Conservation Objectives and Management Advice for the East of Haig Fras Marine Conservation zone

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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 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 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 high energy circalittoral rock, moderate energy circalittoral rock, subtidal mud, subtidal sand, sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities, subtidal coarse sediment, subtidal mixed sediments mosaic and Fan mussel (*Atrina fragilis*).
Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities are included on the OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining Habitats & Species across the North-east Atlantic.

The conservation objectives for the East of Haig Fras MPA are set out in the 2013 Designation Order, 2016 Designation Order, and 2019 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 and*

With respect to the ***high energy circalittoral rock, moderate energy circalittoral rock, subtidal sand, subtidal mud, subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal mixed sediments mosaic*** *and* ***sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities*** *within the site, this means that their:*

- *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 forming part of or inhabiting the habitats) 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 habitats are sufficiently healthy and resilient to enable recovery. Any alteration of the features brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

With respect to the ***Fan mussel (Atrina fragilis)*** *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 its population is maintained in numbers which enable it to thrive.*

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

Conservation benefits

Maintaining or recovering the protected features of the site at or to favourable condition, will contribute to delivering:

- A network of MPAs around the UK, as outlined under the UK Marine & Coastal Access Act (2009);
- 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;
- Good Environmental Status under the UK Marine Strategy; and
- Target 3 of The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, known as the 30by30 target, which 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.

East of Haig Fras Marine Conservation Zone has been designated to protect the following features representative of the Western Channel and Celtic Sea region: **high energy circalittoral rock, moderate energy circalittoral rock, subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal mixed sediments mosaic, subtidal sand, subtidal mud, Fan mussel (*Atrina fragilis*) and Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities**. The rocky cobbles and boulders found within the site provide habitat for a diverse range of species including hydroids, bryozoans, sponges, cup corals and squat lobsters. Pea urchins are the most common species living in the sediments along with a wide diversity of worm species.

This site provides conservation benefits to the wider marine environment and society by affording protection to a range of broad-scale habitats and their associated biological communities and consequently the provision of the following ecosystem services:

<u>High energy circalittoral rock and Moderate energy circalittoral rock:</u>

- 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.

<u>Sedimentary habitats (Subtidal coarse sediment / Subtidal mixed sediments mosaic, Subtidal sand, Subtidal mud and Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities):</u>

- 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; and
- Climate regulation: Providing a long-term sink for carbon within sedimentary habitats.

Fan mussel (*Atrina fragilis*):

- Scientific study: The study of Atrina shells provides information about changes in sea temperatures in the mid-Piacenzian period (c.3.3–3.0 Ma);
- Regulatory processes: Providing a bentho-pelagic link by removing plankton and detritus from the water column;
- Ecosystem engineering: Fan mussels can provide habitats for benthic communities acting as a substrate for their settlement, increasing their diversity and providing safe areas from predators. They can also promote the growth of species relevant to the fisheries sector. For example, juvenile Pectinids attached to Atrina shells; and
- Climate change regulation: Fan mussels take up carbon from the environment during the process of shell growth.

Managing activities to maintain 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. JNCC's view on the condition of the protected features in the site. 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 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 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
High energy circalittoral rock	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Moderate energy circalittoral rock	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Subtidal mud	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Subtidal sand	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal mixed sediments mosaic	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Fan mussel (*Atrina fragilis*)	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 features 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 features to those pressures, JNCC concludes that all the protected features of the site need 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 features or hindering their recovery **should be permitted**. For **Fan mussel**, note this includes activities capable of impacting the protected feature's **supporting habitat** (subtidal sand, subtidal coarse sediment and subtidal mixed sediments mosaic, and subtidal mud) 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. 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 of the site if **mobile bottom contact gears** are not managed within the site to recover the protected features to favourable condition. Removing all mobile bottom contact gears from within the site would reduce the risk of not continuing to achieve the conservation objectives to the lowest possible levels. JNCC recognise that the Marine Management Organisation (MMO) have brought into force a byelaw to protect the high energy circalittoral rock and moderate energy circalittoral rock protected features of the site. The byelaw prohibits mobile bottom contact gear across the entirety of the site. It therefore affords protection to all of the protected features and thus **no further management of this gear type is advised**. Compliance with the byelaw should support the recovery of all the protected features within the site from impacts associated with this gear type. As such, **bottom-towed fishing gear use within the site should be monitored to ensure compliance with the byelaw.**

- Under normal operating conditions, **pelagic fishing gears** are not expected to interact with the protected features of the site and therefore should not present a risk to the achievement of the conservation objectives. **Therefore, no additional management of this gear type is advised**.

- The use of **static bottom-contacting fishing gear** is occurring within the site**.** It has the potential to impact the protected features 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 protected features. **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 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.