

Statements on conservation benefits, condition & conservation measures for North West Rockall Bank Special Area of Conservation

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 qualifying features condition;
 - conservation benefits that the site can provide; and
 - conservation measures needed to support achievement of the conservation objectives set 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 affect it and present a risk to the achievement of 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 qualifying 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;
- Favourable Conservation Status of Annex I Reefs in the Atlantic North-West Approaches, Rockall Trough and Faroe Shetland Channel.
 - Favourable Conservation Status of habitats of European importance, including Reefs, is one of the aims of the Council Directive 92/43/EEC on the Conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (Habitats Directive) as transposed into the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations 2017);
- An ecological network of areas of special conservation interest under the Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention). 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
- Resilience of the UK's network of marine protected areas and wider marine biodiversity to impacts of climate change (2013 EU Guidance¹).

This site has been designated because it affords protection to two subtypes of Annex I Reefs habitat; biogenic and stony reef. Iceberg ploughmarks are present within the site, which are a type of stony reef habitat consisting of lines of cobbles and boulders. The associated biological communities that include erect bryozoa and solitary corals, are dependent on this mixed sediment and stony substratum, rather than on the underlying bedrock. Interspersed with the stony reef are sizeable patches of biogenic reef comprised primarily of the cold-water coral species *Lophelia pertusa*, with other associated species which include stands of the cold water coral species *Madrepora oculata*, erect sponges and pencil urchins.

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:

Annex I Reefs - Stony reef

- Nutrition: due to the level of primary and secondary productivity on or around rock habitat, a range of fish species use these areas as feeding and nursery grounds.

¹ 2013 EU Guidelines on Climate Change and Natura 2000. Dealing with the impact of climate change on the management of the Natura 2000 Network of areas of high biodiversity value. Available here: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/climatechange/pdf/Guidance%20document.pdf>

Annex I Reefs: Biogenic (cold-water coral reefs)

- Nutrition: Coral habitats are potentially an important link in the flow of carbon between the pelagic and benthic environment. Cold-water coral species secrete mucus which becomes a source of dissolved and particulate organic matter for the ecosystem. Sponge species can feed on this and it is incorporated into sponge detritus, which is then consumed by higher trophic levels. This may serve to increase the availability of prey species to predators through enhancement of biological diversity, potentially providing refugia from predators, locations to lay eggs or nurseries for fish species. There is some evidence that the abundance of certain commercial fish species is higher within coral habitats compared to non-coral habitats;
- Climate regulation: Dead coral skeletons are a long-term store of carbon, although the coral calcification process emits carbon dioxide. Ocean acidification is expected to corrode the skeletons of dead deep-water scleractinian corals although cold-water coral reefs shallower than ~ 150 m, are not expected to be subject to corrosion as they will remain above the aragonite saturation horizon;
- Provision of recruits: The larvae of corals have a planktonic phase giving the potential for long distance dispersal. A coral habitat can create a supply of recruits to establish new or help maintain existing coral habitats elsewhere; and
- Provision of biochemical and biotechnological products: Chemicals extracted from corals have been shown to have applications in the pharmaceutical industry.

Managing activities that affect the qualifying features of the site to maintain them at or restore 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 qualifying features based on our understanding of the feature. Please contact [JNCC](#) for further information if required. In summary, a feature is in unfavourable condition either where evidence indicates it needs to be restored or where restoration is not considered to be possible through human intervention. Conversely, a feature is in favourable condition where evidence indicates it is not being adversely affected.

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

| Protected feature | View of condition |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Annex I Reefs | Unfavourable |

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

Conservation measures

As set out in Table 1 above, the Annex I Reefs need to be restored to favourable condition.

Using evidence available about the site 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 qualifying features of the site. The majority of North West Rockall is closed to bottom fisheries under [NEAFC Recommendation 19 2014: Protection of VMEs in NEAFC Regulatory Areas, as Amended by Recommendation 09:2015 and Recommendation 10:2018](#) and EC Regulation No 40/2008 , but part of the site is not covered by these measures.

These activities should be managed to restore the Annex I Reefs by reducing or removing associated pressures:

- Demersal fishing.

Further 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 a protected feature in 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 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.