



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad

COILLE THOGABHAIG
Site of Special Scientific Interest

Bridge Road
Portree
Isle of Skye
IV51 9ER

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 384

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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 Coille Thogabhaig SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)
Cambrian – Tremadoc	Favourable maintained (July 2006)
Moine	Favourable maintained (July 2006)
Beetles	Unfavourable no change (October 2002)
Bryophyte assemblage	Favourable maintained (May 2004)
Lichen assemblage	Unfavourable declining (May 2010)
Rocky slopes (tall herb ledge, calcareous scree, chasmophytic vegetation of calcareous rocky slopes)	Favourable maintained (July 2006)
Upland ash woodland	Unfavourable recovering (October 2002)

Description of the site

Coille Thogabhaig Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located on the north-west side of the Sleat peninsula on the Isle of Skye, close to the township of Ord. It comprises two adjacent areas and is notified for both its geological and biological interest.

There are two geological interests represented within the site: the Moine and the Cambro-Ordovician. The Moine interest illustrates features of the Moine Thrust Belt. This comprises a series of fractures in the Earth’s crust which were formed during a mountain building event around 430 million years ago. It runs along Scotland’s north-western seaboard from Loch Eriboll on Scotland’s north coast to the Isle of Skye. Around Ord the rocks have been folded and domed upwards; the upper layers have then been eroded away to reveal the rocks beneath in a structure known as the ‘Ord window’. The ‘Ord window’ is regarded as one of the best examples of such a window in the British Isles.

The Cambro–Ordovician interest comprises the sedimentary rocks which are visible through the ‘Ord window’. These were deposited in an ancient tropical sea and include quartz-rich sandstone and limestone rocks which are some of the youngest rocks in Sleat. Excellent rock exposures occur along the shore between Ord Bay and Rubha Dubh Ard. They contain a variety of fossils which have been matched with fossils found in North America, but which are different from those in England. This is key evidence for the occurrence of the Iapetus ocean that used to separate Scotland from England and Wales hundreds of millions of years ago. The fossils also help to enable the reconstruction of the environments in which the rocks formed. The geological features are considered to be in favourable condition.

One of the key biological features of the site is the ancient deciduous woodland. Continuity of tree cover, combined with varied soils and a humid microclimate has resulted in a diverse flora and fauna. Woodland to the east of the road grows on fertile soils associated with the limestone and is dominated by hazel and birch. Whilst ash is less frequent it is nevertheless an important component of this woodland. The woodland occurring to the west of the road grows on mainly acid soils derived from Torridonian sandstone. Here the canopy is formed by wind-clipped oak with holly and some ash on the lower slopes. Small areas of alder woodland also occur across the site. The ash-hazel woodland is the largest single area of ash-hazel woodland in Skye and Lochalsh.

The woodland was classed as ‘unfavourable recovering’ when monitored in 2002. This reflected the fact that although the woodland failed a number of the targets, the extent was increasing overall due to the presence of grazing exclosures. However, concerns were raised about the structure and medium to long term prospects for the woodland. A Woodland Profile Survey in 2007 assessed the structure of the woodland and highlighted a shortage of young ash trees, the moribund nature of the unenclosed woodland, and the threat of shading to lower plants resulting from the birch and hazel thickets. Lichen monitoring carried out in 2010 has confirmed that view.

The Allt an Leth Bheinn gorge is one of only four sizeable gorges on limestone in northern Scotland. It supports a diverse range of flowering plants, ferns, mosses and liverworts which inhabit the gorge’s ledges, screes and rocky slopes.

The woodland, gorge and coastal habitats all contribute to the diverse lower plant communities which are amongst the richest in Britain. The lichen interest of the site is concentrated on the older trees such as ash and oak, and those with base-rich bark such as hazel. Notable lichens include a number of nationally rare species.

There are moss and liverwort species of note too, some of which are nationally rare, such as the liverwort *Lejeunea mandonii* for which this is the most northerly locality in the world. Another nationally rare liverwort was recorded on this site in the past but unfortunately it has not been recorded since 1968; it is now thought to be locally extinct.

The woodlands also support a variety of dead-wood beetles, including the nationally notable *Schizotus pecticornis*, a conspicuous scarlet beetle. However, it is the range of species which is important and the beetle assemblage at Coille Thogabhaig is the most diverse in Skye and Lochalsh. Monitoring in 2002 suggested that the beetle assemblage was in unfavourable condition because of a lack of its dead-wood habitat. Further monitoring occurred in 2010 but the findings of that work are not yet available.

