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

EAST CAITHNESS CLIFFS
SPECIAL AREA OF CONSERVATION (SAC)

CONSERVATION ADVICE PACKAGE

Image: ©Lorne Gill, NatureScot

Site Details

Site name: East Caithness Cliffs

Map: https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8248

Location: Highlands and Islands

Site code: UK0030143

Area (ha): 457.48

Date designated: 17 March 2005

Qualifying Features

Qualifying feature	Assessed condition for this site	SCM visit date	UK overall Conservation Status
Vegetated sea cliffs	Favourable Maintained	9 July 2009	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

East Caithness Cliffs SPA https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/8492
Berriedale Cliffs SSSI https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/200
Dunbeath to Sgaps Geo SSSI https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/561
Craig Hammel to Sgaps Geo SSSI https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/418
Castle of Old Wick to Craig Hammel SSSI https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/344
Small parts of Ousdale Burn SSSI https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/1262 and
Helmsdale Coast SSSI https://sitelink.nature.scot/site/772

Key factors affecting the qualifying features

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. A fuller account of the habitat can be found here.

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 and stacks that are inaccessible to grazing animals that are occupied by breeding seabirds may develop specialist communities comprising plant species which are able to cope with high nitrogen content in the soil from 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.

Conservation Priorities

This SAC overlaps with the East Caithness Cliffs SPA. Any pro-active management for the SAC or assessment of plans or projects will also need to take account of the SPA 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 East Caithness Cliffs 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 East Caithness Cliffs 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 (320.37ha) is therefore used as a guide, and the objective is that there should be no loss of the habitat within the SAC other than due to natural processes.

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 underlying geology and soil type determines whether the maritime vegetation on the cliff top is heath or grassland. The sandstone in the northern part of the site has largely formed soils that are rich enough for maritime grassland to grow. Areas of maritime heath are largely restricted to the more acidic soils south of Berriedale although the maritime influence does not extend as far inland here as there tends to be less exposure to wind and spray.

Along the majority of the site, the inland extent of the habitat on the SAC is determined by the presence of fences or field dykes that separate the cliff tops from adjoining agricultural fields.

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 and, on the East Caithness Cliffs, these occur where there are glacial deposits on top of bedrock. These may be subject to mudslides or landslips.

The structure and function of this habitat are dependent on natural marine processes and weather, in particular winter storms and summer droughts.

However, the natural processes of the sea cliffs and transition to the clifftop areas can be disrupted and the habitats changed by alteration in livestock grazing regimes and application of fertiliser/reseeding. Examples of this can be seen immediately out with the site along much of its length, where there is an abrupt transition from natural vegetation to improved fields on the inland site boundary. The habitat needs a low level of grazing by livestock but grazing levels are currently too low in much of the site mainly due to fencing off most of the SAC from adjacent improved ground north of Berriedale. Lack of grazing can lead to growth of more vigorous species, and the buildup of a dense layer of dead grass, to the exclusion of smaller characteristic coastal plants.

Grazing levels need to be increased in areas that currently have little or no livestock as grazing levels by roe deer and rabbits has been too low to maintain the species rich sward typical of maritime grassland. Although appropriate grazing by sheep is important in maintaining the habitat, they can also contribute to localised damage by creating prominent contouring tracks and erosion scarps through rubbing against exposed banks of soil.
The habitat is also influenced by the presence of breeding seabirds such as fulmar, herring gulls and great black-backed gulls, whose guano fertilises some of the ledges and promotes

lush plant growth.

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

Typical species that colonise the grassy cliff slopes and ledges on this site are: red fescue *Festuca rubra;* thrift *Armeria maritima;* sea campion *Silene uniflora;* Scot's lovage *Ligusticum scoticum;* sea plantain *Plantago maritima;* sea mayweed *Tripleurospermum maritimum* and primrose *Primula vulgaris.* 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;* sea campion *Silene uniflora;* Yorkshire fog *Holcus lanatus;* sea plantain *Plantago maritima* and ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolata*.

Typical species on the clifftop maritime heath are: heather *Calluna vulgaris* and/or bell heather *Erica cinerea*; sheep's fescue *Festuca ovina;* ribwort plantain *Plantago lanceolate*; purple milk-vetch *Astragalus danicus;* common dog violet *Viola riviniana;* birdsfoot trefoil *Lotus corniculatus;* catsear *Hypochoeris radicata;* spring squill *Scilla verna;* crowberry *Empetrum nigrum;* wild thyme *Thymus praecox* and tormentil *Potentilla erecta*.

The site is grazed by herbivores such as roe deer and rabbits, which are important in maintaining the distribution of the typical plant species.

Excessive tracking/trampling by livestock, visitors and vehicles can 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, such as bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*; gorse *Ulex europaeus*; creeping thistle *Cirsium arvense;* spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare;* perennial ryegrass *Lolium perenne;* and common ragwort *Senecio jacobaea* should be avoided as this could result in loss of the typical species. Large parts of the site south of Berriedale are affected by bracken, and there are patches of dense gorse in localised areas north of Berriedale.

Conservation Measures

East Caithness Cliffs 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 appropriate grazing levels and timing to ensure that combined grazing levels by livestock, rabbits and roe deer are low enough to allow flowering and fruiting of cliff top maritime heath and grassland vegetation whilst not being so low that the vegetation becomes rank enough to cause loss of typical species.	Land managers, NatureScot, SGRPID (GEAC)
Excessive tracking/trampling by	Ensure tracking/trampling by livestock and visitors is minimal to prevent loss of	Land managers, NatureScot,

livestock / visitors / vehicles	typical species.	SGRPID (GEAC)
Stock feeding	Stock feeding should not be introduced within the site to prevent concentration of trampling and dunging by livestock or introduction of invasive plant seeds.	Land managers, NatureScot, SGRPID (GEAC)
Colonisation by vigorous native species	Ensure colonisation of this habitat by vigorous native species, such as, bracken, gorse, thistles and ragwort is minimal to prevent loss of the typical species.	Land managers, NatureScot
Colonisation by invasive non-native species	Salmonberry and other invasive non-native species should be removed from the site. Garden waste (and other materials likely introduce non-native plants) should not be dumped on site.	Land managers, NatureScot
Colonisation by re-seeding from forestry	An appropriate buffer should be included between the site and any new forestry planting to prevent colonisation of the site by seeds from the new trees.	Land managers, NatureScot, Scottish Forestry
Habitat Management	Other than appropriate livestock management, natural processes should be allowed to continue by a policy of non-intervention.	NatureScot, landowners, land managers.
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

Contact details:

NatureScot
The Links
Golspie Business Park
Golspie
KW10 6UB

Telephone 01463 701608
north@nature.scot

Approved on 3 October 2019 by:

Greg Mudge
Principal Advisor
International Designations

Graham Neville
Area Manager,
Northern Isles & North Highland