



# Assessment of the Condition of Features in Marine Protected Areas

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# Foreword

This Technical Information Note (TIN) has been prepared to help inform you about the process Natural England undertakes when analysing and assessing the condition of features within our Marine Protected Areas to ascertain if feature and site-specific conservation objective targets have been met.

## Overview

In 2016, Natural England trialled and rolled out a new condition assessment methodology that provides robust results and information on the condition of marine features within Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Natural England's Area Teams, who as site leads are very familiar with their sites, as well as the past and ongoing monitoring projects and other evidence sources, conduct these assessments following a standardised approach. The method assesses if feature- and site-specific targets that are set out in the sites' Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives (SACOs) have been met.

The marine condition assessment process is applicable to all fully marine features that lie seawards of mean high water. This excludes saltmarsh, sand dunes, vegetated coastal shingle/driftlines and vegetated cliffs, but includes coastal and saline lagoons, intertidal reef and intertidal sediments. The methodology will be developed to also assess the condition of species, including mobile species, in the future.

Assessments for the first sites have been completed, and several others are currently assessed by the Area Teams. To date, condition assessments have been carried out for marine habitat features of a number of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). Marine habitat features in other SACs will be assessed in the future. Different processes are currently in place to report on the condition of features in Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), and on the condition of non-marine habitat features and species features of SACs. The method will be trialled for these cases in the future.

## Uses and Benefits of Condition Assessments

The results from completed assessments have multiple uses:

- They inform if the Conservation Objectives for the site have been achieved;
- They inform future monitoring needs for the site, enabling Area Teams to focus on activities or pressures that are found to cause significant impacts, thus shifting focus to tackle wide scale problems that may have previously not been noticed;
- Information on the condition of marine features is required for statutory reporting obligations, e.g. Marine and Coastal Access Act (MaCAA) or OSPAR convention reporting;

- It enables Natural England staff to gain knowledge about the sites' features, Supplementary Advice on Conservation Objectives (SACO), the available evidence, knowledge gaps and key issues.
- Stakeholders and managers can use the condition assessment results to determine management efforts

## The Marine Condition Assessment Process

The condition assessment process for marine features is designed to assess if feature- and site-specific Conservation Objective targets have been met. The Conservation Objectives have been supplied by the Area Teams for each site, are summarised in the SACO for the sites and are available on the pages of a particular site on the Natural England Designated Sites View (DSV) website at <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/>. The assessment process follows four main steps listed below.

### Step 1: Evidence gathering and scoring

The Natural England officer undertaking the assessment first needs to review all available evidence. The evidence should be as recent as possible, and ideally from within the last 6 years. Older evidence sources can be used if more recent data are not available, but in those cases expert judgement will be applied to assess if these data are likely still accurate.

Evidence used in the condition assessments can be direct monitoring information as well as modelled evidence. These can stem from Natural England's in-house monitoring projects and contracted surveys, data sources from other agencies (for example data from the Environment Agency), academic studies, citizen science projects, open access data, or expert/ site knowledge. The assessor will give each evidence source a quality score (low, medium or high), based on how relevant and robust the data are, and how well they provide direct information on the Conservation Objectives of the feature and site.

### Step 2: Attribute assessment

Based on the available evidence, the assessor then evaluates if the Conservation Objectives are given a 'pass' or 'fail' against the targets that are listed in the SACO of the site. The assessment is also given a confidence score (high, medium, low). This confidence score is based on the quality score of the evidence source used, and, in cases where multiple data sources were used for the assessment, whether results of these data sources were largely matching. The most recent assessment for the attribute, as well as all details on all evidence sources used and confidence scores given, are available for viewing on the marine condition assessment pages in the DSV.

## Step 3: Subfeature assessment

Once all of the attributes of a subfeature are assessed, the results are used to assign one condition category to the subfeature and this is also recorded directly in the DSV. The condition categories are listed in Annex I. The decision on the category assigned to the subfeature is based on the number of failed Conservation Objectives of the particular subfeature, and if these were classed as principal or secondary attributes or Conservation Objectives. This weighting of attributes is used for this marine condition assessment method to help determine each attribute's relative contribution to the condition of the subfeature. Definitions for the attribute categories are in the Annex II. If one principal attribute (i.e. Conservation Objective) is found to fail to meet its target, the assessor puts the whole subfeature in unfavourable condition. In case of secondary attributes, a 'two out, all out' approach is recommended as broad guidance (i.e., two secondary attributes need to fail for the subfeature to be in unfavourable condition). These rules however are subject to expert judgement; for example, where the assessor feels that failure of one principal or two secondary attributes does not affect the overall conservation interest of the feature (e.g. the changes noted are actually of minor significance), the subfeature may still be assigned favourable condition. Equally, the failure of only one secondary attribute can lead to 'unfavourable condition' of the subfeature, where this creates serious concern. Assessors will have to clear this decision with their Senior Adviser and provide a rationale if this was the case, which is also stored and accessible on DSV. Most generally, the approach of 'one out, all out' (principal attribute) or 'two out, all out' (secondary attribute) is followed.

To identify the trend within the unfavourable condition categories (unfavourable recovering, no change, declining, or unknown), the assessors are asked to use time series data if available, information on management measures that are in place, as well as evidence on activities, pressures and the sensitivity of the subfeature to these activities and pressures.

The decisions and judgements made to reach the subfeature assessments, along with a rationale and the supporting evidence, are accessible on DSV. Also, you can find information on adverse condition reasons, condition threats and management measures of the subfeatures at the site there.

