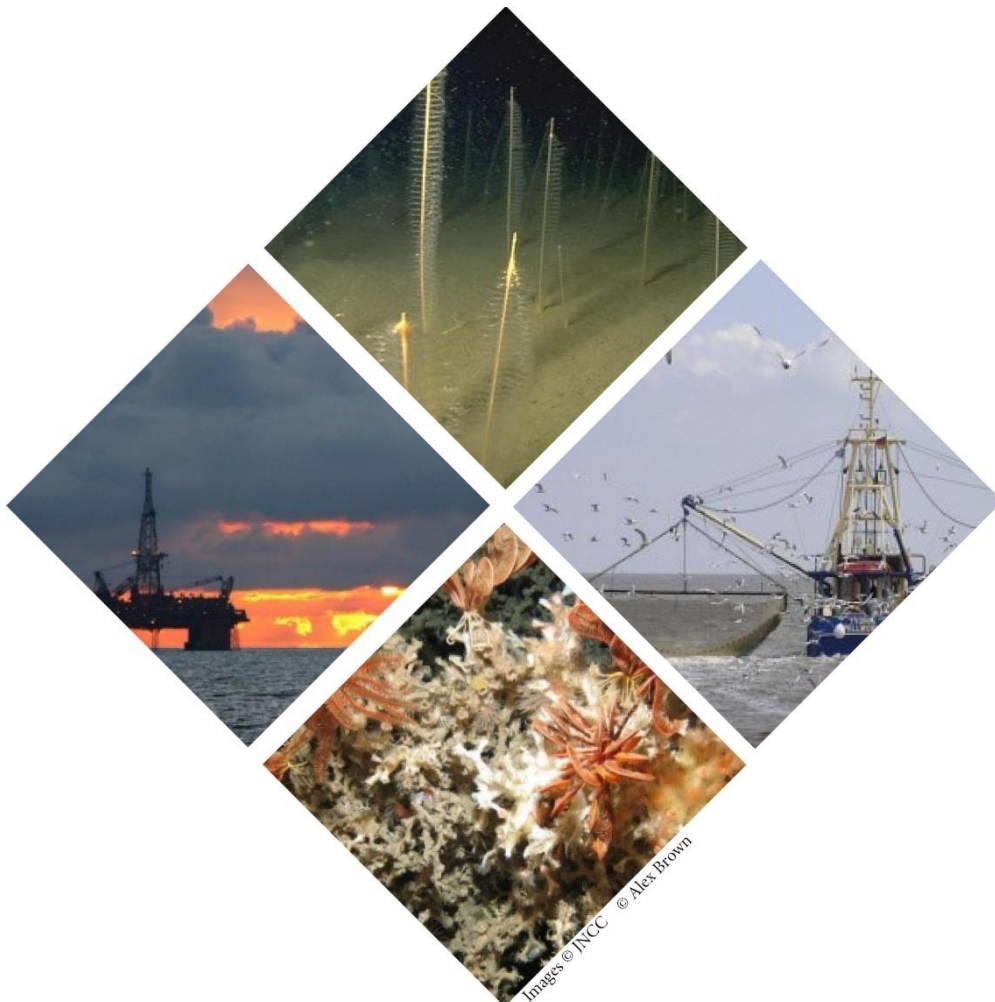


Statements on conservation benefits, condition & conservation measures for Faroe-Shetland Sponge Belt Nature Conservation Marine Protected Area

December 2020



What the conservation advice package includes

The information provided in this document sets out JNCC's current view of the site's condition, the conservation benefits which the site can provide and the measures required to support achievement of the site's conservation objectives. This forms part of JNCC's formal conservation advice package for the site and must be read in conjunction with all parts of the package as listed below:

- [Background document](#) explaining where to find the advice package, JNCC's role in the provision of conservation advice, how the advice has been prepared, when to refer to it and how to apply it;
- [Conservation objectives](#) setting out the broad ecological aims for the site;
- Statements on:
 - the site's protected feature condition;
 - conservation benefits that the site can provide; and
 - conservation measures needed to further the conservation objectives stated for the site. This includes information on those human activities that, if taking place within or near the site, can impact it and hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives stated for the site (this document);
- [Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives](#) (SACO) providing more detailed and site-specific information on the conservation objectives; and
- [Advice on Operations](#) providing information on those human activities that, if taking place within or near the site, can impact it and hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives stated for the site.

The most up-to-date conservation advice for this site can be downloaded from the conservation advice tab in the [Site Information Centre](#) (SIC) on JNCC's website.

Conservation benefits

By maintaining or achieving favourable condition for the protected features, the site will contribute to delivering:

- Strategic objectives and policies within [Scotland's National Marine Plan](#), particularly 5 (climate change) and 9 (natural heritage);
- [Scottish Biodiversity Strategy's](#) Big Step 6 (Marine and coastal ecosystems restored) Priority Project 12 (Increase environmental status of our seas);

- A network of MPAs around the UK, as outlined under the [UK Marine & Coastal Access Act \(2009\)](#) (Section 123) of relevance to Scotland;
- An ecologically coherent network of MPAs which are well managed under the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-east Atlantic ([OSPAR Convention](#)), specifically OSPAR Region II: Greater North Sea; and
- Good Environmental Status under the UK Marine Strategy.

