Conservation Objectives and Management Advice for the West Shetland Shelf 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 feature 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 feature 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 subtidal sands and gravels.**
The feature is a Priority Marine Features (PMFs) in Scotland's seas.

The conservation objectives for the West Shetland Shelf MPA are set out in the Designation Order and say that *the protected feature*:

- *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 and*

*With respect to the **offshore subtidal sands and gravels** within the site, this means that its:*

- *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/s) are such as to ensure that it is/they are 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 recovery from such deterioration.
Any alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

Conservation benefits

Conserving or recovering the protected feature 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 II: Greater North Sea and OSPAR Region III: Celtic Seas;
- 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 feature of the site are listed below:

- Nutrition: Different sediment types offer habitat for various commercial species, for instance mud habitats can be suitable for Norway lobster and shallow sandy sediments can offer habitat for sand eels, 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 feature at, or recover it 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 feature. 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 feature in the site.

Protected feature	View of condition and protected feature objective
Offshore subtidal sands and gravels	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition

The conservation measures listed below set out JNCC's advice regarding management which should be implemented to recover the protected feature of the site to or at 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 feature to those pressures, we conclude that the protected feature of the site needs to be recovered to favourable condition.

JNCC advise the following conservation measures are adopted to support protected feature 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 feature; **offshore subtidal sands and gravels** or hindering its recovery, **should be permitted**.

- **Any new activities** whether located within or outwith the site, 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.

- JNCC recognise that Marine Directorate have brought into force management to protect the offshore subtidal sands and gravels protected feature of the site. The management prohibits dredge and beam trawling from the full site, and demersal mobile gear is prohibited in two zoned areas. Compliance with the management should support the recovery of the protected feature within the site from impacts associated with these gear types. As such, **bottom-towed fishing gear effort within the site should be monitored to ensure compliance. For the zoned management areas, JNCC advises that demersal mobile gear effort within the site is monitored and the effects of ongoing use on the conservation status of the protected features is kept under review.**

- 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**.

- Although the use of **static bottom contact gear** is occurring within the site, it is unlikely that any additional management of these gears will be required, as the risk of not achieving the conservation objectives for offshore subtidal sands and gravels associated with these activities is likely to be minimal. However, it is not possible to fully assess the degree of impact due to limitations around knowledge of the extent and intensity of the fishing activity itself, as well as the impact of this fishing type on the site's qualifying feature. **Further scientific research** and **better fishing effort**

data is needed. In the meantime, JNCC advises that **static gear fishing effort within the site is monitored** and the **effects of ongoing use on the conservation status of the protected features is kept under review**. If monitoring shows evidence of detrimental effects at the scale of the conservation status of the protected features, **additional management may need to be considered**.

More information about how activities can impact the protected feature can be found in the Advice on Operations 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 feature 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 feature 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.