



Sandwood Management Plan

2020-2022



JOHN
MUIR
TRUST

Vision

To safeguard Sandwood's wild landscape for current and future generations to enjoy, and for the benefit of the rich diversity of wildlife it supports. The Trust seeks to work closely with crofting tenants, neighbours and partners to engage in collaborative projects that contribute to the wellbeing of the community, encourage people to enjoy wild places, and enhance biodiversity.

Key objectives *(with link to John Muir Trust Strategy Priorities in italics)*

1. Promote participation in the John Muir Award and volunteering on the property (*IC06; 3&9*) & (*IC16; 1,3&10*)
2. Involve the local community in the Estate's management and through engagement work (*IC09; 4&8*)
3. Provide interpretation, information and opportunities for the local community and visitors to engage more broadly with the property and the Trust's work (*IC11; 1,9&10*)
4. Use the property as a platform to enable Partnership working and pursuit of joint projects with local organisations and initiatives (*IC17; 2,4&5*)
5. Work to restore natural processes, particularly those that will contribute towards the protection and management of designated features (*RR01; 10,11&12*)
6. Engagement in partnerships to facilitate path restoration and repair, habitat and landscape enhancement (*RR03; 9,11&12*)

Facts and figures

Size: 4,703 hectares (11,621 acres)

Tenure: The entirety of the property is under crofting tenure, divided into three different grazings: Oldshoremore, Oldshorebeg and Sheigra. NB – The Oldshoremore machair, between the Abhainn Aisir Mhòr burn and the march dyke between Oldshorebeg and Oldshoremore grazings form part of Rhiconich Estate.

Management Agreements: The Trust has a duty to prepare and adhere to a Management Plan, subject to regular reviews, as a condition of the grant assistance provided by Scottish Natural Heritage and the National Heritage Memorial Fund which enabled the Trust's purchase of the Estate.

Wayleaves: Various (further detail available in the appendices)

Statement of significance

Landscape Description

Sandwood Estate is located in North West Sutherland, approximately 80 miles north-west of Inverness. The Estate comprises a range of habitat and landscape characteristics, and includes a number of small islands off its coast.

The property has several important designated natural heritage features within and neighbouring the boundary, most significantly;

- Machair and sand dune habitats
- Peatland and alpine heath habitats
- Remote upland, peatland and coastal areas
- Sandwood Bay is particularly significant as it has had little human intervention and disturbance

Natural Heritage Designations

The significance of some the habitat and species present are recognised by various designations;

- **Sheigra-Oldshoremore Special site of Scientific Interest (SSSI)**: 157 ha out of 251ha (favourably maintained)
- **Southern Parphe Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)**; 1131 ha out of 5286 in total (3 features favourably maintained, Alpine heath and blanket bog unfavourable recovering due to management)
- **Oldshoremore and Sandwood Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)**; 292 ha out of 446ha total (favourable maintained)

Geology

Sandwood Estate's geology is predominantly Torridonian gritstone, sandstone and conglomerate with some outcrops of Lewisian Gneiss - one of the oldest rocks in the world - located along the south-western coastal strip, north of Sandwood Bay, and at the eastern end of the Estate. A rare and fascinating palaeosol can also be found on an exposed area of cliff north of Sheigra. This is an ancient 'soil' that has been sandwiched between the Lewisian Gneiss and Torridonian Sandstone for around 300,000,000 years.

Geomorphology

Sandwood Bay is the largest beach and dune system in North-West Sutherland and one of the most isolated major dune systems in Britain. At the lowest tide, a beach of almost 3 km long and up to 250m wide is exposed, with dunes rising behind to a height of 15-60 metres. The entire beach system is naturally unstable and highly dynamic, with relatively little human interference.

Local Habitats

A wide and diverse range of habitats can be found on the Estate, from the coastal dune systems to the alpine heath and peatlands. This range of habitats allows many species to thrive in this remote and relatively undisturbed area.

Peatlands

The Estate has large areas of mires, blanket bog and lochans interspersed by rocky outcrops and lochans / pools. These peatlands are among the most north-westerly 'flows' in Britain. A wide range of topographical features are present, including peat mounds, erosion hags, hummocks, sphagnum hollows and drought sensitive pools.

Some areas of the peatlands that have been adversely affected by uncontrolled burning, grazing and drainage in previous years and continue to be dominated by species-poor deer grass / cotton grass communities. A decline in crofting has led to a reduction in the number of sheep and cattle grazing with flocks tend to stick to the areas of better grazing along the coast.

Coast

Dynamic sand dunes, machair and rugged cliffs are found along the Estate's coastline. The dunes and machair support an extremely species-rich range of calcareous coastal vegetation containing flushes and fens. Within the Sheigra-Oldshoremore machair alone,

there are around 200 species of flowering plants and a great diversity of bryophytes and lichens.

Woodland

Small pockets of trees are found across the Estate, mostly consisting of one or two trees clinging to rocky ledges inaccessible to larger herbivores. Allt Briste is the most extensively wooded area on the estate, composed of birch, aspen, hazel, rowan and eared willow with many species of woodland plants. Part of the Oldshorebeg Grazings, this area was planted with native trees under the Crofter Forestry Scheme in 1998.