There may be occasions where there is sufficient spatial information to support a more detailed assessment of the area of the subfeature in unfavourable/not good condition, compared to the area in other condition categories. For example, the assessor may know that there is some discrepancy between the one condition category assigned for the whole subfeature based on the attribute assessment, and the condition of a specific area within the subfeature. This limits the risks of over-reporting the area of the feature in unfavourable condition. Such details on spatial differences are also captured on the subfeature assessment form on DSV. This step is not obligatory in the condition assessment process. In all cases where such information is available, there was still one 'overall' condition category assigned to the subfeature: unfavourable condition is assigned

if one or more attributes failed (depending on the attribute category) and if >5% of the area of the subfeature were affected.

## Step 4: Feature assessment

Multiple condition categories can be assigned to a feature within a site. Each feature category is reported as proportion of the overall feature area and all categories, including 'unknown/ unassessed' condition add up to 100%. For each feature within each SAC, this is done by aggregating the subfeature level results in one of two possible ways:

- i) Subfeature assessments are aggregated by using the one, assigned condition category for each subfeature, and the proportion of the spatial area that each subfeature takes up within the feature. This is done if the whole subfeature area is in the same condition (justifying one condition category per subfeature), or if detailed spatial data on areas in the various condition categories are lacking; OR
- ii) If more detailed spatial evidence of the subfeature areas in the various condition categories is available, then the 'actual areas' of the subfeature in the various condition categories can be used to calculate the proportions of the feature in the various condition categories.

For marine features without subfeatures (Marine Conservation Zone features, SAC 'Coastal lagoons', SAC 'Submerged or partially submerged sea caves'), features are assessed in the same way as for features with subfeatures, however the process only comprises Steps 1 and 2 above. All attributes apply to the whole feature (feature-wide attributes) and the same attribute assessment rules apply. There can be one or multiple condition categories for the feature, depending on whether detailed spatial data were available

Feature-wide attributes are also present for features with subfeatures. These need consideration at a broader ecological scale, even if the attribute has already been assessed for one or more of the component subfeatures. They are reviewed at the feature level once the subfeature assessments have been completed, with the aim of double checking that the results for each subfeature reflect the condition of the parent feature as a whole.

The results for the feature level assessment are provided as percentage of the feature area in the different condition categories and this information is also available on DSV.

## Updating Condition Assessments

It is the aim that the condition assessments for features in protected sites are updated regularly as new information may become available that could inform on the condition of the subfeatures and features and on changes occurring since the last assessment has been undertaken. It is up to the Area Teams to decide when and how often to consider a formal re-assessment for all the features in the site. However, there are occasions where it is suggested to formally review all attributes of all features and sub-features within the site. These occasions may be:

- A new evidence source, such as results from a large monitoring survey, has become available.
- Reporting requirements, such as for UK Habitats Regulations or the Marine and Coastal Access Act, may call for an updated report on the condition of features inside (as well as outside) the network of MPAs
- The site's conservation advice package is updated for reasons other than a completed marine assessment

# **Annex I. Condition categories that are assigned to the sub-feature and features.**

## **Favourable**

The (sub) feature is considered to be adequately conserved, as all evidence analysed through attribute assessments result in the principal attributes for the (sub) feature meeting their targets. The SACO sets the minimum targets for the (sub) feature and there may also still be scope for the further (voluntary) enhancement of the (sub) feature, beyond the requirements of the directive.

## **Unfavourable-recovering**

Where the criteria for favourability have not been met, the (sub) feature is considered in part or whole to be unfavourable, but management is in place as agreed through competent authorities and it is seen to be making progress towards the recovery of the (sub) feature. It is the expert judgement of the assessor that a recovery will occur in due course.

## **Unfavourable-no change**

Where the criteria for favourability have not been met, the (sub) feature is considered in part or whole to be unfavourable. No management is in place to reverse or improve the condition. Common Standards Monitoring also discusses that even if some work is underway to make improvements with regards to some attributes, but not enough to deliver a full recovery, it should be considered as “no change” rather than recover.

## **Unfavourable- declining**

Where the criteria for favourable have not been met, the (sub) feature is considered in part or whole to be unfavourable. No management is in place to reverse or improve the condition. There is either evidence that there is a continued decline in the condition of the (sub) feature, or inference made that damaging activity is continuing and likely to be leading to a continued decline in the condition. Recovery is possible if suitable management input is made.

## **Unfavourable- unknown**

Where the criteria for favourable have not been met, the (sub) feature is considered in part or whole to be unfavourable. The trend (recovering, no change, declining) is not known, e.g. due to uncertainties about whether management efforts that are in place have an effect, or rather need improving.



## **Part destroyed**

Where the criteria for favourable have not been met and lasting damage has occurred to part of the designated (sub) feature so that it has been irretrievably lost and regardless of whether management is in place or not, there is evidence of partial, lasting damage to the feature.

## **Destroyed**

The available evidence confirms there is complete and lasting damage to the entire (sub) feature, with no chance of recovery. Ideally this will be backed up by evidence of cause and effect. Where long lasting loss of the (sub) feature is due to natural change, this should be highlighted, and a process to report such change may be a preferable option.

# **Annex II. Categories assigned to each attribute**

## **Principal Attribute**

Physical descriptions of the (sub) feature, and directly inform on the condition of the (sub) feature. These mainly describe their extent, distribution and structure (categories of the attributes in the SACOs), but could include other types of attribute for some (sub) features.

## **Secondary Attribute**

Aspects of the (sub) feature, which are indirectly related to the (sub) feature condition, or which could pose a significant risk to the condition of the (sub) feature if not managed. These indicators are likely to be mainly the supporting processes or functions of the (sub) feature. Where such attributes are not being met it does not necessarily mean that the (sub) feature is already unfavourable, but they do indicate issues which needs to be managed to prevent deterioration of the (sub) feature.

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