

Draft Fisheries Assessment - Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA

August 2024

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Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction	3
1.1 Scope of the Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA assessment.....	3
1.2 Site description	3
1.3 Activities assessed	6
2. Part A Assessment – Fisheries Screening	7
2.1 Fisheries screening overview	7
2.2 Activities taking place within Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA	8
2.3 Part A Conclusion	9
3. Management Options	9
4. Monitoring and review	9
5. Conclusion	10

Executive Summary

The scope of this fisheries assessment is the [Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA](#), located in a deep-water basin to the far west of Scotland. The purpose of this assessment is to determine whether the current levels of fishing activity occurring within the site are compatible with the conservation objectives of the Hatton Rockall Basin NCMPA.

The protected features of the site are offshore deep-sea muds, deep-sea sponge aggregations and sediment drifts and polygonal faults representative of Hatton Bank (and adjacent sea floor) key geodiversity area. The conservation objective for the NCMPA is 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.

In Part A, fishing activities currently occurring within the site (data from 2015 – 2019) were screened and grouped into aggregated gear types. Throughout this draft fisheries assessment the data from 2015-2019 is referred to as the current levels of activity. Fishing activity which occurs within the site was derived using vessel monitoring system (VMS) data from 2015 – 2019. No fishing activity was found to occur within the site and thus no pressure-feature interactions were identified and was not taken forward for further assessment. As no fisheries activity with the potential to have a likely significant effect on the protected feature, or an adverse effect on site integrity were identified, no further fisheries management options were considered.

The [NEAFC Recommendation 19 : 2014 on area management measures for the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems in the NEAFC Regulatory Area, as amended](#), requires that any new fishing activity would require an environmental assessment to show damage would not be caused to Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs), which in this case constitutes one of the protected features of the site: deep-sea sponge aggregations. Under the same recommendation an area in the north of Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA is also closed to bottom fisheries to protect VMEs, namely deep-sea sponge aggregations.

Further restrictions under The Common Fisheries Policy and Animals (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 Statutory Instrument (S.I.) 2019, No. 1312 (amending S.I. 2019, No. 753) prohibit the use of bottom-set gillnets, entangling nets, and trammel nets at depths greater than 200 meters.

Considering the management already within the site and there are no fishing activities occurring which are deemed to be capable of affecting the protected features of the site. Scottish Ministers conclude that no further management is required to enable progress to be made towards achieving the conservation objectives for Hatton Rockall Basin NCMPA.

The decision of any management to be taken forward will be made following a statutory public consultation exercise and will be taken in the light of all relevant obligations incumbent upon the Scottish Ministers in relation to the exercise of their functions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Scope of the Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA assessment

The geographic scope of this assessment covers the whole of [Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA](#). The purpose of this assessment is to determine whether the current levels of fishing activity occurring within the site are compatible with the conservation objectives of the Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA.

In this assessment, Scottish Ministers use the best available evidence to review the site characteristics and current fishing activity (Part A), both taken alone and in combination with other relevant activities (Part C), to determine if the fishing activities are capable of affecting the protected features (deep-sea sponges and offshore deep-sea muds). Any fishing activities capable of affecting the protected features, either alone or in combination with other activities, are considered further to assess whether they would or might hinder achievement of the conservation objectives (Part B).

Where there is the potential for the achievement of the conservation objectives to be hindered, management measures are identified for the site by Scottish Ministers. These measures are considered in light of the conservation objectives, biological characteristics of the protected features, current fishing activity, other activity levels and existing fisheries restrictions for Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA. A final decision on which measures, if any, are to be adopted, will follow upon a statutory consultation exercise and will take into account all relevant statutory obligations incumbent upon Scottish Ministers.

A methodology document has been prepared to aid understanding of these assessments.

1.2 Site description

[The Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA](#) (Figure 1) is a site situated in a deep-water basin to the far west of Scotland covering 1,256 km². The site is located between Hatton Bank to the west and Rockall Bank to the east and water depth at the site is over 1 km. This site has been protected to protect the habitats deep-sea sponge aggregations and offshore deep-sea muds; both are considered Priority Marine Features (PMFs) in Scotland's seas.

