Conservation Objectives and Management Advice for the East of Gannet & Montrose Fields Nature Conservation MPA

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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 Offshore deep-sea muds, Ocean quahog aggregations and Offshore subtidal sands and gravels (representing sediment types suitable for ocean quahog colonisation).

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

The conservation objectives for the East of Gannet and Montrose Fields 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 offshore deep-sea muds and offshore subtidal sands and gravels (representing sediment types suitable for ocean quahog colonisation) within the site, this means that:

- *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 habitat) are such as to ensure that they remain in a condition which is healthy and not deteriorating.*

Any temporary deterioration in condition is to be disregarded if the habitat is sufficiently healthy and resilient to enable its recovery from such deterioration. Any alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

With respect to the ocean quahog aggregations within the site, this means that the quality and quantity of its habitat and the composition of its population in terms of number, age and sex ratio are such as to ensure that the population is maintained in numbers which enable it to thrive.

Any temporary reduction of numbers is to be disregarded if the population is thriving and sufficiently resilient to enable its recovery from such reduction. Any alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

Conservation benefits

Conserving or recovering the protected features of the site 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 II: Greater North Sea;
- 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:

Offshore deep-sea muds

- Nutrition: mud habitats can provide suitable habitat for *Nephrops norvegicus* (Norway lobster) – offshore deep-sea muds in this site support *Nephrops* fisheries (functional unit 34); and
- Climate regulation: by providing a long-term sink for carbon within sedimentary habitats.

Ocean quahog aggregations and offshore subtidal sands and gravels (representing sediment types suitable for their colonisation)

- Nutrition: by providing prey for a broad range of fish and invertebrate species.
- Regulatory processes: providing a bentho-pelagic link by removing plankton and detritus from the water column;

- Scientific study: the longevity of the species makes it of value in the study of long term climatic and environmental change. They are also of value as an indicator species for heavy metal pollutant concentrations on seabed sediments and in ageing research; and
- Carbon cycling and nutrient regulation: maintaining healthy and productive ecosystems through the laying down of carbonate during shell growth and filter-feeding.

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 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. objective for the site; extent and distribution, structure and function, 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 in the site.

Protected feature	View of condition and protected feature objective
Offshore deep-sea muds	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Ocean quahog aggregations and offshore subtidal sands and gravels (representing sediment types suitable for their colonisation)	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition; acknowledging the influence of climate-change related pressures on feature recovery and the dependence on larval source populations from outwith UK waters

The conservation measures listed below set out JNCC's advice regarding management which should be implemented to recover the protected features of the site to favourable condition.

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 all of the protected features of the site need to be recovered to favourable condition.

JNCC advise the following conservation measures are adopted to support protected features' recovery to favourable condition and reduce the risk of the site not achieving its conservation objectives to the lowest possible level:

- **No new licensable activities** capable of impacting (either directly or indirectly) the protected features or hindering their recovery **should be permitted**. For **ocean quahog**, note this includes activities capable of impacting the protected feature's **supporting habitat** (offshore subtidal sands and gravels) within the site, which is critical to the protected feature's recovery.

- **Variations to existing licenced activities** must seek, as far as is practicable to do so, to **avoid the introduction of additional hard substrata or subsea deposits** in areas where the protected features are recorded within the site. This includes offshore subtidal sands and gravels as supporting habitat for ocean quahog. The impact of variations to existing consented activities are to be **considered on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with JNCC**.

- **Any new activities** must look to avoid, or, as far as is practicable to do so, **minimise the introduction of contaminants to ensure compliance with sedimentary and water Environmental Quality Standards** within the site.

- There is a significant risk of not achieving the conservation objectives for the protected features; offshore deep-sea muds and ocean quahog aggregations if **mobile bottom contact gears** are not managed within the site to recover the protected features to favourable condition. If the risk of not achieving the conservation objectives for the site is to be reduced to the lowest possible levels,

mobile bottom contact gears would need to be removed from where offshore deep-sea muds and ocean quahog are present within the site.

- The use of **heavier bottom-contact gears e.g. beam trawling and dredges** is not known to be occurring within the site. However, if this were to take place it could impact offshore deep-sea muds and ocean quahog and therefore again, if the risk to not achieving the site's conservation objectives are to be reduced to the lowest possible levels, their use **should be prohibited where these protected features are located** within the site.

- Lighter **mobile bottom contact gears e.g. seines** are not thought to pose a risk to ocean quahog and **no management is likely to be needed for these gears**.

- 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**.

- It is unlikely that any additional management of **static bottom contact gear** activities will be required, as the risk of not achieving the conservation objectives for offshore deep-sea muds and ocean quahog aggregations associated with these activities is likely to be minimal. Furthermore, static gear activity is not believed to take place within the MPA at the current time; however, if it were to start and monitoring showed evidence of detrimental effects on these features, it **may be necessary to apply limits in the future**.

More information about how activities can impact the protected/qualifying features can be found in the Advice on Operations for this site which 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 may 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 alongside JNCC's Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives also available from the conservation advice section of the Site Information Centre.

JNCC can provide additional assistance through our discretionary advice service with assessing the impact of proposed operations on the protected features. For queries regarding this service, please contact OIA@jncc.gov.uk.