Past and present management

The first maps specifically showing Coille Thogabhaig date from 1763. The character of the woodlands has been significantly influenced by management over the centuries. The woodlands are likely to have provided timber for boat building, roofing timbers and for the tanning industry. The open grown structure of the ash trees in particular suggests many of them developed in a wood pasture environment.

Part of the site was managed as a National Nature Reserve, until it was de-declared in 1995. This area is still covered by a Management Agreement between SNH and the owner and continues until 2012. As part of this agreement three deer fenced exclosures were erected in order to stimulate tree regeneration. A further exclosure was erected under the Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme.

The part of the site tenanted by Tokavaig Common Grazings was deer fenced in 2007 as part of a natural regeneration scheme under the Forestry Commission's Scottish Forestry Grant Scheme.

Outwith the exclosures the site is grazed by sheep and cattle and in parts of the unfenced woodland the grazing pressure is quite high. Here tree regeneration is required to maintain woodland continuity and allow it to survive in the long term. At the other extreme, the older exclosures are suffering from the lack of grazing which has allowed dense birch regeneration and thick growths of hazel shoots. The increased shade this generates is threatening the lichen flora, especially on hazel and ash.

The lichen-rich woodland to the east of the road would benefit from a variable grazing regime allowing the development of open areas, mixed with denser woodland of an uneven age structure. In the short term some thinning of birch from around key lichen-rich trees would help the lichen community

Much of the site is used for sporting business, both for stalking and woodland game shooting. Part of the woodland contains a pheasant rearing enterprise and associated management such as ploughing and planting of game cover crops.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site:

Rabbits.

Rabbits are common within some exclosures although their numbers fluctuate considerably. They are probably responsible for the unexpectedly slow rate of the tree regeneration in the latest of the exclosures. There is evidence of bark stripping by rabbits on the base of young trees. Ash and oak seedlings are naturally less numerous and more palatable than birch and would be preferentially grazed by rabbits and other grazing animals. Rabbits are likely to be contributing to the shortage of ash and oak seedling. Control of rabbits would be beneficial.

Bracken.

Bracken is present across the site and forms dense patches in most of the open areas within the enclosed woodlands during the summer. It appears to have helped maintain the open glades and as such it has a useful function. However it has also limited tree regeneration. Re-introduction of controlled grazing could help to break up the bracken, stimulate a further phase of tree regeneration, but still maintain open glades.

Ragwort.

Ragwort is present in two exclosures and has been controlled by hand pulling in recent years. Although it does not present a direct threat to the features of the site at present, it is a noxious weed that is poisonous to livestock.

Objectives for Management

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 to monitor the effectiveness of site management.

1. To maintain the geological features in favourable condition by:

- avoiding obscuring rock outcrops (especially along the coast) by construction or coast protection works, or dumping waste materials;
- ensuring access is maintained to all the outcrops by installing and maintaining gates/stiles in fences;
- Preventing the establishment of scrub growth.

2. To restore the woodland to favourable condition by:

- managing grazing within the woodlands to maintain the full range of woodland types, habitats and niches which are appropriate to this site, including mature closed canopy woodland with an under-storey; open grazed woodland, small areas of thicket, and open glades. In particular some tree regeneration is required outwith the existing fenced areas and controlled grazing (preferably by cattle) needs to be re-introduced to the woodland that is currently enclosed;
- increasing the number of young oak and ash trees reaching maturity in order to replace the oldest trees that are gradually dying off by protecting saplings from grazing (and if necessary plant trees of local provenance);
- safeguarding against nutrient enrichment and fire;
- safeguarding against damage by rabbits.

3. To restore the beetle assemblage to favourable condition and subsequently maintain this by:

- maintaining a steady supply of fresh dead wood. This would be achieved by creating a dynamic woodland structure with the full range of age classes and precluding firewood collection.

4. To restore the lichen assemblage to favourable condition by:

- protecting lichens on the trunks of existing mature ash and oak trees by reducing the shade created by dense thickets of birch and rowan regeneration. This is most likely to be achieved initially by manual cutting followed by changes to the grazing management to reduce thicket development in the future.

5. To maintain the bryophyte assemblage in favourable condition by:

- Ensuring shady, humid conditions along the Allt an Leth Bheinn by avoiding tree felling or pruning in this area.

Date last reviewed: 10 March 2011