Scottish Natural Heritage

St Abb's Head to Fast Castle Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 1466

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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.

Description of the site

St Abb's Head to Fast Castle Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) extends for over 10 km along the Berwickshire coast from Lansey Bank, 2.5 km west of Fast Castle Head, to Starney Bay, just north of the village of St Abbs. This site is notified for its geological, botanical and breeding seabird interests.

St Abb's Head itself is managed as a National Nature Reserve (NNR), and owned by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS). It is here that the main geological interests of the SSSI are found – the Old Red Sandstone Igneous rocks of the headland and the Coastal Geomorphology of Scotland, between Pettico Wick and St Abbs itself.

St Abb's Head is a coastline of magnificent rugged and precipitous cliffs cut by numerous gullies, caves and coves. Its dramatic form is the result of an intricate relationship between marine processes and the nature of the rocks. The headland is formed from volcanic lavas erupted over 400 million years ago. Another remnant of this violent period of St Abb's past is the remains of a volcanic vent beneath the village.

The valley of the Mire Loch separates the headland from inland farmland. This valley was eroded by Ice Age glaciers, along the line of a geological fault known as the St Abb's Head Fault. Older rocks of solidified muddy sandstone, called greywacke, are found south west of the fault.

Soon after the end of the Ice Age, when sea levels were higher, the Mire Loch valley was flooded and St Abb's Head was an island. The headland has since been eroded by sea and weather, exploiting weaknesses in the rocks and eroding layers of sediment and rubble that was deposited between lava flows, leaving the harder lava flows as steep steps in the topography of the headland.

The primary botanical interest of the SSSI is in the grassland found along the extent of the cliffs, and is most concentrated and varied at St Abb's Head itself. There are many other habitats of interest in the SSSI which contribute to its high nature conservation value, including scrub woodland, tall herb grassland, calcareous grassland, coastal heath, running and standing water, flushes, rock face seepage, and splash zone communities on a variety of rock and soil types derived from both volcanic and sedimentary rocks. In turn, these habitats support a wide range of species, including many interesting butterflies and moths.

The tall cliffs support the largest mainland breeding seabird site between Angus and Yorkshire. The main species present are guillemot, kittiwake, razorbill, herring gull, and shag. Fulmar and puffin also breed on the site in smaller numbers. The seabird colony and the aforementioned main species are of international interest, and for this reason, the site is classified as a Special Protection Area (SPA). This SPA was recently extended to include some of the inshore waters where these birds feed and congregate. Seabirds rely on freshwater to bathe in, to remove the salt from their feathers, and to keep their plumage in good condition. At this locale, the birds use Mire Loch.

The diversity of habitats present, particularly the scrub woodland at Dowlaw Dean, make this site a good landfall for autumn and spring passage migrant birds, looking for shelter and food around and near the cliffs.

The shoreline flora and fauna of the SSSI are particularly rich because of the diversity of the coastal structures, its exposure, and the relatively unpolluted coastal water. The shoreline forms part of the Berwickshire Coast (intertidal) SSSI designated for its marine habitat, and forms part of the Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC).

The inshore waters are included within the St Abbs and Eyemouth Voluntary Marine Reserve, of particular interest to recreational divers for the variety of species that can be seen underwater. Some species, found here at the southern limit of their natural range, are seen in combination with other southern species at the northern limit of their natural range.

The 'maritime cliff' grassland feature of the SSSI was found to be in favourable-recovered condition when monitored in 2009. Management Agreements with owners of the SSSI have had some success over recent years in addressing previous issues with overgrazing and undergrazing, and the associated impacts on grassland species composition.

Both the 'seabird colony' and 'Guillemot' features were found to be in favourable condition in 1998 and 2003 respectively. The breeding 'kittiwake' feature was considered to be in unfavourable condition in 2008. The condition of these seabird features is dependant on the amount of food available in the sea, mainly sandeels. There has been a general decline in the sandeel population, and this has affected many of the breeding seabird colonies around Scotland. Action is being taken at government level to address this, but it will be some years before populations build up again.

