



**A Statement on Common Standards for Monitoring Protected Sites (2022)  
(version 2.1)**

**JNCC  
(on behalf of the Common Standards Monitoring Inter-agency Working Group)<sup>1</sup>**

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The 2022 version (2.1) of the Common Standards Monitoring Statement replaces version 2.0, produced in 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> This resource was produced by JNCC on behalf of the Common Standards Monitoring Inter-agency Working Group, which consists of representatives from: the Department of Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs (Northern Ireland) (Paul Corbett, Richard Gray), JNCC (Catherine Duigan, Ant Maddock, Tony Weighell), Natural England (Andy Nisbett, Alice Kimpton), Natural Resources Wales (David Allen, Sue Byrne), Nature Scot (formerly Scottish Natural Heritage) (Brian Eardley, Dave Genney).

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC; 34(2)c) 2006) defines one of the special functions of the UK statutory Country Nature Conservation Bodies (the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Northern Ireland)), Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, NatureScot) and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), to establish “...*common standards throughout the United Kingdom for the monitoring of nature conservation...*”. Common Standards were established in 1998 for statutory site monitoring and as a universal set of common principles that could be adopted by Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies in the UK.
- 1.2 Common Standards Monitoring was developed to provide an agreed approach to the assessment of condition on statutory sites designated through UK legislation and international agreements. UK designated sites where common standards have been applied include Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), and international designations such as Ramsar sites designated under the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. Common Standards Monitoring is also used for subtidal and wider marine features.
- 1.3 Several developments in UK nature conservation have taken place since the first [Statement on Common Standards Monitoring](#) was published in 1998. There have been technological advances in environmental monitoring, and changed thinking about conserving nature at different spatial scales and the dynamic nature of ecosystems. Importantly, the UK Country Nature Conservation Bodies now have over 20 years of practical experience in implementing Common Standards Monitoring.
- 1.4 Over this period the four UK Country Nature Conservation Bodies (CNCBs) have refined their protected area monitoring based on the Common Standards Monitoring guidance. The CNCBs and JNCC have reviewed Common Standards Monitoring and reaffirm its value but place increased emphasis on it as an interpretative framework rather than solely as a standard field methodology. This allows an assessment of condition to be based on evidence from the broader range of sources now available and used in a way consistent with the original Common Standards Monitoring ethos on assessing condition.
- 1.5 The UK Country Nature Conservation Bodies are responsible for the protection of sites that conserve important wildlife and Earth science features. Monitoring provides information to help this. Common Standards Monitoring is where the CNCBs use similar approaches and terms to describe the actions they undertake when assessing protected sites. These common standards enable monitoring information from each protected site to be amalgamated to provide local, national and UK-wide assessments.
- 1.6 The revised Statement (2019, subsequently updated in 2022) defines the common standards, supports current monitoring, summarises the current approaches to protected area monitoring, and suggests potential applications of Common Standards Monitoring whilst also ensuring alignment with a set of common standards.

## **2. The need for Common Standards for protected area monitoring**

- 2.1 Commonality in feature condition assessment is required for comparative purposes and to facilitate aggregation of condition assessments across protected areas to provide whole country and UK-scale assessments. This is required for reporting purposes, for example, country assessments, UK Biodiversity Indicators, international obligations, and assessing progress towards targets from local to global scales.

## **3. Potential applications of Common Standards Monitoring**

- 3.1. Common Standards Monitoring has traditionally focussed on features within protected areas. It could, however, be applied beyond protected areas and used to assess feature condition both within and outside protected areas. This would support the better understanding of condition at site, landscape, country and UK scales.
- 3.2. The use of new monitoring technologies (e.g. Earth Observation, eDNA etc.) will enhance the suite of tools available to assess condition, possibly helping offset resource limitations. These new technologies are applicable within and beyond protected areas. They can increase the ability to monitor at larger scales and to monitor attributes of the natural environment that cannot be measured through traditional field survey.
- 3.3. New monitoring techniques, and modelling, in conjunction with existing methods, should help detect the impact of pressures and provide further evidence on what constitutes healthy and resilient ecosystems in protected areas and at wider scales.
- 3.4. A broader uptake of Common Standards Monitoring could facilitate more engagement with stakeholders. The common standards and associated guidance could be used more widely by Non Government Organisations (NGOs), environmental consultancies and businesses so that data can be shared and used to assess condition within and outside protected sites. Further, these partners could develop new ideas about indicators of ecosystem health, connectivity and the value of natural systems to society.
- 3.5. CNCBs will continue to share new innovations and best practice as they undertake their commitments to Common Standards Monitoring.

