

Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for Pisces Reef Complex Special Area of Conservation

UK0030379

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The information provided in this document sets out JNCC's supplementary advice on the conservation objectives set for Pisces Reef Complex Special Area of Conservation (SAC), hereafter referred to as 'the site'. This document 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 it can be applied;
- **Conservation Objectives and Management Advice** document setting out the broad ecological aims for the site and JNCC's advice on;
 - qualifying feature condition;
 - conservation benefits that the site can provide if managed effectively; and
 - conservation measures that JNCC consider are required to support achievement of the conservation objectives stated for the site.
- **Advice on Operations** providing information on those human activities that, if taking place within or near the site, can adversely affect the site's integrity, presenting a risk of not achieving the conservation objectives stated for the site.

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

The advice presented here describes the ecological characteristics or 'attributes' of the site's qualifying Annex I feature: [1170 Reefs](#), specified in the site's conservation objectives. These attributes include extent and distribution, structure and function and supporting processes.

Figure 1 below illustrates the concept of how a qualifying feature's attributes are interlinked: with impacts on one potentially having knock-on effects on another e.g. the impairment of any of the supporting processes on which a feature relies can result in changes to its extent and distribution and structure and function.

Collectively, the attributes set out in Table 1 below, along with the objectives set for each of them, describe the desired ecological condition (favourable) for the site's qualifying features. The condition of each feature contributes to its favourable conservation status more widely, as well as the site's integrity. All attributes listed in Table 1 must be taken into consideration when assessing impacts from an activity.

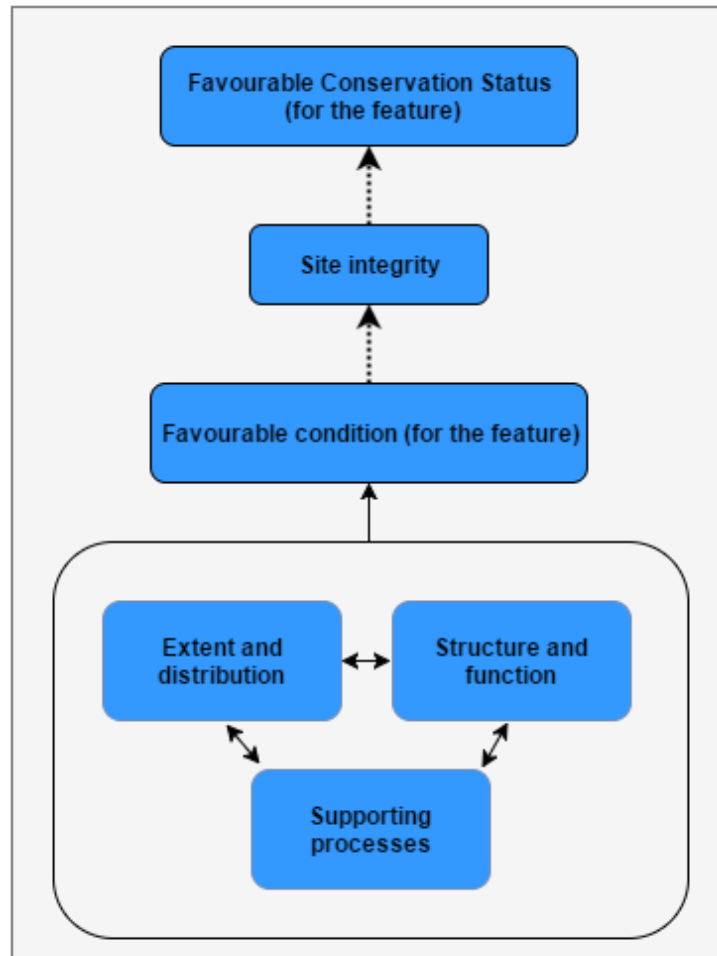


Figure 1. Conceptual diagram showing how qualifying feature attributes are interlinked, describing favourable condition and contribute to site integrity and more widely a qualifying feature’s favourable conservation status.

In Table 1 below, the attributes for the Annex I Reef qualifying features are listed. An objective of restore or maintain is set for each qualifying feature attribute, reflecting our current understanding of available evidence e.g. whether it indicates some of a qualifying feature’s extent is lost and needs to be restored or that extent is not lost and needs to be maintained to ensure the qualifying feature is in overall favourable condition. Where a restore objective is advised and there is considerable uncertainty as to whether restoration is possible, this will be noted alongside the objective.

The rationale for setting an objective is provided in the summary of evidence column and supporting references listed in the reference section at the end of this document.

Note: when a maintain objective is set, this does not preclude the need for management, now or in the future to ensure a qualifying feature remains in favourable condition.

