Conservation Objectives and Management Advice for the South Rigg 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:

- moderate energy circalittoral rock;
- subtidal mud;
- subtidal sand;
- sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities;
- subtidal coarse sediment; and
- subtidal mixed sediments.

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 South Rigg 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 and*

With respect to the **moderate energy circalittoral rock, subtidal mud, subtidal sand, sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities, subtidal coarse sediment,** and **subtidal mixed** sediments *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.

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 Sea;
- 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.

South Rigg Marine Conservation Zone has been designated to protect the following features representative of the Irish Sea: the broad-scale habitats; **moderate energy circalittoral rock, subtidal coarse sediment, subtidal sand, subtidal mud, subtidal mixed sediments**; and the habitat Feature of Conservation Importance (FOCI) **sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities**.

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:

Moderate energy circalittoral rock:

- 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.

Sedimentary habitats (subtidal coarse sediment, subtidal sand, subtidal mud, subtidal mixed sediments and sea-pens and burrowing megafauna communities):

- 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; 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, depending on the biogeographic region;

- 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 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
Moderate energy circalittoral rock	Favourable, maintain at favourable condition
Subtidal coarse sediment	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Subtidal sand	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Subtidal mud	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Subtidal mixed sediments	Favourable, maintain at favourable condition
Sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition

The conservation measures listed below set out JNCC's advice regarding management which should be implemented to recover or maintain 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 the protected features; subtidal coarse sediment, subtidal sand, subtidal mud and sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities need to be recovered to favourable condition and that the protected features; moderate energy circalittoral rock and subtidal mixed sediments need to be maintained in favourable condition.

JNCC advise the following conservation measures are adopted to support recovery of protected features; subtidal coarse sediment, subtidal sand, subtidal mud and sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities to favourable condition and maintenance of moderate energy circalittoral rock and subtidal mixed sediments in favourable condition; reducing 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; subtidal coarse sediment, subtidal sand, subtidal mud and sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities or hindering their recovery, **should be permitted**.

- To support their maintenance in favourable condition, **no new licensable activities capable of significantly impacting** (either directly or indirectly) the protected features; moderate energy circalittoral rock and subtidal mixed sediments **should be permitted**. An impact's significance should consider the spatial scale, duration and the relative ecological importance of the area impacted. Longer-lasting impacts to any of the protected features' attributes listed in the site's conservation objectives; extent and distribution, structure and function or supporting processes should be considered significant. Impacts to species considered key or influential to the feature or listed in the OSPAR Threatened and or Declining species list which are present within the feature, could be considered significant. Please see the Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives for the site accessible via the conservation advice section of the Site Information Centre, for more detail about the protected features' attributes.

- **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,** 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.

- 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. If the risk of not achieving the conservation objectives is to be reduced to the lowest possible levels, all mobile bottom contact gears would need to be removed from within the site.

- Under normal operations, **use of pelagic fishing gears** is not expected to interact with any of the protected features within the site. Therefore, **no additional management of this gear type is advised**.

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