

# Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for Pobie Bank Reef Special Area of Conservation UK0030385

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The information provided in this document sets out JNCC and NatureScot's supplementary advice on the conservation objectives set for Pobie Bank Reef Special Area of Conservation (SAC), hereafter referred to as 'the site'. This document forms part of JNCC and NatureScot's formal conservation advice package for the site and must be read in conjunction with all parts of the package as listed below:

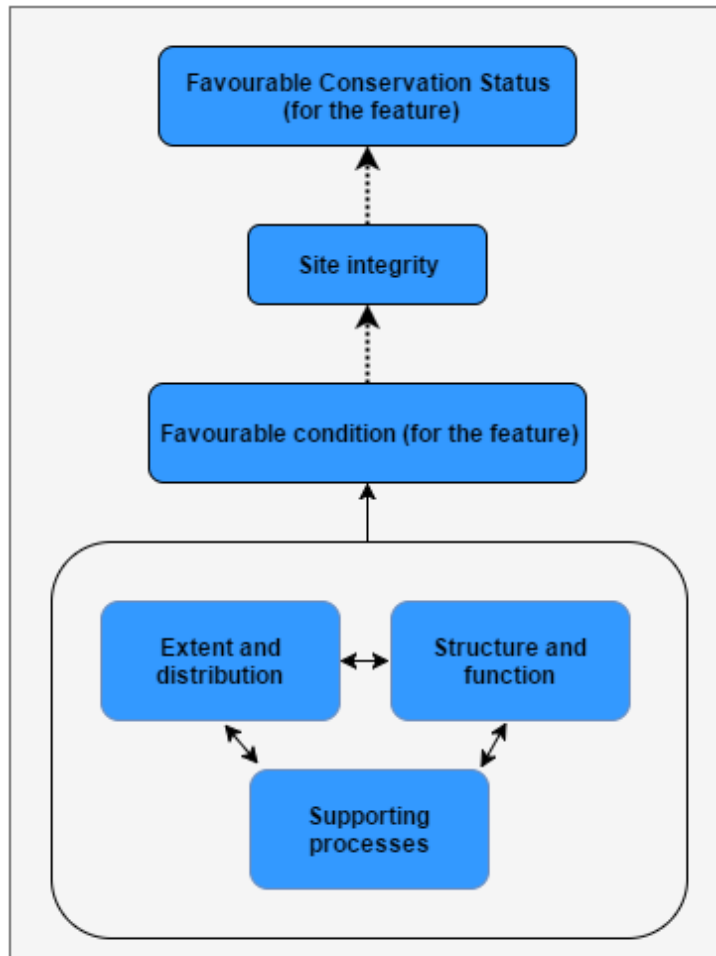
- **Background Document** explaining where to find the advice package, JNCC and NatureScot's role in the provision of conservation advice, how the advice has been prepared, when to refer to it and how it can be applied;
- **Conservation Objectives and Management Advice** document setting out the broad ecological aims for the site and JNCC and NatureScot's advice on;
  - qualifying feature condition;
  - conservation benefits that the site can provide if managed effectively; and
  - conservation measures that JNCC and NatureScot 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: [Reefs](#). 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 habitat Reefs qualifying feature 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 habitat Reefs qualifying feature of the site**

In summary, the Annex I Reefs protected feature of the site is considered to be in unfavourable condition. Active management of fishing activity has been in place since October 2025, prohibiting mobile demersal fishing practices across the majority of the site. As the only activity known to be taking place within, or in close proximity to, the site which has the potential to impact, other than insignificantly, the Annex I Reefs qualifying feature of the site it is likely that, if adequately enforced, the site will be restored to favourable condition. However, it may take several years to observe any measured impact of recovery due to the slow-growing nature of Annex I Reef associated species.

Please see the Conservation Objectives and Management Advice document available in the [conservation advice section of the Site Information Centre](#) for further information. 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 Site Information Centre](#).

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Summary of evidence</b>	<b>View of attribute condition &amp; objective</b>	<b>Confidence in attribute condition</b>
Extent and distribution	<p>Extent of reefs refers to the total area in the site occupied by the biogenic habitat 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 biogenic habitats. This comprises both bedrock and stoney reef habitat sub-types of Annex 1 reef (Foster-Smith et al., 2009).</p> <p>To the best of JNCC and NatureScot’s knowledge, the only human activities known to be taking place within the site which could impact the reefs protected feature are fishing activities. Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) data up to 2022 shows a consistent trend of demersal and fixed net fishing with no active avoidance of the reef. This evidence informed the updating of fisheries management measures in October 2025, prohibiting demersal mobile gear across the majority of the site. The effect of these changes will likely take several years to see a measured impact due to the slow-growing nature of reefs (FeAST, 2023).</p>	Unfavourable - needs to be restored	<p>Moderate - JNCC and NatureScot have a baseline understanding of the extent and distribution of reef habitats in this site, which is derived from Strategic Environmental Assessments (SEA) completed in 2005 (Foster-Smith et al., 2009). This has been further integrated with a modelled habitat map that covers the remaining site area that has not been surveyed, as part of a composite predictive habitat mapping product known as ‘EUSeaMap’ (EUSeaMap, 2023). Evidence for impact is indirect, based on our understanding of the sensitivity of reef habitats to pressures associated with human activities known to have taken place in the site; namely fishing (Tyler-Walters et al., 2023 and JNCC 2022).</p>