## **4. The basis for protected area monitoring**

- 4.1. The four UK Country Nature Conservation Bodies (CNCBs) have several responsibilities under the NERC Act (2006), including to advise on the safeguarding, management and monitoring of SSSIs and ASSIs. All countries need to use monitoring resources responsibly and ensure that the most vulnerable features receive the greatest focus. Risk-based approaches allow this focus by identifying the most vulnerable features that require the most frequent monitoring. Each CNCB will consider risk-based approaches to fit national circumstances. This section outlines the process for using Common Standards Monitoring in designated sites and includes the broad principles from the 1998 Statement and guideline chapters.

- 4.2. In this Statement, the actual common standards are the Interest Features (Natural Features in Scotland), the broad attributes, and the condition categories (sections below).
- 4.3. Note that the Interest Feature (this includes biological (species and habitats), geological and geomorphological features) is a common standard. However, the terminology used to describe the different habitats, species, geological and geomorphological features (i.e. the categories of Interest Features) are not common standards.
- 4.4. Interest features within protected areas are defined in the Citation for the SSSI/ASSI or, in the case of SACs, SPAs and Ramsar sites, they are those features for which the site is designated.
- 4.5. Interest features are dynamic and change over time and site management needs to reflect this dynamism. For this reason, objectives can be reviewed if evidence suggests that dynamic natural processes have changed and now restrict their achievement.
- 4.6. The use of attributes is integral to Common Standards Monitoring and will be informed by the Guidance, with broad (high level) attributes defined for assessment purposes. For example, habitat attributes can include extent and composition; for species, population size and distribution; and for Earth science, quality and extent of landforms/rock exposures. Detailed measures will be employed to assess these attributes at the site level, to define the condition of the interest feature and to set targets for management.
- 4.7. The condition of interest features is assessed using one of the following four condition categories. These are all common standards:
  - **Favourable.** An interest feature should be recorded as favourable when its condition objectives are being met. This includes biological (species and habitats), geological and geomorphological features.
  - **Unfavourable.** An interest feature should be recorded as unfavourable when its condition objectives are not being met.
  - **Partially destroyed.** It is possible to destroy sections or areas of certain features or to destroy parts of protected areas with no hope of reinstatement because part of the feature itself, or the habitat or processes essential to support it have been removed or irretrievably altered. In such instances it is usual for a condition assessment to be carried out on the remaining, intact feature.
  - **Destroyed.** The recording of a feature as destroyed will indicate the entire interest feature has been affected to such an extent that there is no hope of recovery, perhaps because its supporting habitat or processes have been removed or irretrievably altered.
- 4.8. Previously considered part of the common standards, the following trend qualifiers are now listed as optional and the Country Nature Conservation Bodies may choose to use these (and others as they see fit) or not:
  - **Favourable - maintained.** An interest feature should be recorded as maintained when its conservation objectives were being met at the previous assessment and are still being met.

- **Favourable - recovered.** An interest feature can be recorded as having recovered if it has gained favourable condition, having been recorded as unfavourable on the previous assessment.
- **Favourable – declining.** Not originally part of common standards but being used to reflect instances where all targets are being met, but identified pressures would indicate that unfavourable condition will result if the pressures are left unaddressed.
- **Unfavourable - recovering.** An interest feature can be recorded as recovering if it has begun to show, or is continuing to show, a trend towards favourable condition.
- **Unfavourable - no change.** An interest feature may remain in a more-or-less steady unfavourable state/deterioration; it is unfavourable but neither declining or recovering. In rare cases, an interest feature might not be able to regain its original condition following a damaging activity, but a new stable state might be achieved.
- **Unfavourable - declining.** Decline is another possible consequence of a damaging activity. In this case, recovery is possible and may occur either spontaneously or if suitable management input is made.