



Scottish Natural Heritage

**SUNART
Site of Special Scientific Interest**

SITE MANAGEMENT STATEMENT

Site code: 8174

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Purpose



This is a public statement prepared by SNH for owners and occupiers of the SSSI. It outlines the reasons it is designated as an SSSI and provides guidance on how its special natural features should be conserved or enhanced. This Statement does not affect or form part of the statutory notification and does not remove the need to apply for consent for operations requiring consent.

We welcome your views on this statement.

This statement is available in Gaelic on request.

Description of the site

Sunart Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is situated in the west of Lochaber and encompasses Loch Sunart and its hinterland. The site supports a range of nationally and internationally important features of nature conservation interest.

The SSSI is notified for the following species and habitats:

Natural features of Sunart SSSI	Condition of feature (and date monitored)	Other relevant designations
Caledonian Igneous	Favourable - maintained (July 2002)	
Tertiary Igneous	Favourable - maintained (February 2007)	
Moine	Favourable - maintained (January 2004)	
Rocky Shore	Favourable - maintained (July 2006)	SAC
Egg wrack (<i>Ascophyllum nodosum</i> <i>ecad mackaii</i>)	Favourable - maintained (July 2006)	
Eel grass bed	Favourable - maintained (July 2006)	
Saltmarsh	Unfavourable - declining (July 2002)	
Upland Oak Woodland	Unfavourable - recovering (October 2001)	SAC
Lichen assemblage	Unfavourable - recovering (October 2001)	

Bryophyte assemblage	Unfavourable - no change (September 2005)	
Dragonfly assemblage	Favourable - maintained (August 2002)	
Chequered skipper (<i>Carterocephalus palaemon</i>)	Favourable - maintained (July 2006)	
Moths	Favourable - maintained (July 2001)	
Upland assemblage	Favourable - maintained (November 2006)	SAC
Vascular plant assemblage	Unfavourable - no change (August 2004)	
Otter (<i>Lutra lutra</i>)	Favourable - maintained (September 2004)	SAC

Features of overlapping Natura sites that are not notified as SSSI natural features	Condition of feature (date monitored)	SPA or SAC
Dry Heaths*	Unfavourable - no change (November 2006)	SAC
Wet Heath*	Unfavourable - no change (November 2006)	SAC

* Although not SSSI natural features in their own right, these habitats are two components of the SSSI natural feature 'upland assemblage'.

Sunart SSSI extends from the Mean Low Water Mark to over 500 metres above sea level at its highest point and forms a continuous border around Loch Sunart from Auliston Point in the south west to the western slopes of Ben Hiant in the North West. Of particular interest within the site are intertidal habitats, both coastal and inland woodland with associated glades, intricate upland mosaics of heath and grassland, coastal grassland, a range of notable plant and animal species and a variety of geological features.

Sunart hosts one of the most extensive areas of ancient native broad-leaved woodland in Britain. The combination of coastal woodlands with the mild maritime climate produces a distinct range of tree and plant species. The woods of the West Highlands are among the richest habitats in Europe for mosses, liverworts and lichens, and Sunart is significant for the number of different species it supports. The upland areas contain intricate mosaics of habitat types with wet and dry heath, grasslands, blanket bog and woodlands. The uninterrupted transitions from marine to woodland habitats is an important feature of this SSSI. Loch Sunart illustrates the varied coastline characteristic of west coast sea lochs, including rock shores interspersed with small saltmarshes and other inter-tidal marine habitats, and is an important habitat for otters. Several elements of the site's geology are of national significance.

The geological features within Sunart SSSI are currently in favourable condition as there has been no apparent deterioration in the visibility and extent of the exposures. However, on the northern side of the loch conifer saplings are colonising notable

outcrops from the adjacent conifer plantation and these are threatening the condition of the rock exposure in places.

The three coastal features: rocky shore, egg wrack and eel grass were all found to be in favourable condition when surveyed in July 2006. Monitoring also revealed that the vast majority of the reef feature was in good condition, with twenty littoral reef biotopes recorded throughout the SSSI area.

Saltmarsh within Sunart SSSI was assessed in 2002 as being in unfavourable condition because of damage to the saltmarsh surface due to poaching by stock, and a long established vehicle route. This problem has been the subject of management changes since the time of the monitoring visit.

The condition of the upland oak woodland, lichen and bryophyte features of Sunart SSSI are assessed as being unfavourable as targets for woodland age structure, amount of deadwood present, regeneration, and abundance of non-native species were not met. The principal problem is the extent of rhododendron which leads to a reduction in the value of the associated lichens and bryophytes. It should be noted work is now well-advanced across many parts of the site to rectify this problem. However there remain some areas still to tackle.

Following surveying in November 2006, the upland assemblage feature was found to be in favourable condition as all the component habitats met their minimum area targets. Although the upland assemblage met its condition target, the results of monitoring indicate that there are some problems with regard to the condition of some components of the feature. These are mainly the result of localised over and under grazing and extensive bracken coverage in parts of the site.

