



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

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DUNNET HEAD
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 571

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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 Dunnet Head SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Maritime cliff (vegetation)	Favourable, maintained (June 2000)	
Guillemot, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2000)	Special Protection Area (SPA)
Seabird colony, breeding	Not yet assessed	SPA

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Feature condition (date monitored)	Designation
Fulmar, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2000)	SPA
Peregrine, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2006)	SPA
Puffin, breeding	Favourable, maintained (June 2000)	SPA
Razorbill, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2000)	SPA
Kittiwake, breeding	Unfavourable, declining (June 2000)	SPA

Description of the site




Dunnet Head Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) consists of the coastal cliffs around the most northerly headland on the mainland of Britain. The site lies c. 10km east of Thurso and includes c. 10.5km of the cliffs and cliff top between Dwarwick Pier and Little Score. The site is designated for the nationally important breeding seabirds and the nationally important cliff top vegetation. Dunnet Head SSSI also forms part of North Caithness Cliffs Special Protection Area (SPA) which includes a series of internationally important seabird colonies on the north coast of Caithness and Stroma. An internationally important population of peregrines also nests on these cliffs.

Maritime cliff (vegetation)

Maritime cliff vegetation is found in a narrow strip (typically about 100m wide) above the cliffs, as well as on the cliff ledges. The cliff top vegetation is a mosaic of coastal grassland and maritime heath. The grassland consists largely of red fescue and Yorkshire fog and contains the coastal species sea plantain and spring squill. The maritime heath is species-rich with a broad range of dwarf shrubs. Heather, crowberry, bell heather, bearberry, creeping willow and juniper are all found here, together with bird's foot trefoil, lady's bedstraw and violet. With the exposure to wind and salt spray, the plants grow slowly and have a creeping, mat-like growth form.

The more exposed cliff ledges are scattered with maritime species including thrift, scurvy grass, sea campion and sea mayweed. In more sheltered areas the ledges support roseroot, primrose, Scots lovage, tall herbs such as angelica and hogweed and even some stunted aspen, willow and honeysuckle.

The maritime cliff vegetation was assessed as being in favourable condition when monitored in June 2000. The area of habitat has been maintained, grazing was at an appropriate level, there were no signs of human disturbance and the grasses and flowering plants were able to set seed and flower. Part of the site was damaged by fire in 2009. Any long term effects of this damage will be assessed during future monitoring.

Razorbill	Kittiwake	Guillemot
		

Seabird colony

The sandstone cliffs of Dunnet Head erode to form ideal nesting ledges for large colonies of breeding seabirds. Species that breed here in large numbers include guillemot, kittiwake, razorbill, puffin, shag, herring gull and great black-backed gull. The most important areas for nesting seabirds are on the north-west section of cliffs, to the west of the lighthouse. The seabird colony was surveyed in June 2000 and

more than 10,000 pairs of breeding seabirds were recorded. Since this monitoring was carried out, seabird numbers appear to have declined, but the extent of the decline has not been quantified by full colony counts.

Guillemot

This site provides suitable breeding ledges for particularly large numbers of guillemot. More than 1% of the UK population of guillemot nest here. The guillemot colony was counted in June 2000 and assessed as being in favourable condition.

Past and present management

The near-vertical, exposed, rocky cliffs receive no active management. The cliff top grasslands and heath are grazed by sheep. The present light grazing regime is beneficial; if grazing were to cease the growth of rank grasses may exclude more sensitive species.

About a quarter of the cliff top vegetation was damaged by fire in April 2009. The vegetation is likely to take many years to recover because plants grow slowly in such exposed locations.

The area around the lighthouse is managed by the RSPB who provide information on the birdlife for visitors and offer guided walks. The car park at the Head is a favourite stopping place for tourists.

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 to monitor the effectiveness of its management.

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, 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, distribution and extent of the maritime cliff vegetation

Most of the site forms part of common grazings and is grazed by sheep. The cliff top is largely unfenced so grazing occurs right to the cliff edge. A moderate level of grazing is beneficial, in particular to the grassland but also to the heath vegetation.

Moderate grazing prevents rank vegetation building up, and stops taller grasses from shading out lower-growing species. A low level of trampling also allows seedling establishment in the small pockets of bare ground created. However, heavy grazing can damage some plants and prevent flowering and therefore seed formation. Excessive trampling would lead to erosion.

Moorland managed for sheep is often burned to allow new growth which is more palatable to the sheep. Very hot fires cause a problem by burning into the soil surface, destroying seedlings and seeds and leaving bare areas of soil or peat that are prone to erosion. The maritime heath is particularly sensitive to fire damage as plants grow very slowly in the harsh exposed conditions on the cliff top. Areas that have been burnt risk being eroded by wind before these slow-growing plants can re-colonise. The Muirburn Code advises small, manageable fires which leave a mix of vegetation patches. In April 2009 a large fire on Dunnet Head burned to the cliff top over at least 50% of the site on the western side. The longer term effects of this fire will be studied through the Site Condition Monitoring programme. Stock feeding is unlikely to be carried out near the cliff edge. Practices which concentrate animals in an area for any length of time create adverse impacts from grazing, dunging and trampling and should be avoided.

2. To maintain the size and distribution of the populations of breeding seabirds and to avoid significant disturbance to these birds during the breeding season

Seabirds nesting on the cliffs of Dunnet Head use the cliff ledges and cliff tops simply as a nest site. All feeding is done at sea and many of the species spend the remainder of the year at sea.

Apart from food supply and conditions at sea, the main threat to seabirds is disturbance at the nest site during incubation and rearing of their chicks. The present regime of complete non-intervention is ideal for nesting seabirds. If any activities were required to take place on or near the cliffs, it would be important for these to occur outwith the bird breeding season (generally April to the end of July inclusive).

3. To maintain the size and distribution of the populations of breeding peregrine and to avoid significant disturbance to these birds during the breeding season

Peregrine is a qualifying feature of the overlapping North Caithness Cliffs Special Protection Area. Activities that might prevent the birds from nesting on the cliffs and avoiding disturbance to the nesting birds themselves should be avoided. Continuation of the existing management of minimal intervention should achieve these aims.

Activities close to the edge of the cliff that might cause significant disturbance to nesting birds should be undertaken outwith the nesting season. The nesting season for peregrine starts in February and the young birds will have left the nest by the end of June. Management for breeding seabirds will benefit peregrines because seabirds are potential prey for coastal peregrines. Rock doves are also a preferred prey for coastal peregrines.

Other factors affecting the natural features of the site

- Sand eels: The breeding seabirds are largely dependent on the sand eel population for feeding. Any significant decline of the sand eel population is likely to have a detrimental effect on the breeding success of the seabird colonies.

Date last reviewed: 16 December 2010