Scottish Natural Heritage
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SOUTHERN PARPHE
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1459

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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 Southern Parphe SSSI	**Condition of feature** (and date monitored)	**Other relevant designations**
Coastal geomorphology of Scotland	Favourable, maintained (September 2007)	
Blanket bog	Unfavourable, no change. (September 2008)	
Alpine heath	Unfavourable, no change. (September 2008)	
Maritime cliff (vegetation)	Favourable, maintained. (July 2002)	
Sand dune	Favourable, maintained. (July 2007)	SAC 'Dune grassland' and 'Shifting dunes with marram' are sub-types

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	**Condition of feature** (and date monitored)	**SPA or SAC**
Machair*	Favourable, maintained (July 2007)	SAC

* Note that machair is not found on the Southern Parphe SSSI component of Oldshoremore and Sandwood Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

Description of the site
Southern Parphe SSSI lies in the far north west of Scotland, 4km north of Kinlochbervie. The site is nationally important for its coastal geomorphology, blanket bog and alpine habitats, and the habitats supported by the maritime cliffs and sand dunes. Part of the SSSI is overlapped by Oldshoremore and Sandwood Special Area of Conservation (SAC). The SAC features 'dune grassland' and 'shifting dunes with marram' present on this SSSI are also subtypes of the sand dune SSSI feature. However the 'machair' SAC feature is not found on this SSSI.

Coastal Geomorphology
On the west of the site, Sandwood Bay comprises a highly dynamic beach-dune system, with a shingle-cored bar. It is perhaps the best example of a naturally unstable beach-dune system on the British mainland. The bay is fringed by Torridonian Sandstone cliffs to the southwest and Lewisian Gneiss cliff lines to the northeast. A spectacular feature of the system is the dune-capped bar which has built up along the mouth of Strath Shinary, impounding the freshwater Sandwood Loch in its lee. The geomorphological interest of the site lies in the extreme dynamism of the beach-dune system. This interest is enhanced by the fact that the site is remote and hence human influence has been minimal. This site therefore offers the rare opportunity to study natural changes and the relative importance of processes in developing the coastal landforms in this extremely high energy system.

When monitored during September 2007, this feature was found to have maintained its favourable condition with minor changes being recorded since the 2002 survey. These changes are not considered to be significant and are entirely due to natural processes.

Sand Dune
Wind-blown sand has created a mosaic of habitats within Sandwood Bay including mobile sand dunes, dune grasslands, fen beside Sandwood loch and blackland (a mixture of peat and sand) further inland. These support a variety of vegetation types with a diverse and rare mix of plant species, such as mountain avens, crowberry and creeping willow on the climbing dunes to the north east of the stream flowing from Sandwood Loch.

The sand dune habitat was last monitored in July 2007 and considered to be in favourable condition. It was noted however that the fixed dune did not meet all the targets for grazing due to localised high grazing impacts by sheep on the northern end of the site.

Maritime Cliffs
Maritime heath and grassland have developed on the exposed cliff tops, whilst the ungrazed cliff ledges provide a foot hold for tall herb and fern species. Erosion of the cliffs has produced extensive areas of undercliff where scree and boulders have been colonised by ferns and tall herbs, including the hay-scented buckler fern. The shattered cliffs around Sheigra are also the most important site in Scotland for the nationally scarce moss Wilson's Pouchwort which in the UK is only found in Scotland.

The maritime cliffs at Southern Parphe were found to meet all the targets when monitored during July 2002 and therefore retained their favourable condition status.

Alpine Heath
The exposed nature of the site has allowed alpine heath communities, containing

montane plants such as club mosses and alpine bearberry to develop on hill summits at comparatively low altitudes. These areas are dominated by wind-blown heather in a distinctive waveform.

The Alpine heath was monitored in September 2008 and found to be in unfavourable condition due to the effects of grazing, indicated by the presence of undesirable grass species which would not naturally occur in this habitat, signs of browsing on dwarf-shrub and also areas of disturbed bare ground.

Blanket Bog

Peatland habitats on the SSSI are amongst the most north westerly in Britain and display characteristics of extreme oceanic influence at the edge of the range for this habitat type. The vegetation is characterised by lichen-rich deergrass bogs with hummocks of hare's-tail cottongrass and an abundance of great sundew.

The blanket bog was monitored during September 2008 and found to be in unfavourable condition. The damage to the habitat is attributed to a combination of trampling by sheep and deer and burning. Moor-gripping affects a wide area of very gently-sloping bog on the western side of Strath Shinary. It was also noted that due to the extreme climatic conditions in this area, recovery of the habitat may take some time.

Sandwood Bay	Sundew
	

Past and present management

The site is mainly managed for sheep grazing, with the coastal areas the most intensively grazed. Rabbits are also present. There is evidence of past muirburn across much of the site and burning continues to occur in certain areas. Several fires have occurred in recent years damaging extensive areas of peatland, grassland and heath. Other management activities include the maintenance of existing fences and the occasional use of low ground pressure vehicles. At present the main sporting interest on the site is fishing on the lochs. Recently, however, deer numbers have been steadily increasing, therefore deer management may become increasingly important (information based on Deer Commission for Scotland NW Sutherland Deer Census February 2008) .