Table 1: Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for the Annex I Reef qualifying feature of the site

In summary, the Annex I Reef qualifying feature of the site is considered by JNCC to be in unfavourable condition. Active management of human activities is required to restore the biological structure and function of the qualifying Annex I Reef feature in the site. Please see the Conservation Objectives and Management Advice document available in the [conservation advice section of the SIC](#) for JNCC’s advice on the management of activities which JNCC consider is needed to restore the Annex 1 Reef qualifying feature of the site. Further information on activities capable of affecting the qualifying feature of the site can be found in the Advice on Operations workbook available also in the [conservation advice section of the SIC](#).

Attribute	Summary of evidence	View of attribute condition & objective	Confidence in attribute condition
Extent and distribution	<p>Extent refers to the total area in the site occupied by the qualifying feature and must include consideration of its distribution, i.e. how it is spread out within the site. A reduction in extent has the potential to alter the biological and physical functioning of habitat types (Elliott et al., 1998). The distribution of a habitat influences the component communities present, and can contribute to the health and resilience of the feature (JNCC, 2004a).</p> <p>Pisces Reef is an MPA with three component boundaries to protect three distinct bedrock and stony reef areas. The delineation of the reef area is challenging to accurately define in this site due to the veneer of mud that frequently settles and covers the elevated rock area that supports the qualifying Annex I Reef feature. The latest calculations (based on a survey of the site in 2016) suggests an area of 5.4 km² of reef across the three composite locations of the site (Van Rein <i>et al.</i>, 2022).</p> <p>Recent vessel monitoring system (VMS) data, up to 2021, shows consistent levels of relatively high demersal trawl activity within all three component boundaries of the site overlapping with the qualifying Annex I Reef feature. In addition, the most recent survey conducted at the site shows evidence of trawl scars in one of the site boundaries which visibly transect the elevated Annex I Reef qualifying feature (Van Rein <i>et al.</i>, 2022).</p>	Favourable – needs to be maintained	Low – JNCC have low confidence in the delineation of the Annex I Reef qualifying feature within the site due to the ephemeral veneer of mud that can cover parts of the elevated reef feature at different times. While there is direct evidence of impact in the form of trawl scars, JNCC do not consider this sufficient to result in an increased confidence rating for this assessment.

	<p>Pressures associated with demersal trawling are not considered capable of significantly impacting the extent and distribution of the rock feature on which the Annex I Reef habitat is formed. Based on this, JNCC advise a maintain objective.</p>		
<p>Structure and function</p>	<p>Structure and function of Annex I Reef pertains to the physical structure itself (finer scale topography) and its biological structure (the presence of key and influential species and characteristic communities).</p> <p>Pisces Reef is an area of elevated rock and bedrock that rises from the homogenous mud plane that surrounds it. Encrusting epifauna, such as sponges and bryozoans, that colonise the elevated rock form a 'secondary substratum' which create further habitat complexity, influencing water flow and thus the transport of resources and propagules within the community (Sebens, 1991).</p> <p>Impact on the species that form the secondary substratum upon Annex I Reef, and their associated characteristic communities, can impact the functioning of the ecosystem overall, through changes to hydrodynamics, food webs and secondary productivity.</p> <p>Whilst it is unlikely that the impacts of demersal trawling known to be taking place within the site, even at relatively higher levels, could have detrimental impacts on the physical structure of Annex I Reef, it is considered likely to impact upon the qualifying feature's biological structure and therefore its ability to function. JNCC therefore conclude a restore objective for this attribute.</p>	<p>Unfavourable – needs to be restored</p>	<p>Low – based on the same description outlined for extent and distribution.</p>
<p>Supporting processes</p>	<p>Rocky habitats rely on a range of supporting natural processes to support the functions (ecological processes) of the feature and help any recovery from adverse impacts. For the site to maintain its ecological functioning, and thereby deliver the conservation benefits laid out in the Conservation Objectives and Management Advice document, hydrodynamic regime and water quality must remain largely unimpeded.</p>	<p>Favourable – needs to be maintained</p>	<p>Low - The evidence-base supporting JNCC's assessment against this attribute draws upon data from the wider OSPAR Region III (Celtic Seas region) (OSPAR, 2023a), rather than any evidence available from within, or in close proximity to, the site itself. This lack of data pertaining to water and sediment quality within this site limits</p>

	<p>The wider region in which this site is located is considered to have good environmental status (OSPAR, 2023a). This is due to a reduction in the concentration of harmful pollutants in the water column and of eutrophication levels (OSPAR, 2023a, b). A lack of data pertaining to water and sediment quality within the site itself limits this assessment. Overall, there is limited evidence to suggest that the supporting processes that operate at this site are being impeded. JNCC therefore advise a maintain objective on this basis.</p>		<p>this assessment. Moreover, there is a lack of time series data about water quality and how human activities may have impacted this.</p>
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References

OSPAR (2023a). *Hazardous Substances Thematic Assessment*. In: OSPAR, 2023: Quality Status Report 2023. OSPAR Commission, London. Available at: <https://oap.ospar.org/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/qsr-2023/thematic-assessments/hazardous-substances>

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