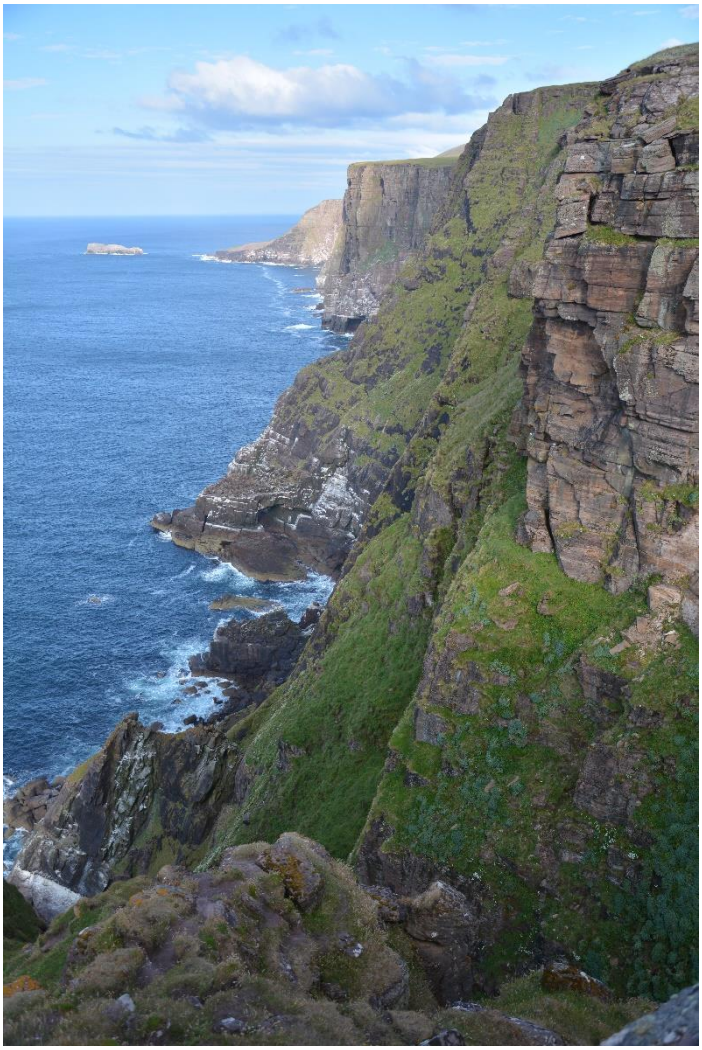
NatureScot
Scotland's Nature Agency
Buidheann Nàdair na h-Alba

CAPE WRATH
SPECIAL AREA OF CONSERVATION (SAC)

CONSERVATION ADVICE PACKAGE



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Site Details

Site name: Cape Wrath

Site map: https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8219

Location: Highlands and Islands

Site code: UK0030108

Area (ha): 1009.75

Date designated: 17 March 2005

Qualifying Feature	Assessed Condition on this site	SCM visit date	UK Overall Conservation Status
Vegetated sea cliffs	Favourable Maintained	30 July 2015	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:

Cape Wrath Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/311
Cape Wrath Special Protection Area (SPA) https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8481

Key factors affecting the qualifying feature

Vegetated sea cliffs
This habitat occurs on steep slopes fringing hard or soft coasts, created by past or present marine erosion, and supporting 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 one of the major determinants of cliff vegetation. Near-vertical cliffs support specialist crevice communities, while ledges occupied by breeding seabirds may develop specialist nitrophilous communities comprising plant species which are able to cope with heavy guano deposition. On less extreme 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.

Cape Wrath SAC is a two-part site. Vegetated sea cliffs are found in both parts. To the south of the Cape the cliffs are broken with vegetated undercliffs and extreme exposure from the west and northwest. East of the headland the cliffs are more sheltered but far more

precipitous. At 210 m, Cló Mòr is the highest seacliff on the British mainland and supports a large seabird colony. The combination of extreme exposure and northern latitude at Cape Wrath has allowed the development of montane plant communities which are normally associated with much higher altitudes in Britain. Thus there are coastal communities (maritime cliff/ledge, maritime heath, coastal grassland) juxtaposed with upland and montane heaths.

Environmental factors such as winter storms and summer droughts are key factors affecting this habitat. Grazing levels (by sheep and deer) and military training activities also affect the vegetated sea cliffs at Cape Wrath. Close to the lighthouse, there is localised potential for trampling of the habitat by visitors.

A fuller account of the habitat can be found here.

Conservation priorities

This SAC overlaps with the Cape Wrath SPA. Any pro-active management for the SAC or assessment of plans or projects will also need to take account of the SPA seabird interests.