Natural features of St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SSSI	**Condition of feature** (date monitored)	**Other relevant designations**
Maritime cliff (SAC feature is vegetated sea cliffs)	Favourable-recovered (Aug 2009)	St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SAC
Seabird colony, breeding	Favourable – maintained (June 2003)	St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SPA
Guillemot (*Uria aalge*), breeding	Favourable – maintained (June 1998)	St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SPA
Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), breeding	Unfavourable – declining (June 2008)	St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SPA

Features of the overlapping Berwickshire Coast (intertidal) SSSI that are not notified features of this SSSI.	**Condition of feature** (date monitored)	**Other relevant designations**
Rocky shore	No current assessment	
Sea caves	Favourable, maintained (June 2003)	Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast SAC

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified features of this SSSI.	**Condition of feature** (date monitored)	**Other relevant designations**
Shallow inlets and bays	No current assessment	Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast SAC
Intertidal mudflats and sandflats	No current assessment	Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast SAC
Reefs	No current assessment	Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast SAC
Sea caves	Favourable, maintained (June 2003)	Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast SAC
Grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)	Favourable, maintained (Nov 2003)	Berwickshire and North Northumberland Coast SAC
Herring gull (*Larus argentatus*), breeding	Unfavourable – declining (June 2002)	St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SPA
Razorbill (*Alca torda*), breeding	Favourable – maintained (June 1998)	St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SPA
Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), breeding	Unfavourable – declining (June 2008)	St Abb's Head to Fast Castle SPA

Past and present management

The site was first designated as a SSSI in 1961. The Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) managed St Abb's Head as a nature reserve from 1977 until the land was purchased by NTS in 1980, and formally declared a National Nature Reserve (NNR) in 1984 with NTS as an "approved body" under Section 35 (c) of the Wildlife & Countryside Act. The site is managed primarily for its nature conservation interest by a fulltime NTS Ranger, with seasonal rangers in the summer months.

Grazing is essential to maintain the nature conservation interest of the coastal grassland habitat. This needs to be flexible to react to seasonal changes, particularly in the summer months when warm, dry summers can result in parched, dry, grassland. At St Abb's Head, NTS manage the grazing in combination with their adjacent farm which aids grazing management by providing an alternative site onto which the sheep can be moved at short notice. Outwith the NNR, landowners manage grazing of the cliffs, moving stock to their adjacent farmland when required, except at the Lumsdaine Strip. This is owned by NTS, but is not currently grazed due to difficulties of getting stock to the site and managing it thereafter. This is currently being addressed by NTS staff.

The small freshwater body, Mire Loch, occupies the "fault line" between the volcanic Lower Old Red Sandstone lavas and the Silurian sediments. It is used by the seabirds, particularly kittiwakes, to bathe. Small areas around the loch were planted with sycamore, Scots pine and hawthorn around 1900, with a further area of native broadleaves planted in 1983 to improve the site for breeding birds and migrant birds on passage.

On the Head, grassland exclosures have been in place since 1990 to provide suitable habitat for the northern brown argus and grayling butterflies.

Visitors to the NNR are steady in number, with some also walking along the Berwickshire Coastal Path that runs the length of the SSSI. There is a car park just off the Reserve, as well as two small car parks on the NNR for divers and disabled visitors – at Pettico Wick and at the Lighthouse – an interpretive centre, signs, and footpaths management. There is a public right of way along the cliffs, and public vehicular access along the lighthouse road, although the public are encouraged to use the car park off the Reserve and walk to the site.

Most of the SSSI is under positive management for nature conservation, either through its ownership and management by NTS or Management Agreements between owners and SNH. Most of the associated management prescriptions relate to grazing management, and the control of scrub, bracken and pests.

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

We wish to work with the owners 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 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 long term objective is to maintain the geological features and the coastal grassland in a favourable condition, maintain the breeding seabird colony, and to support recreational opportunities for visitors to the site where they do not compromise its nature conservation interest.

1. **To ensure the geological features remain clearly visible and are accessible.**

   No active management is currently required for this objective.

2. **To maintain the condition and extent of the coastal grassland habitat.**

   Grazing is usually the preferred management of grassland for nature conservation, the alternative being cutting. However, the physical nature of the coastal cliff makes it impractical to graze this grassland in places, and also to use machinery to cut it.

   Where it is possible to manage the coastal grassland by grazing, the ideal is for the stocking level and grazing periods to be managed to produce a sward structure of varying heights that provides ideal conditions for plants and invertebrates, including butterflies, moths and beetles. The sward should be at its longest in the summer, while plants are flowering and setting seed. Most grassland species germinate in the autumn or spring, so the sward should be shorter at these times to give light and space at ground level for new growth. The ideal management for coastal grassland is grazing to achieve an average sward height of less than 10 cm.

3. **To maintain the breeding seabird colony and its associated species**

   No active management on site is currently required for this objective as off-site issues are thought to be affecting the seabirds. Action is being taken at a government level to address this.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

None noted at present.

Date last reviewed: 9 March 2011