NatureScot
Scotland's Nature Agency
Buidheann Nàdair na h-Alba

BUCHAN NESS TO COLLIESTON SPECIAL AREA OF CONSERVATION

CONSERVATION ADVICE PACKAGE

Site Details

Site name:	Buchan Ness to Collieston Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
Site map:	https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8214
Location:	North Eastern Scotland
Site code:	UK0030101
Area (ha):	206.03
Date designated:	17 March 2005

Qualifying Feature

Qualifying Feature	SCM assessed condition at this site	SCM visit date	UK Overall Conservation Status
Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts [H1230]	Favourable declining	21 June 2016	Unfavourable-Bad

Notes:
Assessed condition refers to the condition of the SAC feature assessed at a site level as part of NatureScot's Site Condition Monitoring (SCM) programme.
Conservation status is the overall condition of the feature throughout its range within the UK as reported to the European Commission under Article 17 of the Habitats Directive in 2019.

Overlapping protected areas

Buchan Ness to Collieston Coast Special Protection Area (SPA)
Collieston to Whinnyfold Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)
Bullers of Buchan Coast SSSI

Key factors affecting the Qualifying Feature

Vegetated sea cliffs
This habitat occurs on the sea cliffs and slopes between Buchan Ness and Collieston. The site contains a variety of coastal landforms which have developed on a massive granite bedrock. The coastline has eroded in such a way to create a number of inlets at different orientations, creating areas with varying degrees of exposure. The cliffs and slopes support a wide diversity of vegetation types with variable maritime influence. Exposure to the sea and wind, and in particular salt spray blown on to the cliff face and cliff top is a key determinant of the type of sea cliff vegetation. The most exposed areas support maritime vegetation dominated by a range of salt-tolerant plants. More sheltered cliffs support communities closely related to those found on similar substrates inland, such as grassland and heath, with only a minor maritime element in the flora.

The profile and stability of the cliff face is another major determinant of cliff vegetation. Near-vertical cliffs support specialist crevice communities, while ledges occupied by breeding seabirds may develop specialist nitrophilous (nitrate-loving) plant communities comprising species which are able to cope with heavy guano deposition. On shallower slopes, species tolerant of exposure to wind and salt spray and of thin soils can find a foothold. The cliff top vegetation included in this habitat comprises maritime grassland and maritime heath.

At Buchan Ness to Collieston, the sea-cliffs and slopes support a wide range of maritime habitats including grassland, crevice and ledge communities with characteristic species such as thrift *Armeria maritima*, Scots lovage *Ligusticum scoticum* and roseroot *Sedum rosea*. The cliff top has some of the best examples of heath and brackish flushes on the coast of north-east Scotland.

A fuller account of the habitat can be found here.

Key management issues affecting the habitat are grazing pressure, habitat fragmentation, and spread of invasive native and non-native species. Any activities that interrupt the natural processes of sea cliffs such as coastal defences, roads, path and /or extraction of rock can be detrimental.

Conservation Objectives for vegetated sea cliffs

1. To ensure that the qualifying feature of Buchan Ness to Collieston SAC is in favourable condition and makes an appropriate contribution to achieving favourable conservation status
Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) is considered at a European biogeographic level. When determining whether management measures may be required to ensure that the conservation objectives for this site are achieved, the focus should be on maintaining or restoring the contribution that this site makes to FCS. When carrying out appraisals of plans and projects against these conservation objectives, it is not necessary to understand the status of the feature in other SACs in this biogeographic region. The purpose of the appraisal should be to understand whether the integrity of the site (see objective 2) would be maintained. If this is the case then its contribution to FCS across the Atlantic Biogeographic Region will continue to be met. Further details on how these appraisals should be carried out in relation to maintaining site integrity is provided by objective 2 (including parts a, b and c). If broader information on the feature is available then it should be used to provide context to the site-based appraisal. Note that “appropriate” within this part of the conservation objectives is included to indicate that the contribution to FCS varies from site to site and feature to feature.

