

Conservation Objectives and Management Advice for the Geikie Slide and Hebridean Slope Nature Conservation MPA

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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 burrowed mud ([sea-pen and burrowing megafauna communities](#)), [offshore subtidal sands and gravels](#), [offshore deep-sea muds](#), the continental slope large scale feature and Submarine Mass Movement - slide deposits, slide scars geomorphological feature representative of the Geikie Slide [Key Geodiversity Area](#).

The features are [Priority Marine Features](#) (PMFs) in Scotland's seas and sea-pen and burrowing megafauna is included on the [OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining Habitats & Species](#) across the North-east Atlantic.

The conservation objectives for the Geikie Slide and Hebridean Slope MPA are set out in the 2014 [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 burrowed mud, [offshore subtidal sands and gravels](#) and [offshore deep-sea muds](#) 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 of flora and fauna forming part of or inhabiting the habitats) are such as to ensure that they are 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 from such deterioration.
Any alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.*

With respect to the continental slope within the site, this means that its:

- *extent, distribution and structure is maintained;*
- *function is maintained so as to ensure that it continues to support its characteristic biological communities (including the diversity of any species associated with the feature) and use of the site for, but not restricted to, feeding, courtship, spawning, or use as nursery grounds; and*
- *processes supporting the feature is maintained*

Any alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

With respect to the Submarine Mass Movement - slide deposits, slide scars within the site, this means that their:

- a) extent, component elements and integrity are maintained;*
- b) structure and functioning are unimpaired; and*
- c) surface remains sufficiently unobscured for the purposes of determining whether the criteria in paragraphs (a) and (b) are satisfied.*

Any obscuring or alteration brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

Conservation benefits

Conserving or recovering the protected features 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;
- 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 Geikie Slide and Hebridean Slope Nature Conservation MPA has been designated to protect the following features: burrowed mud, offshore subtidal sands and gravels, offshore deep-sea muds, the continental slope large scale feature and slide deposits and slide scars representative of the Geikie Slide Key Geodiversity Area.

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. Consequently, the provision of the following ecosystem services:

Offshore deep-sea muds and burrowed mud:

- Nutrition: the different sediment types offer habitat for various commercial species, for instance mud habitats can be suitable for Norway lobster; and
- Climate regulation: by providing a long-term sink for carbon within sedimentary habitats.

Offshore subtidal sands and gravels:

- Nutrition: the different sediment types offer habitat for various commercial species, for instance mud habitats can be suitable for Norway lobster; and
- 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.

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. 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 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
Burrowed mud	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Offshore subtidal sands and gravels	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Offshore deep-sea muds	Unfavourable, recover to favourable condition
Continental Slope	Favourable, conserve at favourable condition
Submarine Mass Movement - Slide deposits, slide scars	Favourable, conserve at favourable condition

The conservation measures listed below set out JNCC's advice regarding management which should be implemented to recover/conservate 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, we conclude that the protected features; burrowed mud, offshore subtidal sands and gravels and offshore deep-sea muds need to be recovered to favourable condition.

JNCC advise the following conservation measures are adopted to support recovery of these protected features 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; burrowed mud, offshore subtidal sands and gravels and offshore deep-sea muds or hindering their recovery, **should be permitted**.
- To also avoid hindering the recovery of the protected features; burrowed mud, offshore subtidal sands and gravels and offshore deep-sea muds, **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; burrowed mud, offshore subtidal sands and gravels, and offshore deep-sea muds if **mobile bottom contact gears** are not managed within the site to recover the protected features to favourable condition. If the risk to not achieving the site's conservation objectives are to be reduced to the lowest possible levels, **all mobile bottom contact gears would need to be removed from where burrowed mud, offshore subtidal sands and gravels, and offshore deep-sea muds are present within the site**.

- 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 burrowed mud, offshore subtidal sands and gravels, and offshore deep-sea muds 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. **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.**

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 the protected features; continental slope and Submarine Mass Movement - Slide deposits, slide scars need to be conserved in favourable condition.

JNCC advise the following conservation measures are adopted to support conservation of these protected features in 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 obscuring** these large scale, geomorphological and geological features **or significantly impacting** their extent and physical structure, should be permitted. An impact's significance should consider the spatial scale, duration and the relative geological importance of the area impacted, to the protected feature. Impacts, for example, which are long-lasting or result in loss of the protected feature within the site should be considered significant.

- **Fishing activities** are not considered capable of impacting the conservation status of these large-scale, geomorphological and geological protected features and as such **no additional management is advised**.

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