The condition of the 'vascular plant assemblage' feature was assessed as being unfavourable in February 2005 as the targets for the number of populations present and for population size were not met for several species. However, it is possible that some notable species' populations were present but were overlooked due to their small size.

There are notable insect populations throughout the SSSI with the dragonfly assemblage, chequered skipper and the rare New Forest burnet moth all assessed as being in favourable condition. The area favoured by burnet moths is currently subject to a management agreement which involves a controlled grazing regime. However consideration should be given to sympathetic management of all habitats that the insects depend on.

The SSSI is considered to be in favourable condition for otters with the woodlands on the site providing excellent cover and abundant sources of fresh water.

Past and present management

It is clear from a study of historic maps and documents that the Loch Sunart area has had a long history of managed woodland with agricultural settlements and townships in the more open parts of the SSSI. There is evidence to suggest that oak was the favoured species with oak-dominated plantations established, such as in parts of Ariundle, for use in charcoal production for lead and iron furnaces. Following

the decline of the furnaces the woodlands were used more for domestic stock and sporting purposes.

Currently, sheep and cattle are still grazed in many areas of the SSSI and both red and roe deer are present throughout, with several of the larger estates managing their red deer herds as a sporting resource. Some grazing is generally beneficial to the habitats within the SSSI, for example by maintaining woodland glades and preventing scrub encroachment onto heathland.

The SSSI is increasingly being managed for its intrinsic value, through a variety of financial tools and schemes to restore habitats several of which are SNH management agreements. Schemes to remove non-native species and provide recreational and interpretative facilities have been and are being developed. The National Nature Reserves at Ariundle and Glencripesdale are managed to maintain and improve their nature conservation value and to provide opportunities for environmental education and recreational activity in the area. There is also an RSPB reserve at Glenborrodale and this too has woodland conservation and restoration as a management aim.

Sunart is a popular area for recreational activity, both marine based and walking. The current use of the loch by leisure craft does not appear to be causing any significant disturbance to sensitive species such as otters. Several footpaths have recently been constructed within the SSSI, offering opportunities for short walks.

There are several vehicle tracks, sections of road and way-leaves within the SSSI with track-side verges and open way leaves often providing important butterfly glades. Marine fish farming also occurs within Loch Sunart and there are shore bases located around the loch.

Objectives for Management (and key factors influencing the condition of natural features)

We wish to work with the owners and occupiers to protect the site and to maintain and where necessary enhance its features of special interest. SNH aims to carry out site survey, monitoring and research as appropriate to increase our knowledge and understanding of the site and its natural features and to monitor the effectiveness of management agreements.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives oblige Government to avoid, in SACs and SPAs, the deterioration of natural habitats and the habitats of species, as well as disturbance of the species for which the areas have been designated, in so far as such disturbance could be significant in relation to the objectives of these Directives. The objectives below have been assessed against these requirements. All authorities proposing to carry out or permit to be carried out operations likely to have a significant effect on the European interests of this SSSI must assess those operations against the relevant Natura conservation objectives (which are listed on our website through the SNHi - SiteLink facility).

The specific management objectives to safeguard or enhance the nature conservation interests are:-

1. To maintain the favourable condition of the geological features by:

- Maintaining the extent and visibility of, and access to important rock exposures.
- Maintaining the former volcano intact and free from tree or scrub cover is especially important.

2. To maintain the condition of the coastal habitats by:

- safeguarding against pollution and physical damage or smothering.

3. To improve the condition of the saltmarsh by:

- reducing the impact of vehicles and the level of poaching by stock.

4. To restore the favourable condition of the woodland by:

- Removal of rhododendron and subsequent control of regrowth or seedlings.
- By maintaining a balance of deer grazing to allow for natural regeneration without the formation of unduly thick understory.
- Encouraging the expansion of new native woodland onto appropriate ground around the existing woodland, using natural regeneration where possible or by appropriate planting.
- Improving the structure of the woodland by increasing the proportion of saplings and mature trees present for all native species, increasing the quantities of dead wood which is present, and retaining open glades.
- Safeguarding against fire damage.

5. To maintain the favourable condition of the upland assemblage by:

- Preventing any significant reduction in the overall extent and quality of upland habitats and encouraging the diversification of heathland structure through appropriate grazing management.

6. To maintain or improve the condition of the vascular plant assemblage through:

- Appropriate management of the habitat.

7. To safeguard the condition of the non-vascular plant features by:

- Maintaining or improving the structure of the woodland habitat.
- Improving the condition of the lichen feature by continuing to control the regeneration of non-native species (rhododendron).

8. To maintain the favourable condition of the invertebrate species by:

- Maintaining a mixed habitat structure, including glades, dense cover and plentiful food plants.
- Safeguarding against fire.

9. To maintain the favourable condition of otters by:

- Preventing any reduction in the overall number of active holts.
- Preventing any loss of intertidal foraging habitat.
- Avoiding undue disturbance.