SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE

LEVEN VALLEY
Site of Special Scientific Interest

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site ref: 927

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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 Leven Valley SSSI	**Condition of feature** (and date monitored)
Dalradian	Favourable (March 2006)
Upland birch woodland	Unfavourable (April 2002)

Description of the site

Leven Valley SSSI encompasses steep south and north-facing slopes along 10 km of the Leven Valley, as well as two major side valleys and several small ravines. It extends from near sea level at Kinlochleven to about 300m. at the head of the valley. The SSSI is of national importance for its woodland, which is one of the largest extents of continuous native woodland in the south of Lochaber. A large part of the site is "ancient" woodland i.e. it has had continuous woodland cover for at least 230 years and is likely to be a remnant of Scotland's original forest cover. The woods are dominated by birch and are varied and extensive. They support an important assemblage of mosses and liverworts. Wet heath forms most of the open ground vegetation within the SSSI. There are less extensive areas of limey flushes, blanket bog and dry heath. Notable species present include nationally scarce mosses and liverworts in the gorge of the Allt an h-Eilde, black grouse and native Scots pine.

During monitoring in 2002, the SSSI was found to be subject to a number of detrimental influences, the most important being: the spread of rhododendron; grazing/ browsing pressure (due to deer and, probably to a lesser extent, stray sheep); annual burning; and motorcycle scrambling. However, there were strong indications that the condition of the woodland was improving. A decrease in grazing/ browsing pressure was noted, and it was considered that the Woodland Grant Scheme should further improve regeneration and control the spread of rhododendron. Improvements in air quality were also expected with the cessation of aluminium smelting at Kinlochleven, and this should have a beneficial impact on mosses, liverworts and lichens. The condition of the woodland interest was therefore considered to be unfavourable - recovering.

The SSSI contains a nationally important geological site that lies along the River Leven, towards the western end of the SSSI. The rocks exposed form the principal location where the nature of the transition between two groups of Dalradian rocks (the Grampian Group, the oldest Dalradian rocks, and the Appin Group, which were formed from sediment deposited later) can be clearly seen. The Dalradian rocks were deposited into an ancient ocean 800-600 million years ago, and then transformed under heat and pressure into metamorphic rocks around 450 million years ago. Rock exposures within the SSSI provide evidence for the changes in the type of marine environment under which deposition occurred and evidence for their subsequent metamorphism and deformation.
During recent monitoring, there was no evidence of any decrease in the extent or visibility of rock exposures, or of activity that may damage the geological interest. Although the SSSI was the subject of a Woodland Grant Scheme to promote tree regeneration by reducing grazing/ browsing pressure, there were no indications that this was having a detrimental impact on the visibility or accessibility of the site's geological interest and in March 2006 the Dalradian feature was considered to be in favourable condition. However, rhododendron saplings were frequently found growing from crevices in rock exposures along the banks of the River Leven. It was not considered to be having a significant detrimental impact on visibility or accessibility of the key rock exposures at the time of monitoring, but it may do so in the future if its growth and spread is not controlled.

Past and present management

The SSSI forms part of Alcan Highland Estates, and the owner manages the land primarily for hydroelectric power generation. Pipes carry water from Blackwater Reservoir and from tributaries of the River Leven to the former aluminium smelter at Kinlochleven. Excess water is spilt at intervals from a small reservoir within the SSSI into a tributary of the River Leven. The Kinlochleven aluminium smelter closed in 2000, and the infrastructure is now being used for hydroelectric power generation only.
Since 2000, the SSSI has been included within a large (3000 ha) Woodland Grant Scheme extending from sea level to an altitude of above 400 m along the north and south sides of Loch Leven and up the Leven Valley. The SSSI (and the majority of the scheme area) is managed principally through controlling grazing/ browsing pressure, without the use of fencing, to promote natural regeneration. Rhododendron is also being controlled through the scheme. The overall aims are to maintain and enhance existing native woodlands and encourage the development of new native woodland areas that are of high conservation, recreation and landscape value.

Parts of the Scottish Six Days Motorcycle Trial and Pre-65 Motorcycle Trial have taken place for many years within the SSSI, mainly on paths and a section of scree below part of the pipeline associated with the Kinlochleven aluminium smelter. The Lochaber and District Motorcycle Club hold the Ian Pollock Memorial Trial within the SSSI. Informal, unauthorised use of motorcycles within the SSSI also occurs. SNH, along with the landowner, the local club, trials organisers and community representatives, work together to reduce ground damage caused by motorcycles, which has been a particular problem when motorcycles have left the paths and crossed wet ground during trials. The club now discourages informal use of the site and ensures that, when traversing wet, vulnerable ground during trials, the motorcycles only use established paths. The paths used by the motorcycles are monitored before and after events and the event organisers complete any repairs necessary.

Part of the West Highland Way follows an old military road through the south western

section of the SSSI and there are other footpaths within the SSSI boundary, including St Kieran's path. As well as being a popular location for walks and picnics, the woodland is also used by members of the local community for gathering wild food (fungi), and as a resource for cultural activities (a sculpture has been erected beside the main track and a charcoal burning platform, and ruins associated with the early aluminium smelting industry and with a prisoner of war camp have been cleared of invading scrub).

A small part of the western end of the SSSI is crossed by a power line, which was refurbished during 2000 and the site also contains the supply pipe for the Kinlochleven water mains, which was renewed in 1999-2000.

In the past, the wood has been used for pastoral settlement, for the production of charcoal and also for sheep grazing. These landuses are likely to have influenced the present-day structure of the woodland and are likely to account, in parts of the woodland, for, for example, the low proportion of oak and Scots pine and for the lack of young trees. Air pollution (of which fluorides from the aluminium smelter at Kinlochleven are thought to have had the greatest effect) may have had an impact on the mosses, liverworts and lichens of the woodland in the early years of the industry.

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

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 to carry out site survey, monitoring and research as appropriate to increase our knowledge and understanding of the site and its natural features.

1. **Keep the Dalradian exposures clearly visible**

Ensure that rhododendron is controlled as part of the Woodland Grant Scheme, and monitor rock exposures and remove rhododendron or other regeneration if necessary.

2. **Maintain the extent of the woodland habitat**

Continue the positive management of the site through the Woodland Grant Scheme, including continuing deer cull efforts, eradicating rhododendron, and maintaining the habitat of the small and vulnerable black grouse population on woodland edges. If future monitoring indicates that less common tree and shrub species are not regenerating, consideration should be given to carrying out active management to ensure the perpetuation of these species within the woodland.

3. **Minimise the damage caused by motorcycles**

Continue liaison between SNH, the landowner, the local motorcycle club, trials organisers and community representatives to reduce ground damage caused by motorcycles.

Date last reviewed: 28 March 2008