Species

Notable species present on the Estate include red deer, mountain hare, water vole, bank vole, badger, fox, otter, pipistrelle bat, stoat and weasel. Red tailed bumble bee and the great yellow bumblebee are rare species found on the Estate.

A number of marine species can be seen from the coast, including grey seals, Risso's dolphin, common, white-sided and bottle nosed dolphin, porpoise, and occasionally minke and killer whale.

There are also large undisturbed areas of coastline which attract breeding birds such as guillemots, common / arctic terns, razorbills, puffins, shags, fulmar and kittiwake. The corncrake used to be numerous in the area breeding within hayfields on the machair, but they have not been present as a breeding bird since 1996.

Red-throated divers, golden plover, dunlin, common sandpiper, meadow-pipits and skylarks are numerous on the open moorland. The estate is also an important stop over site for migratory birds such as redwings, fieldfares, whooper swan, barnacle and greylag geese.

Many of these species are listed as 'Red' or 'Amber' under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UP BAP). Their presence on the estate is therefore an important indicator to the diverse and healthy nature of habitats present.

History of Settlement & Land Use

Sandwood Estate is entirely under crofting tenure with around one hundred people still occupying the south-western shores. Evidence of past land modification can be seen in the peatlands where drainage channels have left scars across areas of a landscape otherwise bearing little evidence of past human occupation.

The area around Sandwood Bay contains hospitable and fertile ground and was at one time inhabited; the oldest ruins on the Estate can be found here, along with the more recent ruins of Sandwood House. Areas of machair on the common grazings have been extensively cultivated and grazed for centuries.

Today the general public's main interaction with the property is through recreational walking on the open hills, peatlands and on the track out to and on Sandwood Bay itself.

Pressures

The North-West Highlands as a whole have seen a considerable increase in tourism and visitor numbers in recent years, in part due to the North Coast 500. Increased visitor numbers provide an opportunity to engage more people directly with the Trust's work and potentially to get involved through volunteering, whilst also making an important contribution to the local economy. Due to the increased footfall, more direct impacts on the path network and wider local infrastructure, as well as more general impacts such as littering and increased road traffic, are being experienced.

Consultation and review

The revision of this plan, following the previous (2014-2019 version), has been informed through consultation and engagement with the local community, neighbouring land-owners, and wider Trust membership and staff teams. It is the Trust's intention that consultation remains an ongoing process with opportunities provided for input and feedback throughout the plan's three-year timeframe.

Operations

1.0 Management Planning

1.1 Audit existing state and condition

- Information gathered previously, and available in appendices
- Digitising maps to illustrate/identify all man-made structures, Gaelic place names, plus existing woodland and remnants with a view to identifying planting / enhancement opportunities

1.2 Establish survey and monitoring programme

- Continue current programme of annual monitoring of habitats and species surveys
- Consider use of fixed-point photography to monitor machair and dunes at Sheigra, Oldshoremore, Oldshorebeg and Sandwood Bay
- Sharing data with National Databases etc

1.3 Develop SMART Actions – within revised management plan

1.4 Consult stakeholders – arrange annual event in Kinlochbervie and attend appropriate local events. Locally based staff are always available for concerns, suggestions & comments

2.0 Soil, carbon and water

2.5 Maximise Water table on peatlands

- Peatland restoration; explore possibilities with SNH – through the Peatland Action Fund, and smaller scale work that can be undertaken in house; drain blocking etc

2.6 Minimise exposure, burning and grazing – No burning is undertaken on the property

2.7 Minimise Pollution – Remove any litter when on site, and work parties undertake litter picks

3.0 Biodiversity and woodland

3.8 Maintain in favourable condition

- Undertake work to maintain/repair fences where appropriate on existing enclosures

3.9 Maximise native habitats

- Consider new planting opportunities; Shinary River, possible planting with mix of native broadleaves; in conjunction with and pending approval from common grazing committee
- Consider experimental enclosure for juniper (link to opportunities from woodland mapping)
- Explore opportunities for grants and support for crofters wishing to undertake management to maximise habitat for corncrake and other species

3.10 Biodiversity Species Management

- Develop and implement a control strategy for mink; if suspicion of presence in the area

3.11 Re-structure woodland – n/a

3.12 Re-introductions – consider where appropriate as part of national schemes

4.0 Deer and Woodland

4.13 Minimise deer impacts

- Ongoing programme of culling and extraction for the purpose of encouraging natural woodland regeneration and improvement to habitat condition.
- Annual culls are undertaken by John Muir Trust property staff, and when necessary local contractors, in co-operation with NWSDMG
- Collect and analyse relevant data; foot counts, recruitment counts, helicopter counts

4.14 Leave deer carcasses for eagles

- Leave a small (TBC) number of carcasses each year, as per moorland management agreements

4.15 Minimise livestock impacts

- Liaison with Oldshoremore, Oldshorebeg and Sheigra Common Grazing Committees

5.0 Facilities and heritage

5.16 Staff Training Plan

- Develop a training plan, to assist with delivery of land management objectives

5.17 Infrastructure and heritage maintenance

- Footpaths: Continue volunteer work party input to footpath maintenance, and continue to monitor usage, with recently installed people counter at the start of the Sandwood Bay track
- Blairmore Car Park & WC block: Consider an expansion of the Car Park, towards Sheigra, with an overhaul/expansion of the loo block to include a ranger hut type facility / local info, and possible replacement of the septic tank

- Sandwood House; consider appropriate response to recent east end gable collapse
- Kinlochbervie Coastguard Hut; factor in any repair works required

5.18 Reduce, re-use and recycle – Trust wide audit being undertaken through 2020, with actions to be incorporated into this plan thereafter.

