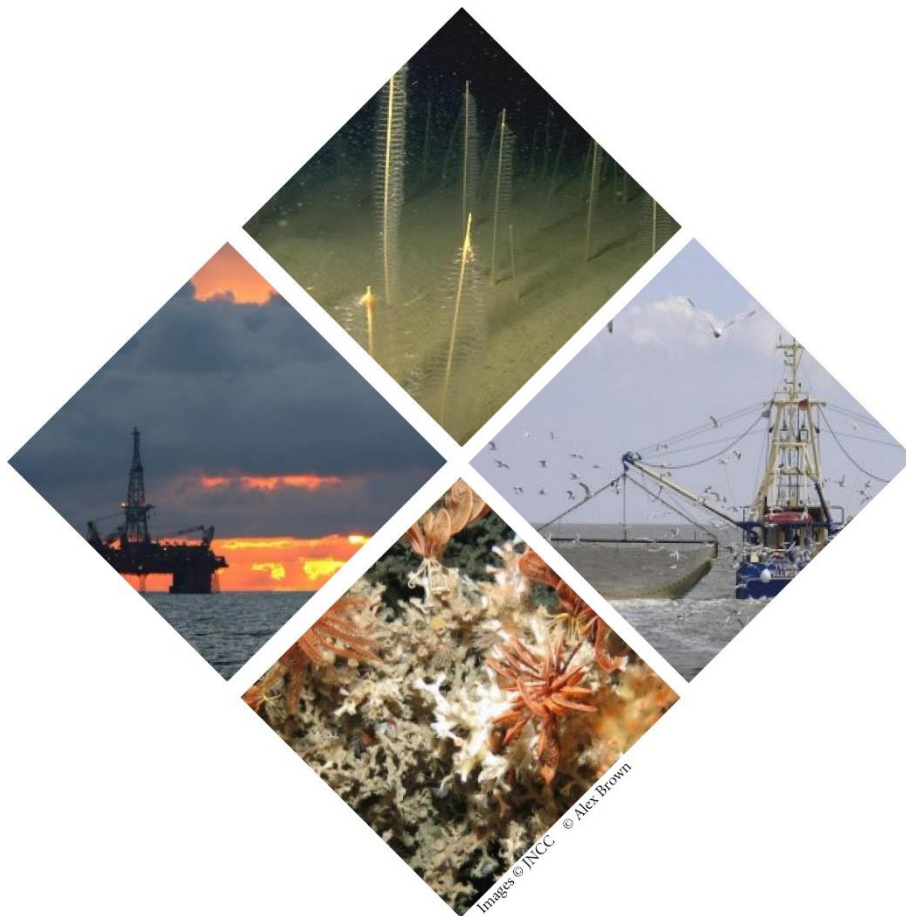


Statements on conservation benefits, condition & conservation measures for Hatton-Rockall Basin Nature Conservation Marine Protected Area

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); and
- [Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives](#) (SACO) providing more detailed and site-specific information on the conservation objectives.

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: V Wider Atlantic; and
- Good Environmental Status under the UK Marine Strategy.

This site has been designated to protect the habitats Deep-sea sponge aggregations and Offshore deep-sea muds, both are considered [Priority Marine Features](#) (PMFs) in Scotland's seas. Deep-sea sponge aggregations are on the [OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining habitats & species](#) and are considered to be Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems. Two types of sponge aggregations are present within the site; encrusting sponge aggregations and Bird's nest sponge (*Pheronema carpenteri*) fields. The majority of the Offshore deep-sea mud is believed to be "Atlantic mid bathyal mud and sandy mud", but the site also includes a patch of "Atlantic upper bathyal mud and sandy mud". The geomorphological features protected within the site are representative of the Hatton Bank (and adjacent seafloor) Key Geodiversity Area.

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:

Deep-sea sponge aggregations

- Nutrition: Sponges filter feed organic matter out of the water column, therefore Deep-sea sponge aggregations are a potentially important link in the flow of nutrients between the pelagic and benthic environment. For example, cold-water corals can secrete mucus which becomes a source of dissolved and particulate organic matter. Sponges feed on the organic matter produced by cold-water corals and it is incorporated into sponge tissue, which is then shed and can be consumed by higher trophic levels. This may serve to increase the availability of prey species to predators through enhancement to levels of biological diversity, potentially act as spawning grounds and provide refugia from predators for commercially important fish species;
- Silicon regulation: by providing a long-term sink for silicon; and
- Provision of biochemical and biotechnological products: Sponges and their associated microbes produce a diverse array of chemicals, many of which have been shown to have applications in drug development. Sponges may also have wider biotechnological applications e.g. chitin networks from one species of

sponge are effective at absorbing uranium contamination. Sponge species typically found in Deep-sea sponge aggregations may also prove to have useful applications in the future.

Offshore deep-sea muds

- Nutrition: Different sediment types offer habitat for breeding and feeding for various commercial species, which in turn are prey for larger marine species, including birds and mammals;
- Bird and whale watching: Foraging seals, cetaceans and seabirds may also be found in greater numbers near some Subtidal sedimentary habitats due to the common occurrence of prey for the birds and mammals; and
- Climate regulation: Providing a long-term sink for carbon within sedimentary habitats.

Managing activities that affect the protected features of the site to conserve them at, or recover them to, favourable condition, will support provision of ecosystem services and help fulfil the policy obligations listed above.

Site Condition

Table 1 below sets out JNCC’s view on the overall condition of the site’s protected features. In summary, a feature is considered to be in unfavourable condition either where evidence indicates it needs to be recovered or where recovery is not considered to be possible through human intervention. Conversely, a feature is considered to be in favourable condition where evidence indicates it is not being adversely affected.

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

Protected feature	View of condition
Deep-sea sponge aggregations	Uncertain*
Offshore deep-sea muds	Uncertain*
Sediment drifts and Polygonal fault systems representative of the Hatton Bank (and adjacent seafloor) Key Geodiversity Area.	Uncertain*

*There is limited information available on the human activities taking place within the Hatton-Rockall Basin MPA. In the absence of evidence, JNCC cannot provide a view on the condition of the protected features of the site. When more evidence becomes available, JNCC's view on feature condition will be reviewed.

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 protected features of the site.

Conservation measures

As set out in Table 1 above, we are uncertain as to the condition of the protected features of the site.

A proportion of the site focussed on the area of Deep-sea sponge aggregations is closed to bottom-contacting fishing practices under [NEAFC Recommendation 19 2014: Protection of VMEs in NEAFC Regulatory Areas, as Amended by Recommendation 09:2015 and Recommendation 10:2018](#), but limited information is available on the human activities taking place within the wider site

The MPA lies in a region defined as a "new bottom fishing area" under current NEAFC regulations. This means that any proposed fishing activity would require an assessment and fishing would only be permitted if it can be shown that it would not cause damage to the Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems present. When more evidence becomes available on activities taking place within this area, JNCC's view on feature condition and advice on conservation measures will be reviewed. The possibility of activities other than fishing taking place in the near future is thought to be low.

Further management of the site should be informed by the sensitivity of protected features to pressures associated with human activities. The [Feature Activity Sensitivity Tool](#) (FeAST), provides an initial assessment of whether a proposed plan or project (or ongoing activity) may have an impact on a protected feature in the site. FeAST 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, other than insignificantly, a feature where the feature is known to be sensitive to associated pressures. The sensitivity assessments provided in FeAST, 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. FeAST 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 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.