Conservation Objectives for Vegetated sea cliffs of the Atlantic and Baltic coasts [H1230] (Vegetated sea cliffs)

1. To ensure that the qualifying feature of Cape Wrath 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 improving 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 assessment 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 assessments 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 assessment. 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 Cape Wrath SAC is maintained by meeting objectives 2a, 2b and 2c for the qualifying feature.
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 on 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 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 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 as well as the clifftop maritime vegetation that occurs on flatter ground. The figure within the SAC Standard Data Form (297.87 ha) is therefore used as a guide, and the objective is that there should be no loss of the habitat within the SAC other than through natural processes

The extent of this habitat is largely determined by topography, being found partly 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 exposure of the cliff top vegetation to salt spray. The zone of maritime influence extends further inland in more exposed places than in more sheltered ones. The cliff top vegetation type is determined by the soil type: maritime heath is found growing on peaty soils whilst the better-drained areas with mineral-based soils support maritime grassland.

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

The structure of the habitat is influenced by the geomorphological processes, degree of exposure to the wind and sea, and the associated salt spray on the cliff face and cliff tops. Exposed stretches of coast support salt-tolerant vegetation, while more sheltered areas support plant communities similar to those found inland such as grassland and heath.

The profile and stability of the cliff face is dependent on whether it is a 'hard' or soft' cliff. 'Hard' cliffs with vertical or very steep faces are characteristic of hard igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary rocks. 'Soft' cliffs have a sloping or slumped profile, often with a distinct 'undercliff'. At Cape Wrath these occur in areas where there are glacial deposits on top of the bedrock. These areas may be subject to mudslides or landslips.

The structure and function of this habitat are mainly dependent on natural marine processes and weather at Cape Wrath. However, the natural processes of the sea cliffs and transition to the clifftop areas could potentially be disrupted by military training activities.

The cliff top habitat needs a low level of grazing by herbivores, which is mainly by red deer at present although there are a small numbers of sheep on parts of the site. Grazing levels that are too high in summer can prevent plants from flowering and setting seed or lead to erosion. Too low a level of grazing can cause rank vegetation to out-compete the typical species of this habitat.

The habitat is also influenced by the presence of seabirds such as puffin, guillemot and fulmar, whose guano fertilises the soil and promotes lush plant growth. These birds also create bare ground where they nest in dense colonies.

2c. Maintain the distribution and viability of typical species of the habitat
Typical species that colonise the cliff slope and ledges on this site are: red fescue *Festuca rubra;* thrift *Armeria maritima;* Scot's lovage *Ligusticum scoticum* roseroot *Sedum rosea;* sea mayweed *Tripleurospermum maritimum* and scurvygrass sp. *Cochlearia* sp. These species grow in different places on the cliff slope as their distribution depends on environmental conditions as well as guano from nesting seabirds. Typical species on the clifftop maritime grassland are: red fescue *Festuca rubra;* thrift *Armeria maritima;* and plantains *Plantago spp* (especially sea plantain *Plantago maritima*). Typical species on the clifftop maritime heath are: *Calluna vulgaris* and/or bell heather *Erica cinerea;* Sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina;* sea plantain *Plantago maritima;* crowberry *Empetrum nigrum;* wild thyme *Thymus praecox and* tormentil *Potentilla erecta*. The site is grazed by red deer and sheep, and although these are not part of the SAC feature, herbivore grazing is important in maintaining the distribution of the typical plant species. Excessive tracking/trampling by livestock/visitors/vehicles or excessive use of parts of the site for military training could contribute to a deterioration in the habitat structure, leading to a reduction or loss in the typical/indicator species for this habitat and could lead to erosion of the cliff top vegetation. Colonisation of the vegetated sea cliffs by invasive native species should be avoided as this could result in loss of the typical species.

Conservation Measures

Cape Wrath is notified as a Site of Special Scientific Interest and management changes described on the list of Operations Requiring Consent must have prior consent from SNH (NatureScot).

Current and recommended management for Vegetated sea cliffs

Issue	**Measure**	**Responsible party**
Grazing impacts	Ensure grazing levels and timing (by both sheep and deer) are low enough to allow flowering and fruiting of cliff top vegetation whilst also being great enough to prevent loss of typical species from maritime grassland and heath due to formation of rank vegetation.	Land managers, NatureScot, SGRPID (GEAC)
Excessive tracking/trampling by livestock / visitors / vehicles	Ensure tracking/trampling is minimal to prevent loss of typical species. Livestock tracking has historically been mainly on the west-facing coast. Visitor trampling is only likely to be a potential issue in localised areas close to the lighthouse.	Land managers, NatureScot, SGRPID (GEAC)
Colonisation by vigorous native species	Ensure colonisation of this habitat by vigorous native species is minimal to	Land managers, NatureScot,

[eg nettle, thistle]	prevent loss of the typical species.	
Habitat Management	Other than appropriate livestock and deer management, natural processes should be allowed to continue by a policy of non-intervention.	NatureScot, landowners, land managers.
Military training activities	Military training exercises have the potential to damage the habitat (e.g., shell holes, fires). The habitat would benefit from training exercises being planned so that there is no more than minimal damage to any part of the habitat.	MOD, NatureScot
Research and monitoring	To identify emerging impacts on the habitat and their causes, in order to understand the long term issues, and to inform future management of the habitat across Scotland.	NatureScot

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