Conservation Objectives and Management Advice for the Croker Carbonate Slabs Special Area of Conservation

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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 qualifying feature of the site;
- The conservation benefits which the site can provide if managed effectively;
- JNCC's current view of qualifying 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 most up to date version of 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 qualifying 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, adversely affecting the site's integrity and presenting a risk of not achieving 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 Annex I submarine structures made by leaking gases. Submarine structures made by leaking gases is included on the OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining Habitats & Species across the North-east Atlantic.

The conservation objectives for the Croker Carbonate Slabs MPA are for *the qualifying feature; submarine structures made by leaking gases to be in favourable condition thus ensuring site integrity in the long term and contribution to Favourable Conservation Status.*

This is achieved by maintaining or restoring as needed, subject to natural change, the qualifying feature's:

- Extent and distribution within the site;
- Structure and function within the site; and
- The supporting processes on which it relies.

Conservation benefits

Maintaining or restoring the qualifying feature of the site at or to favourable condition, will contribute to delivering:

- Favourable Conservation Status of submarine structures made by leaking gases in the Irish Sea, which is a requirement set out in the Conservation of Offshore Marine Habitats and Species Regulations, 2017.
- An ecological network of areas of special conservation interest under the Convention of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention)
- Good Environmental Status under the UK Marine Strategy; and
- 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 III: Celtic Seas;
- 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 MPA Target as set out in the Environmental Targets (Marine Protected Areas) Regulations 2023.

Croker Carbonate Slabs Special Area of Conservation (SAC) has been designated to protect the following feature representative of the Celtic Sea region: submarine structures made by leaking gases.

This site provides conservation benefits to the wider marine environment and society by affording protection to submarine structures made by leaking gases and associated biological communities and consequently the provision of the following ecosystem services:

Submarine structures made by leaking gases:

- Climate regulation: by providing a long-term sink and storage of methane and other greenhouse gases;
- Nutrition: by providing habitat, a food source and refugia for a variety of fauna, including a range of commercially important fish species.

Managing activities to maintain the qualifying feature at, or restore 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. JNCC's view on the condition of the qualifying feature in the site.Table 1 below sets out JNCC's view on the condition of the site's qualifying feature. This view is based on JNCC's assessment of qualifying 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 protected feature's attributes as listed in the conservation objective for the site; extent and distribution, structure and function and supporting processes.

In summary, a qualifying feature is in unfavourable condition either where evidence indicates one or more of its attributes need to be restored. Conversely, a qualifying 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 qualifying feature in the site.

Qualifying feature	View of condition and qualifying feature objective
Submarine structures made by leaking gases	Favourable, maintain at favourable condition

The conservation measures listed below set out JNCC's advice regarding management which should be implemented to maintain the qualifying 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 qualifying feature to those pressures, we conclude that the qualifying feature of the site need to be maintained at favourable condition.

JNCC advise the following conservation measures are adopted to support the maintenance of the qualifying feature at 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 significantly impacting** (either directly or indirectly) the qualifying feature Annex I Submarine structures made by leaking gases **should be permitted**. Significance should consider the spatial scale, duration and the relative ecological importance of the area impacted with respect to the site. Longer-lasting impacts to any of a feature's attributes listed in the site's conservation objectives; extent and distribution, structure and function or supporting processes should be considered significant.

- To maintain the qualifying feature Submarine structures made by leaking gases in favourable condition, **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 qualifying feature is recorded within the site. 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** 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.

- The qualifying feature's physical structure can be irreversibly damaged by abrasion exerted by **mobile bottom contact gears**. There is a significant risk of not achieving the conservation objectives for the qualifying feature if **mobile bottom contact gears** are not managed within the site to maintain its favourable conservation status,

noting the risk of damage to the qualifying feature is likely to be highest from use of heavier gear types. If the risk of not achieving the site's conservation objectives is to be reduced to the lowest possible levels, **all mobile bottom contact gears would need to be removed from where the qualifying feature is present within the site and from an appropriate distance, to reduce the risk of unintended contact**.

- Under normal operations, **pelagic gears** are not expected to interact with the qualifying feature 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 use of **static bottom-contacting fishing gear** is occurring in the site and has the potential to impact the qualifying feature of the site, but it is not possible to assess the degree of impact. This is 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. **More 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/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 qualifying 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 qualifying feature and therefore integrity 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.