Scottish Natural Heritage
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KELLAS OAKWOOD
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 829

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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

Kellas Oakwood is of the best examples of oak woodland in Moray, one of very few in north-eastern Scotland. It occupies a steep, predominantly south-east facing slope between 150 and 275m above sea level. Kellas is an ancient woodland site (woodland is known to have been present on the site since at least 1760), which has been considerably modified by past management.

The majority of the canopy is almost pure sessile oak but, in the more open and recently managed upper slopes and clear-felled areas, birch predominates. The shrub layer is very sparse (except where rhododendron has been planted), and consists of scattered holly and juniper.

Most of the woodland is found on poor, acidic soils. Here the field layer is mainly wavy hair-grass with hard fern, bell heather, chickweed wintergreen, blaeberry, climbing corydalis and common cow-wheat. Ling heather, Yorkshire fog and bracken are locally abundant in more open areas. Mosses such as *Dicranum* species and *Leucobryum glaucum* are quite frequent and there is a moderately high cover of epiphytic lichens. On the lower slopes and in several flushes, local soil enrichment has given rise to a slightly richer woodland community with wood sorrel, wood anemone, primrose, bugle, yellow pimpernel and bramble.

Natural Features of Kellas Oakwood SSSI	Feature Condition (date monitored)
Upland oak woodland	Unfavourable - no change (June 2004)

Site condition monitoring was last carried out in 2004. This found the woodland to be in unfavourable condition, mainly due to the abundance of *Rhododendron* in the shrub layer (over around 10% of the site), and also due to the extent of regeneration by exotic species, in particular Douglas fir and western hemlock along the south-west boundary of the site.

Past and present management

The earliest record of management is from 1798 when the wood was managed as oak coppice. This was discontinued in the early 19th century and much of the wood is now a rather dense, single-storied and almost pure stand of sessile oak stems, singled from former coppice about 190 years old.

In the Kellas Estate section of the site, stands of conifers, predominantly Scots pine, were planted early in the 20th century on the slopes above the oaks. Some of these conifer stands were felled in the 1980s. About 60 to 65 years ago, several belts of *Rhododendron* species were planted with the aim of creating a rhododendron garden. Several amenity paths were also created to connect oakwood with Kellas House.

Agricultural use seems to have been limited to small areas of pasture and arable land at Woodhead Croft (now marked Oakwood) in the early years of the 20th century and, until the early 1980s, access to sheep grazing from the tenant farm to the east. Stock fences now prevent sheep entering the wood and agricultural use has long since been abandoned.

The oak stems in the Forest Enterprise owned block are approximately 50 to 60 years old. The lower slopes of this block were felled and planted with Douglas fir in 1933-34 and the lower slopes were underplanted with Douglas fir and western hemlock in 1952. Almost all of these conifers were removed between 1982 and 1985, to enhance the conservation value of the area.

In 1989 a small section of oak woodland along the B9010 was lost as part of a road alignment works.

The Kellas Estate section of the site was until recently subject to Management Agreement with SNH the objectives of which were:

1. To maintain the Special Scientific interest of the land as a semi-natural woodland.

2. To encourage tree regeneration to take place and allow the shrub layer and ground flora to develop naturally.

3. To re-establish and/or extend similar native woodland where this formerly occurred or where ground conditions are appropriate.

The Management Agreement also contained policies to remove 50% of the rhododendron cover, establish native shrubs and retain deadwood in deadwood retention zones. Rhododendron control is carried out annually. Kellas Estate has, for a number of years, encouraged natural regeneration of oak by protecting seedlings with tree shelters.

The principal use of the Kellas Estate section is pheasant shooting. The area is regularly stocked with pheasants and these are shot. Roe deer and pest species are also controlled in this section. Fallen timber is removed from areas outwith the deadwood retention areas and dangerous trees or limbs may be occasionally felled throughout the Kellas Estate section, and particularly close to the public road.

Oakwood Croft is used as a summer house. Grass is mown and bracken controlled with herbicide in its immediate environs.

The Forest Enterprise section of the site is subject to an agreed Management Plan. The primary management objective of the Management Plan is "to rehabilitate and maintain a well stocked, high forest cover of native oak with associated structure, ground vegetation and flora and fauna. Some small-scale timber production may be gained by group or selective felling on a rotation of not less than 150 years. Restocking of this area should ideally be by natural regeneration with supplementary plantings of Kellas-reared stock. Between 1986 and 2001, 365 oak seedlings (raised from Kellas acorns and cuttings) were planted in the FE section of the site. Naturally occurring regeneration of oak is identified and protected with tree tubes. FE continue to collect acorns from Kellas for restocking of the site and collections of holly and hazel have also been made for the same purpose. Birch, gorse and broom which is competing with planted oak is removed and conifer regeneration is periodically removed. Dangerous trees or limbs may be occasionally felled if they present a public safety hazard. No felling for timber production has been carried out. Pest and game species are killed by a sporting tenant but no pheasants or other species are released in the FE section.

Objective for management (and key factors influencing the condition of natural features)

We wish to work with the owners and occupiers 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 effectives of the management agreements.

To maintain the extent and diversity of the native woodland, in particular the oak woodland, and associated flora and fauna

- The regeneration and establishment of appropriate native tree and shrub species (particularly oak) should be encouraged. Regeneration should occur in suitable

gaps in the canopy. Grazing levels should allow regeneration to establish beyond browsing height.

- Modern intensive silvicultural practices should be limited. The woodland should be allowed to regenerate naturally, with planting comprising no more than 25% of area of regeneration over a 20-year period; all mature trees over 150 years should be retained; and ground disturbance and the impact of herbicides should be minimised.

Date last reviewed: 26 May 2011.