	On this basis, JNCC consider that the extent and distribution of the protected feature within the site is likely to be in unfavourable condition and should be restored.		
Structure and function	<p>The structure of reef habitats encompass:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical structure of the reef – including the topography of the reef and the available macrohabitats;</li> <li>• Key and influential species; and</li> <li>• Characteristic communities present</li> </ul> <p>Functions are ecological processes that include sediment processing, secondary production, habitat modification, supply of recruits, bioengineering and biodeposition. These functions rely on the supporting natural processes and the growth and reproduction of associated biological communities (Armstrong et al., 2014).</p> <p>Based on the same evidence presented under the extent and distribution attribute, JNCC and NatureScot conclude that the structure and function of the feature is likely to have been adversely affected by activities occurring in the site. JNCC and NatureScot therefore advise a restore objective.</p>	Unfavourable - needs to be restored	Moderate - as per extent and distribution above.
Supporting processes	<p>Biogenic habitats and the communities they support such as reefs rely on a range of natural processes to support function (ecological processes) and help any recovery from adverse impacts.</p> <p>Supporting processes with respect to reef habitats include hydrodynamic regime, physical topography, supporting habitat, water and sediment quality. Physical topography and supporting habitat condition have been reflected in the assessment of extent and distribution, and structure and function, and therefore are not also considered within this assessment against the supporting processes attribute.</p> <p>There is no evidence to suggest that human activities are having an adverse impact on the typical hydrodynamic regime to which the site is exposed. The site is located in the Greater North Sea (OSPAR region II) region; whilst it is noted the region which the</p>	Favourable – needs to be maintained	Low - The evidence-base supporting JNCC's assessment against this attribute draws upon data from the wider Greater North Sea Region (Larsen et al., 2022), rather than any evidence available from within, or in close proximity to, the site itself. The lack of data pertaining to water and sediment quality within this site limits this assessment. Moreover, there is a lack of time series data information about water quality and on how human activities may have impacted this.

	<p>site is located within has been assessed to have a poor contaminant status (Larson 2022), this is insufficient evidence to assess water or sediment quality in the site.</p> <p>Overall, there is no evidence to suggest that supporting processes that operate at this site are being impeded with respect to supporting the presence of reefs. JNCC and NatureScot therefore advises a maintain objective on this basis.</p>		
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## References

Armstrong, C.W., Foley, N.S, Kahui, V. and Grehan, A. (2014). Cold water coral reef management from an ecosystem service perspective. *Marine Policy*, 50: 126-134.

EUSeaMap (2023). EMODnet Seabed Habitats - Broad-scale seabed habitat map for Europe available from: <https://emodnet.ec.europa.eu/en/seabed-habitats>

FeAST (2023). Feature Activity Sensitivity Tool, for Scottish waters. Available from: <https://feature-activity-sensitivity-tool.scot/>

Foster-Smith, R, Benson, A and Foster-Smith, J. (2009). Interpretation of Pobie Bank East of Shetland for Annex I Reef, JNCC Report No. 433, JNCC, Peterborough.

JNCC (2022) Marine Activities and Pressures Evidence. Available at <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/marine-activities-and-pressures-evidence/>

Larsen, M.M., Fryer, R., Hjermann, D., McHugh, B. and Sorensen, A. (2022). Status and Trend hazardous substances using CHASE. In: *OSPAR, 2023: The 2023 Quality Status Report for the North-East Atlantic*. OSPAR Commission, London. Available at: <https://oap.ospar.org/en/ospar-assessments/quality-status-reports/qsr-2023/other-assessments/chase>

Tyler-Walters, H., Tillin, H.M., d'Avack, E.A.S., Perry, F., Stamp, T., (2023). Marine Evidence-based Sensitivity Assessment (MarESA) – Guidance Manual. *Marine Life Information Network (MarLIN)*. Marine Biological Association of the UK, Plymouth, pp. 170. Available from <https://www.marlin.ac.uk/publications>.

VMS MMO internal underlying dataset variant of Fishing Activity for over 15 metre vessels which covers 2007 – 2020.