5.19 Minimise carbon footprint – As above. In the interim seek to reduce vehicle usage and utilise technology to enable online meetings.

5.20 Explore local renewable energy – if / where appropriate

5.21 Remove redundant structures – old fence lines, if / where appropriate

5.22 Sensitive new build techniques – N/A

5.23 Sensitive footpath techniques

- Undertake repairs and upgrades as required, Amber Survey of the main path leading to Sandwood Bay to be undertaken in 2020

6.0 Communities, visitors and awareness

6.24 Provide responsible access – consider a ‘Day of Access’ project for individuals/groups with a specific disability that would otherwise prevent them from accessing the bay/dunes/wilder areas

6.25 Meet responsibilities towards local people

- Hold open meetings; planned for November 2019, and annually
- Use local contractors where possible, as appropriate with funding procurement guidelines
- Attend relevant meetings of local organisations, including Kinlochbervie Community Council
- Liaise with neighbours, through the North-West Sutherland Deer Management Group, and one to one as appropriate

6.26 Joint Project Work

- Contribute to relevant regional projects and events, as appropriate
- Seek to establish the Hill to Grill Programme with Kinlochbervie High School
- Liaise with the Scottish Natural Heritage team in Ullapool
- North-West Highlands Geopark; develop a Memorandum of Understanding and explore joint initiatives

6.27 Maximise Interpretation

- Review and update leaflets, ensure dispensers are re-filled regularly
- Review and maintain interpretation panels (2019 refresh) consider further signage as required/appropriate; possibly with regards location and use of bike racks on the Sandwood track
- Consider providing interpretation in Gaelic

6.28 Maximise education opportunities

- Continue with annual programme of events and guided walks, consider new subject areas based on ideas/feedback
- Participate in wider events, eg Durness Games, and others as appropriate
- Consider resurrection of the John Muir Trust North-West Members' Group
- Develop programme of events with Kinlochbervie High School
- Target for delivery of John Muir Awards on/in conjunction with the property: 25 per year.

Targets for delivery

1	2	3	4	Sandwood	
				Target	Actual
3	Management Planning	Baseline Data Surveys	No. identified and achieved	11	
4		Habitat Monitoring	No. identified and achieved	6	
5		Species Monitoring	No. identified and achieved	5	
6	Soil, Carbon & Water	Peatland Restoration	Ha of peatland restored	0	
7		Minimise pollution	No. of litter picks undertaken	8	
8			Tonnes / no. of bags removed	100	
9	Biodiversity & Woodland	Designated Features	Features in favourable condition	3	
10		Designated Sites	Site status improvement	1	
11		Native Woodland	ha of native woodland planted	0.25	
12		Native Woodland	ha of native woodland maintained	0	
13		Native Woodland	ha of native woodland regen	0	
14		Plantations	ha of conifer plantation felled	0	
15	Deer & Livestock	Cull targets	Stag target achieved - Y/N		
16		Cull targets	Hind target achieved - Y/N		
17		Leave carcasses	no. left on the hill		
18	Facilities & Heritage	Path maintenance	kms of path maintained	6.5	
19		Path repair/upgrade	kms of path repaired/upgraded	0.5	
20		Conservation volunteering	no. person days of volunteering	4	
21	Communities, Visitors & Awareness	Public meetings held	no. of meetings held	1	
22		Projects / Partnerships	no. projects / p'ships engaged with / deliv	3	
23		Interpretation	no. of new panels/leaflets/virtual tours	0	
24		Engagement	no. of guided walks / events	10	
25		Education	no. of school groups hosted/engaged wi	3	
26		Education	no. of college groups hosted/engaged wi	1	
27		John Muir Award	no. of JMAs facilitated	25	
28	Other - JMT General	Communication	no. articles / updates written	6	
29		Local Employment	no. of staff days per property	390	

Links to the John Muir Trust's Strategy

Inspire; 4. By growing public support for wild places, including in communities that live within or close to wild land areas.

Protect; 9. By better managing and engaging with visitors across all the properties and places in our care.

Repair; 10. By setting measurable targets for progress across each of our properties underpinned by realistic funding, and to demonstrate long-term wild land management in action.

Repair; 11. By using our Wild Ways programme to showcase the practical work we do to enrich public access to some of our most famous wild landscapes, and to build public and political support for additional funding of footpath work.