
**PROPOSED SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AND SPECIAL PROTECTION
AREA FOR BIRDS
ORONSAY AND SOUTH COLONSAY**

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1 Scottish Natural Heritage has invited the Council to respond to a proposal to designate a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), and a Special Protection Area for Birds (SPA) under the European Union Habitats Directive, in respect of land to the south of Colonsay including the island of Oronsay. The Council's views are to be forwarded to SNH who are undertaking the consultation process, the results of which will be sent to the Scottish Ministers.

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Council should not raise objections to the proposed designations.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Habitats Directive seeks the establishment of a network of *Natura 2000* sites to conserve natural habitats and species of plants and animals which are rare, endangered or vulnerable in the European Community. The network is to include two types of area, namely, Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's) to support rare, endangered or vulnerable natural habitats and species of plants or animals, and Special Protection Areas (SPA's) to support significant numbers of wild birds and their habitats.
- 3.2 The proposal is to designate part of the south of Colonsay, most of the island of Oronsay and the intertidal strand as an SPA, with a slightly larger area including the skerries to the south of Oronsay being designated as an SSSI. There is a range of habitat included within the areas proposed to be designated including wet heathland, marshy grassland and improved pasture; but it is the wind blown shell sands and dune grasslands (machair) which are the most significant in nature conservation terms. Careful management of grazing and timing of vegetation cutting are required in order to sustain current bird populations.
- 3.3 The proposed qualifying interests for the SPA are chough (2001 – 2005 winter peak mean of 47 individuals and 4 breeding pairs), and corncrake (2001 -2004 average 16 calling males). The notified natural features in terms of the proposed SSSI designation are, machair, sand dune, chough, corncrake and grey seal. Designation is warranted in view of the international significance of the bird populations present. The Oronsay headland and associated skerries are of national importance in terms of their grey seal population.
- 3.4 The purpose of the designations is to maintain nature conservation in the area by avoiding significant disturbance and supporting grazing management to maintain habitats in a suitable condition to support the resident populations.

On Colonsay, the land is owned by the Colonsay Estate and is farmed by two tenant farmers who have agreements in place with SNH to manage the land in support of the chough and corncrake populations. Oronsay is managed as a farm by the RSPB with nature conservation objectives in mind. The Oronsay machair is already designated as an SAC.

4. CONSEQUENCES OF DESIGNATION

- 4.1 In the event of development being proposed within an SPA, the Council is required by legislation to undertake an 'appropriate assessment' to determine whether 'qualifying interests' would be adversely affected as a consequence of proposed works. In practice, advice is sought from SNH as to the likely effects of development upon protected species and their comments and recommendations inform the Council's assessment of the nature conservation implications of development.
- 4.2 The EU Habitats Directive requires that only scientific factors can be taken into account in designations. Both SNH and the Scottish Executive are, however, aware of the socio-economic impact of designations, particularly where they are widespread in areas such as this. There is therefore a commitment to implementing the SAC programme through positive partnerships with those who live and work on the land. In terms of restrictions on development, it is often possible through discussion to modify potentially damaging proposals to avoid adverse impacts upon designated areas.
- 4.3 As part of the designation process, Circular 6/1995 requires planning authorities to consider extant planning consents within proposed designations and to consider whether the implementation of such consents would have a significant effect on the ecological value of sites. The southern part of Colonsay and Oronsay are areas which are subject to any significant pressure for development. Most of the land within the proposed SPA/SSSI is identified as 'sensitive countryside' or 'very sensitive countryside' in the 'Argyll and Bute Local Plan (Modified Finalised Plan) 2006', where development opportunities will, in any event, be extremely limited in planning policy terms. There are no extant planning consents within the proposed SPA/SSSI.

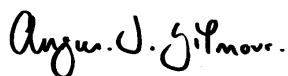
5 IMPLICATIONS

Policy: The proposal is consistent with the sustainability principles of the Argyll & Bute Structure Plan and the biodiversity objectives of the Argyll & Bute Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

Financial: None

Personnel: None

Equal Opportunities: None



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