Conservation Objectives and Management Advice for Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA UKNCMPA024

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JNCC

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What the conservation advice package includes

The information provided in this document sets out:

- The conservation objectives for the protected features of the site;
- The conservation benefits which the site can provide if managed effectively;
- JNCC's current view of protected feature condition; and
- The conservation measures that JNCC consider are required to support achievement of the site's conservation objectives.

This document forms part of JNCC's formal conservation advice package for the site and must be read in conjunction with:

- **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;
- **Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives** (SACO) providing more detailed and site-specific information on the conservation objectives of the protected features of the site; and
- **Advice on Operations** providing information on those human activities that, if taking place within or near to the site, could impact it and hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives stated for the site.

The most up-to-date conservation advice package for this site can be downloaded from the conservation advice section of the Site Information Centre on JNCC's website.

Conservation objectives

This site has been designated to protect **deep-sea sponge aggregations**, **offshore deep-sea muds**, **marine geomorphology of the Scottish deep ocean seabed – sediment drifts** and **polygonal fault systems.**

The biodiversity features are Priority Marine Features (PMFs) in Scotland's seas and deep-sea sponge aggregations are included on the OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining Habitats & Species across the North-east Atlantic.

The conservation objectives for the Hatton-Rockall Basin MPA are set out in the Designation Order and say that *the protected features*:

- *so far as already in favourable condition, remain in such condition; and*
- *so far as not already in favourable condition, be brought into such condition, and remain in such condition.*

*With respect to the **deep-sea sponge aggregations and offshore deep-sea muds** within the site, this means that their:*

- *extent is stable or increasing; and*
- *structures and functions, quality, and the composition of characteristic biological communities (which includes a reference to the diversity and abundance of species of flora and fauna forming part of or inhabiting the habitats) are such as to ensure that they are in a condition which is healthy and not deteriorating.*

Any temporary deterioration in condition is to be disregarded if the habitats are sufficiently healthy and resilient to enable recovery from such deterioration.

Any alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

*With respect to the **marine geomorphology of the Scottish deep ocean seabed – sediment drifts and polygonal fault systems** within the site, this means that their:*

a) extent, component elements and integrity are maintained;
b) structure and functioning are unimpaired; and
c) surface remains sufficiently unobscured for the purposes of determining whether the criteria in paragraphs (a) and (b) are satisfied.

Any obscuring or alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

Conservation benefits

Conserving or recovering the protected features of the site at or to favourable condition, 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;
- Good Environmental Status under the UK Marine Strategy; and
- Target 3 of The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, known as the 30by30 target is a global commitment to effectively conserve and manage by 2030 at least 30% of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of marine and coastal areas through an ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective areas-based conservation measures.

The types of ecosystem services that can be provided by the protected features of the site are listed below:

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;
- 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 4 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;
- Climate regulation: Providing a long-term sink for carbon within sedimentary habitats.

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

Protected Feature Condition

Table 1. JNCC's view on the condition of the protected features of the site.**Table 1** below sets out JNCC's view on the condition of the site's protected features. This view is based on JNCC's assessment of protected feature condition using best available information at the time of writing and which is summarised in the SACO available from the conservation advice section of the Site Information Centre on JNCC's website. The SACO sets out our understanding of the condition of a feature's attributes as listed in the conservation objective for the site; extent and distribution, structure and function and supporting processes.

In summary, a protected feature is in unfavourable condition either where evidence indicates one or more of its attributes need to be recovered. Conversely, a protected feature is in favourable condition where evidence indicates none of the attributes are being adversely affected.

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

Protected feature	View of condition and protected feature objective
Deep-sea sponge aggregations	Favourable, conserve at favourable condition
Offshore deep-sea muds	Favourable, conserve at favourable condition
Marine geomorphology of the Scottish deep ocean seabed – sediment drifts	Unassessed
Polygonal fault systems	Unassessed

Conservation measures

Based on JNCC's understanding of the pressures associated with human activities taking place within, or in close proximity to the site, and the sensitivity of the protected features to those pressures, we conclude that the protected features of the site need to be conserved at favourable condition.

Whilst no active management is considered to be required at the time of this assessment above the measures already in place, JNCC advise the following conservation measures are adopted to support the conservation of the protected features at favourable condition:

- **No new licensable activities** capable of significantly impacting (either directly or indirectly) the protected feature deep sea sponge aggregations **should be permitted**. An impact's significance should consider the scale and duration of impacts to the protected feature itself and to any supporting habitat within the site.

- **Any new activities** whether located within or outwith the site, must look to avoid, or, as far as is practicable to do so, **minimise exceeding sedimentary and water Environmental Quality Standards** within the site.

- The NEAFC Recommendation 19 : 2014 on area management measures for the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems in the NEAFC Regulatory Area, as amended, requires that any new fishing activity would require an environmental assessment to show damage would not be caused to Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs), which in this case constitutes one of the protected features of the site: deep-sea sponge aggregations. Under the same recommendation an area in the north of Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA is also closed to bottom fisheries to protect VMEs, namely deep-sea sponge aggregations.

- Further restrictions under The Common Fisheries Policy and Animals (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 Statutory Instrument (S.I.) 2019, No. 1312 (amending S.I. 2019, No. 753) prohibit the use of bottom-set gillnets, entangling nets, and trammel nets at depths greater than 200 meters.
- As management is already in place within the site and there are no fishing activities occurring which are deemed to be capable of affecting the protected features of the site, **no further management is required.**
- Under normal operations, **pelagic gears** are not expected to interact with the protected features and therefore should not present a risk to the achievement of the conservation objectives of the site. **Therefore no additional management of this gear type is advised**.

The Advice on Operations for this site is accessible via the conservation advice section of the Site Information Centre. It provides information on the sensitivity of the protected features of the site to pressures associated with activities that JNCC consider could conceivably take place within, or in close proximity to, the site. This should be used when undertaking an initial assessment of whether a proposed plan or project (or ongoing activity) may have an impact on the protected features of the site.