This site has been designated to protect the habitats: Deep-sea sponge aggregations and Offshore subtidal sands and gravels, as well as the species: Ocean quahog aggregations. All these features are [Priority Marine Features](#) (PMFs) in Scotland seas. Ocean quahog are included on [the OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining Habitats & Species](#). Deep-sea sponge aggregations are also included on the OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining Habitats & Species, and are also recognised as [Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems](#). An area of the Faroe-Shetland Channel Continental slope is designated as a large-scale feature of the site; thought to have wider functional significance to the health and biological diversity of Scotland's seas. The site is also designated for a number of relict and active geodiversity features representative of the West Shetland Margin Paleo-Depositional System and West Shetland Margin Contourite Deposits Key Geodiversity Areas.

This site provides conservation benefits to the wider marine environment and society by affording protection to a range of seabed habitat types and their associated species and consequently the provision of the following ecosystem services. In summary:

Deep-sea sponge aggregations

- Nutrition: by providing a habitat for a variety of fauna, enhancing the availability of prey for commercially important fish species;
- Silicon regulation: by providing a long-term sink for silicon; and
- Provision of biochemical and biotechnological products: by providing a source of novel chemicals and structures which may have applications in drug development and other industries.

Offshore subtidal sands and gravels

- Nutrition: the different sediment types offer habitat for various commercial species;

- Bird and whale watching: the sedimentary habitats may contribute to the enhanced feeding conditions for cetaceans in the wider Faroe-Shetland Channel; and
- Climate regulation: sedimentary habitats provide a long-term carbon sink.

Ocean quahog aggregations

- Nutrition: by providing prey for a broad range of fish and invertebrate species;
- Regulatory processes: providing a benthic-pelagic link by removing plankton and detritus from the water column;
- Scientific study: the longevity of the species makes it of value in the study of long term climatic and environmental change. They are also of value as an indicator species for heavy metal pollutant concentrations on seabed sediments and in ageing research; and
- Carbon cycling and nutrient regulation: maintaining healthy and productive ecosystems through the laying down of carbonate during shell growth and filter-feeding.

Continental Slope

- Whale and dolphin watching - The interaction between hydrographic processes and the continental slope may enhance feeding conditions for cetaceans in the wider Faroe-Shetland Channel;
- Nutrition – The interaction between hydrographic processes and the continental slope may enhance feeding conditions for commercially important fish species; and
- Enhanced levels of biological productivity - The interaction between hydrographic processes and the continental slope lead to increased levels of biodiversity

Geodiversity features

- Scientific importance: all the protected geodiversity features are important for scientific study; and
- Habitat provision: The iceberg plough marks fields are of functional importance for deep-sea sponge aggregations as a settlement point.

Further detail on ecosystem services which the site can provide are available in the Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives (SACO) under the structure and function attribute.

Managing activities that affect the protected features of the site to conserve them at or recover them to, favourable condition, will support the site’s provision of the benefits and delivery of obligations listed above

Site Condition

Table 1 below sets out JNCC’s view on the overall condition of the site’s protected features. This view is based on information provided in the Supplementary Advice on Conservation objectives (SACO) (hyperlink is provided in the box at the top of this document). The SACO sets out our understanding of the feature attributes which are listed in the conservation objectives (hyperlink is provided in the box at the top of document). In summary, a feature is in unfavourable condition either where evidence indicates one or more of its attributes need to be recovered or where recovery is not considered to be possible through human intervention. Conversely, a feature is in favourable condition where evidence indicates none of the attributes are being adversely affected. To understand JNCC’s view on condition you will need to refer to the SACO table for this site.

Table 1. JNCC’s view on the condition of the protected features in the site.

| Protected feature | View of condition |
|--|--------------------------|
| Deep-sea sponge aggregations | Unfavourable |
| Offshore subtidal sands and gravels | Unfavourable |
| Ocean quahog aggregations | Unfavourable |
| Continental slope (large-scale feature) | Favourable |
| Continental slope channels, Iceberg plough marks, Prograding wedges and Slide deposits representative of the West Shetland Margin Paleo-Depositional System Key Geodiversity Area. | Unfavourable |
| Sand wave fields and Sediment wave fields representative of the West Shetland Margin Contourite Deposits Key Geodiversity Area. | Unfavourable |

The conservation measures listed below set out JNCC’s view as to which, if any, human activities may require additional management to conserve or recover the features within the site.

Conservation measures

As set out in Table 1 above, all protected features of the site (with the exception of the area of the Faroe-Shetland Channel continental slope protected as an example of a large-scale feature) need to be recovered to favourable condition. Please see the Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for more detail (hyperlink is provided in the box at the top of this document).

Using available site evidence and information contained within the Advice on Operations for this site (hyperlink is provided in the box at the top of this document), we consider that the activities listed below are capable of significantly affecting the protected features of the site.

These activities should be managed to prevent further deterioration to (and where feasible enable recovery of) the protected features of the site by removing or reducing (where appropriate) their associated pressures:

- Demersal mobile and static fishing activity; and
- Oil and gas activity

Management of the site should be informed by the sensitivity of protected features to pressures associated with human activities. The Advice on Operations provides an initial assessment of whether a proposed plan or project (or ongoing activity) may have an impact on the protected features of the site. The Advice on Operations identifies pressures associated with the most commonly occurring marine activities, and provides a detailed assessment of feature sensitivity to these pressures. A human activity is considered capable of affecting a feature where the feature is known to be sensitive to associated pressures. The sensitivity assessments provided in the Advice on Operations workbook and the guidance within, should be used at an early stage of a plan or project when considering potential impacts of an activity.

The simple presence of such human activities would not necessarily significantly affect the site were they to occur. Advice on Operations should be used in conjunction with the specific details of a proposed plan or project (e.g. indirect and/or additive impacts, activity duration, time of year, scale etc.) and the site-specific Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives (SACO) to develop assessments of impacts to features within the site. You may

also find the information available in the Activities and Management tab of the site's [Site Information Centre](#) useful.