2. To ensure that the integrity of Buchan Ness to Collieston SAC is maintained by meeting objectives 2a, 2b and 2c
The aim at this SAC is to maintain the vegetated sea cliffs habitat in a favourable condition as a contribution to its wider conservation status. Therefore any impacts to the objectives shown in 2a, 2b, or 2c below must not persist so that they prevent the achievement of this overall aim. When carrying out appraisals of plans or projects the focus should be on maintaining site integrity, specifically by meeting the objectives outlined in 2a, 2b and 2c. If these are met then site integrity will continue to be maintained. Note that not all of these will be relevant for every activity being considered. Any impacts on the objectives shown in 2a, 2b or 2c below must not persist so that they prevent the maintenance of site integrity. Temporary impacts on these objectives resulting from plans or projects can only be

permitted where they do not prevent the ability of a feature to recover and there is certainty that the features will be able to quickly recover.

This objective recognises that the qualifying habitat is exposed to a wide range of drivers of change. Some of these are natural and are not a direct result of human influences. Such changes in the habitat's extent, distribution or condition within the site which are brought about by natural processes, directly or indirectly, are normally considered compatible with the site's conservation objectives. An exception to this is when the favourable condition of a habitat is dependent on halting or managing natural succession. An assessment of whether a change is natural or anthropogenic, or a combination of both, will need to be looked at on a case by case basis.

2a. Maintain the extent and distribution of the habitat within the site

Accurate measurement of the extent of this habitat is hard to achieve due to its location on vertical or near vertical slopes but does include, where appropriate, the clifftop maritime vegetation. The figure within the SAC standard data form is therefore used as a guide, and the objective is that there should be no loss of the habitat within the SAC such that the area and distribution of vegetated sea cliffs is maintained to no less than approximately 62ha.

The extent of this habitat is largely determined by topography, being found on vertical or steeply sloping cliffs with exposure to salt spray and the wind. These factors limit the potential for expansion or loss of extent through natural processes.

The extent of the habitat on the SAC is also in part determined by the presence of fences and field stone dykes that separate the cliff tops from adjoining agricultural fields.

The main issues which could affect the extent of habitat at this site are inappropriate grazing (grazing that is either too high or too low), dumping/fly tipping (though this has been mainly historical), scrub encroachment, habitat fragmentation, spread of native and non-native invasive species (including gorse and a stand of Japanese knotweed) and some minor nutrient enrichment from field drains.

2b. Maintain the structure, function and supporting processes of the habitat

The structure and function of this habitat is dependent on maintaining the influences from natural marine processes and weather. The natural processes of the sea cliffs and transition to the clifftop areas can be disrupted by development, such as coastal defences, quarrying and offshore energy related projects.

The coastal path runs through the site. Path works may be required to counter erosion or to reduce the risk of landslips in sections that are close to the cliff edge. Care will be required to ensure that any path works do not impact on the qualifying feature.

Grazing management has recently been reintroduced to parts of the site under Scottish Government agri-environment schemes. Historically, grazing was restricted as most of the site has been fenced off to keep stock safe from some of the cliff edges. Grazing at the right levels is critical. A complete lack of grazing can be detrimental to the site as it can lead to the colonisation of the habitat by scrub and other vigorous species. Too much grazing should be avoided as this could lead to tracking and trampling. Supplementary feeding should also be avoided as this could lead to nutrient enrichment.

There are signs of nutrient enrichment on the site from field drains and historical fly tipping which has caused minor impacts, however this is not extensive. Any further activities that could lead to nutrient enrichment should be avoided.

2c. Maintain the distribution and viability of typical species of the habitat

Maritime cliff vegetation (slope and cliff top) varies according to a number of physical and biological factors, but most important among these are climate, degree of exposure to sea-spray, geology and soil type, level of grazing, and the amount of seabird activity.