Since the John Muir Trust (JMT) bought Sandwood Estate in 1993, the land has been managed according to the JMT's objective to "conserve and protect wild places." The Trust employs a conservation manager for the estate. Activities carried out include the

repair of the footpath leading to Sandwood Bay, the removal of litter and campfires from the site, surveys of vegetation and mammal species including water vole, the monitoring of specific bird populations and the recording of visitor numbers and recreational trends.

The site has become increasingly popular with visitors and a 6km footpath links Sandwood Bay with a car park at Blairmore. This footpath is actively maintained by the JMT. The long walk has limited visitor numbers to Sandwood beach, though people use the site regularly and camping and small fires are common, particularly during summer. The site is also used by mountain bikers, kayakers, surfers and horse riders, with the cliffs and sea stack attracting climbers.

A total of 1654 hectares of peatland within the site has recently been covered by Peatland Management Scheme (PMS) agreements with SNH. These agreements stipulated the number of stock that could be hefted across the area and did not permit muirburn on any part of the site covered by the agreements. Peat cutting for domestic use took place at one existing bank within the SSSI and new banks would only be opened after consultation with SNH. No supplementary feeding of stock or deer occurred in the PMS area and vehicles were only used on established tracks or avoiding soft, wet fragile areas of peatland. These PMS agreements are replaced by Rural Development Contracts through the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) which provides funding for the same management practices.

Drainage ditches on the site are a relict of past attempts to improve the land for agriculture. The area to the southwest of Strath Shinary is particularly affected. These drains continue to adversely affect the hydrology of the site and the blanket bog vegetation.

Other interests

Woodland: approximately 17ha of land along the Allt Briste was planted with native broadleaved trees (including birch, rowan hazel, alder and willow) in 1998 funded by the Woodland Grant Scheme. The enclosure was fenced to allow the trees to establish in the absence of stock and deer. Unfortunately, 10ha of this area was damaged by fire in 2005.

Birds: The alpine heath supports an interesting range of upland bird species including: dunlin, teal and red-throated diver. Typical peatland bird species such as greenshank nest on the blanket bog and birds of prey including merlin and golden eagle use the area for breeding or foraging.

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 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, 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).

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 allow natural processes to shape the dune system and its vegetation at Sandwood Bay

The dune system should be allowed to evolve naturally through the processes of erosion and accretion. This requires minimal human interference. The remote location of Sandwood Bay means major coastal engineering works are extremely unlikely, but damage to the dunes can be caused by excessive trampling or overgrazing. Visitor numbers and tracking through the dunes should continue to be monitored. If human trampling is destabilising the dunes, then improved visitor information or possible upgrading of the established footpath may be needed. The presence of stock is not considered damaging over most of the dune area however the fixed dune had localised high grazing impact by sheep on the northern end of the site. Improvements could be achieved by a combination of stock reduction, changes in sheep management practices or possibly the control of rabbit numbers.

2. To improve the condition and extent of the blanket bog and alpine heath habitats.

Sheep and deer numbers should be maintained at a level at which there is no obvious damage to the vegetation from grazing or trampling by animals. Uncontrolled fires in the past have damaged much of the peatland and heath within the site. Any muirburn should be carried out following the Muirburn Code, and only in the areas identified by PMS agreements where these apply. Improved visitor information and fire control plans may need to be developed to reduce the risk of accidental fire. Use of vehicles can cause damage to the vegetation, particularly in wet areas or if the same route is used frequently. If vehicles are to be used on the SSSI, the vegetation would benefit from the use of low ground pressure models, choosing routes that avoid wet ground and not using the same route too often. It is important to maintain the natural water table in peatland habitats, so the digging and clearing of drains should be avoided and no new drains should be made, nor existing ones cleared. It would be beneficial to block old drains that are still active as these drains alter the natural water table and dry out the peat on both sides of the drain. They are also likely to continue to cut down through the peat until the underlying mineral layer is reached, causing fragmentation of the bog.

3. To maintain the water levels, water quality, extent and distribution of the clear water lochs and dubh lochans for the benefit of upland habitats.

Management in the areas around lochs should avoid activities that would release sediment, excessive nutrients or chemicals into the water. Activities that might alter water levels of lochs should be avoided. This objective can readily be achieved by

maintaining the present management of lochs that allows natural processes to continue with minimal intervention or disturbance.

4. To maintain the condition and extent of the dune grassland and maritime cliff habitats.

The level of grazing is a key factor in maintaining these habitats. 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 localised areas of heavy sheep grazing that have been noted and these may benefit from a reduction in stock numbers and/or a change in sheep management practices. Visitor numbers should continue to be monitored as tracking through the dune areas may cause damage through trampling and dune destabilisation.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

- Egg collecting: Some of the rare birds that breed on Southern Parphe SSSI are potential targets for illegal egg collecting. Any suspicious vehicles or activity should be reported to the Police.

Date last reviewed: 16 March 2010