvious damage to the vegetation from over-grazing or trampling, and this level of grazing should continue. There are however, some areas of heavy sheep grazing which would benefit from a reduction in stock numbers and/or a change in management in all three bays.

Visitor numbers and tracking through the dunes should continue to be monitored by the John Muir Trust. If human trampling is destabilising the dunes, then improved visitor information or upgrading of the established footpaths to the beaches may be needed.

2. To maintain the condition, extent and distribution of the machair habitat
Stocking on the machair should be of a pattern and at a level which avoids obvious trampling of the vegetation. The ideal level of grazing is one that maintains a short sward but also enables the majority of plants to flower and seed to maintain the characteristic mixture of species. If the vegetation were to become too rank, for example through the total exclusion of grazing, it would suppress typical machair species that require a short, open sward. A grazing regime that allows stock onto the machair during the late autumn to early spring would be ideal. There are some areas of heavy sheep grazing in all three bays, but particularly at Sheigra, which would benefit from a reduction in stock numbers and/or a change in management.

Stock feeding would not be desirable on the machair or dunes because this can bring large numbers of livestock to one place causing localised trampling that could lead to formation of bare ground, followed by erosion of fragile soils. Concentrating livestock around feeding sites can also cause large amounts of dung to be left in one place. These conditions can allow the seeds of vigorous plants (e.g. nettles, thistles), that are often found within hay, to germinate. This would be undesirable because these plants might outcompete the typical machair plants that grow here at present. Any stock feeding should therefore be restricted to a small number of locations at consented parts of the site or outwith the designated area.

If vehicles are to be used off existing tracks, care should be taken not to break through the vegetation. It would be advisable to avoid wet areas or areas of exposed sand and not to use the same route too frequently. The beds of reeds that already grow in small

parts of the machair should be allowed to continue to grow as these are a valuable part of the mix of plant communities on the site.

Notices should be used to actively discourage campers and caravanners at Sheigra from driving over the wet areas of machair which are showing tracking damage. If signs fail to resolve the problem, restricting vehicle access should be considered in order to restore the site. Campers should also be discouraged from lighting fires on the machair or using foil barbeques that burn the machair. Again, signage on the importance of the machair, and providing leaflets on responsible camping would encourage users to apply best camping/access practice to protect the site. Information on responsible camping and access can be found on our web site by typing 'camping' or 'access' into the Search box on our web site at http://www.snh.gov.uk/

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

Climate change
Global climate change may lead to increased storminess and sea-level rise which could cause increased coastal erosion and threaten low-lying dune and machair systems.

Date last reviewed: 31 March 2011