Typical species that colonise the cliff slope on this site are: Red fescue *Festuca rubra;* thrift *Armeria maritima;* sea campion *Silene uniflora;* Scot's lovage *Ligusticum scoticum;* sea plantain *Plantago maritima;* ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata;* roseroot *Sedum rosea;* wild angelica *Angelica sylvestris;* common sorrel *Rumex acetosa;* wild hyacinth *Hyacinthoides non-scripta;* sea mayweed *Tripleurospermum maritimum;* sea spleenwort *Asplenium marinum;* primrose *Primula vulgaris;* scurvygrass sp. *Cochlearia* sp. The cliff faces support the locally rare sea wormwood *Seriphidium maritimum.*

Typical species on the clifftop maritime grassland dominated by red fescue *Festuca rubra* are: thrift *Armeria maritima;* sea campion *Silene uniflora;* Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus;* sea plantain *Plantago maritima;* ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata;* buckshorn plantain *Plantago coronopus;* cocksfoot *Dactylis glomerata;* common sorrel *Rumex acetosa;* wild hyacinth *Hyacinthoides non-scripta.* The grassland also supports the locally rare carline thistle *Carlina vulgaris*.

The clifftop maritime heath is dominated by heather C*alluna vulgaris* with bell heather *Erica cinerea* sometimes present. Other typical species are: Sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina;* sea plantain *Plantago maritima;* ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata;* purple milk-vetch *Astragalus danicus;* kidney vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria;* common dog violet *Viola riviniana;* birdsfoot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus;* cat's-ear *Hypochoeris radicata;* crowberry *Empetrum nigrum;* wild thyme *Thymus praecox;* tormentil *Potentilla erecta*.

In order to maintain the typical species of maritime grassland and heath, the level and timing of grazing should be low enough to allow flowering and fruiting of cliff top vegetation, and great enough to prevent encroachment by scrub.

Colonisation of the vegetated sea cliffs by invasive native species, such as: Gorse, *Ulex europeaus*; willow *Salix* spp; creeping thistle *Cirsium arvense;* spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare;* perennial ryegrass *Lolium perenne;* broad-leaved dock *Rumex obtusifolius;* curled dock *Rumex crispus;* common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea;* white clover *Trifolium repens;* stinging nettle *Urtica dioica,* can result in loss of typical species. There are some limited signs of this occurring at this site. Stinging nettle occurs in patches through the site and some blocks of gorse at the north end of the site. Some patches of bracken have also been recorded.

The presence of invasive non-native species could affect the distribution of typical species. A small patch of Japanese knotweed has been recorded at this site.

This site supports a colony of breeding seabirds including fulmar, guillemot, herring gulls, kittiwake and shag.

Conservation Measures

Buchan Ness to Collieston SAC is part of Collieston to Whinnyfold Coast SSSI and Bullers of Buchan Coast SSSI. Land managers must apply to NatureScot for consent to carry out certain management activities set out in the list of Operations Requiring Consent.

Current and recommended management for vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts

Issue	Measure	Responsible party
Development	Ensure that any development such as coastal defences, quarrying and offshore energy related projects do not affect the feature.	Land managers, NatureScot, Planning Authority, Marine Scotland
Dumping/fly-tipping	Fly tipping is illegal. Any new incidences recorded should be reported to the relevant authorities to prevent loss of species and habitats and aid restoration.	Land managers, NatureScot, Local Authority, Police
Grazing impacts	Conservation grazing management has been carried out under the government agri-environment schemes in the past (Countryside Premium Scheme, Rural Priorities and more recently AECS). Continue to ensure timing and level of grazing are low enough to allow flowering and fruiting of cliff top vegetation to prevent loss of typical species whilst also being great enough to prevent encroachment of invasive species both native and non-native. Grazing levels should be informed using a combination of conservation grazing guidance, and also regular monitoring of the habitat condition.	Land managers, NatureScot
Excessive tracking/trampling by livestock / visitors / vehicles	The site is bordered by land which is fairly intensively farmed, and it is also an important amenity area as the coastal footpath passes through the site. Ensure any tracking or trampling is minimal to prevent loss of typical species.	Land managers, Local Authority
Colonisation by vigorous native species	The presence of gorse, willow and nettles should be monitored to detect any increase in cover and to allow impacts to the feature to be assessed.	NatureScot
Colonisation of invasive non-native species	The site contains a stand of Japanese knotweed which appears to be spreading. This should be carefully managed by spraying.	Land managers, NatureScot

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