Deep-sea sponge aggregations are on the OSPAR list of Threatened and/or Declining habitats & species and are considered to be Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs). There are two different types of deep-sea sponge aggregations known to be present within the site; aggregations dominated by encrusting sponges and bird's nest sponge (*Pheronema carpenteri*) fields. The bird's nest sponge fields within the site are the only known examples to occur in UK waters. The encrusting sponge aggregation is typified by encrusting grey sponges living on boulders and mud substrata.

Both types of deep-sea sponge aggregations act as biodiversity hotspots, with a range of other species associated with them. For the bird's nest sponge fields, these include ascidians, formaniferans, polychaetes and burrowing anemones, while the encrusting sponge aggregations include anemones, ascidians, crinoids and ophiuroids. The seabed in the area is littered with spicules, spiny remnants of dead sponges, that inhibit the establishment of burrowing animals but allow surface-dwelling species to thrive. For example, beds of brittlestars are present, which live on the surface of the seabed, filtering food from passing currents.

Offshore deep-sea mud habitat is predicted to be present throughout the Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA and is another of the site's protected features. It is predicted that there are two different types of offshore deep-sea mud habitat in the NCMPA. The majority of it is believed to be "Atlantic mid bathyal mud and sandy mud", but this encompasses a patch of "Atlantic upper bathyal mud and sandy mud". There is little information on the level of biological diversity and composition of communities supported by the offshore deep-sea mud habitats in the MPA, however limited survey data support the presence of habitat that is dominated by different species of burrowing anemone as well as echinoderms such as starfish, sea cucumbers and sea urchins.

A series of unique geological features known as polygonal faults are also included for protection within the site. Polygonal faults are cracks in the seafloor, similar in appearance to those on a sun scorched desert. Usually, polygonal faulting occurs below the seafloor, but the faults in the Hatton-Rockall Basin are present on the surface of the seabed, making this a unique example of the feature. The hard edges of these cracks may facilitate the aggregations of deep-sea sponges by providing a suitable surface for settlement. Along with the polygonal faults, sediment drifts are also protected within the Hatton-Rockall Basin MPA, as it is a representative feature of the Hatton Bank (and adjacent sea floor) key geodiversity area.

[JNCC's view on the overall condition](#) of the site's qualifying features is uncertain. This is because there is limited information available on the human activities taking place within the Hatton-Rockall Basin MPA. In the absence of evidence, JNCC cannot provide a view on the condition of the protected features of the site. When more evidence becomes available, JNCC's view on feature condition will be reviewed.

The Conservation Objective for the Hatton-Rockall Basin Nature Conservation Marine Protected Area is that the protected features listed below:

- 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.

With respect to deep-sea sponge aggregations and offshore deep-sea muds, this means that:

- 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 marine fauna forming part of or inhabiting that habitat) are such

as to ensure that it remains in a condition which is healthy and not deteriorating.

Any temporary deterioration in condition is to be disregarded if the features are sufficiently healthy and resilient to enable recovery from such deterioration. Any alteration to the features brought about entirely by natural processes is to be disregarded.

With respect to the sediment drifts and polygonal fault systems representative of the Hatton Bank (and adjacent seafloor) key geodiversity area, this means that:

- their extent, component elements and integrity are maintained;
- their structure and functioning are unimpaired; and
- their surfaces remain sufficiently unobscured for the purposes of determining whether the points listed above are satisfied.

Any obscuring of the features entirely by natural processes are to be disregarded. Any alteration to the features brought about entirely by natural processes are to be disregarded.

With regards to the scope of this assessment, JNCC considers that the large-scale feature and/or geomorphological features (sediment drifts and polygonal fault systems representative of the Hatton Bank (and adjacent seafloor) key geodiversity area) are unlikely to be impacted by fishing activities within the site. As such, these features are not considered further in this assessment.

Further information regarding the designation and conservation objectives for the protected features of Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPS is available on [the JNCC Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPS webpage](#).

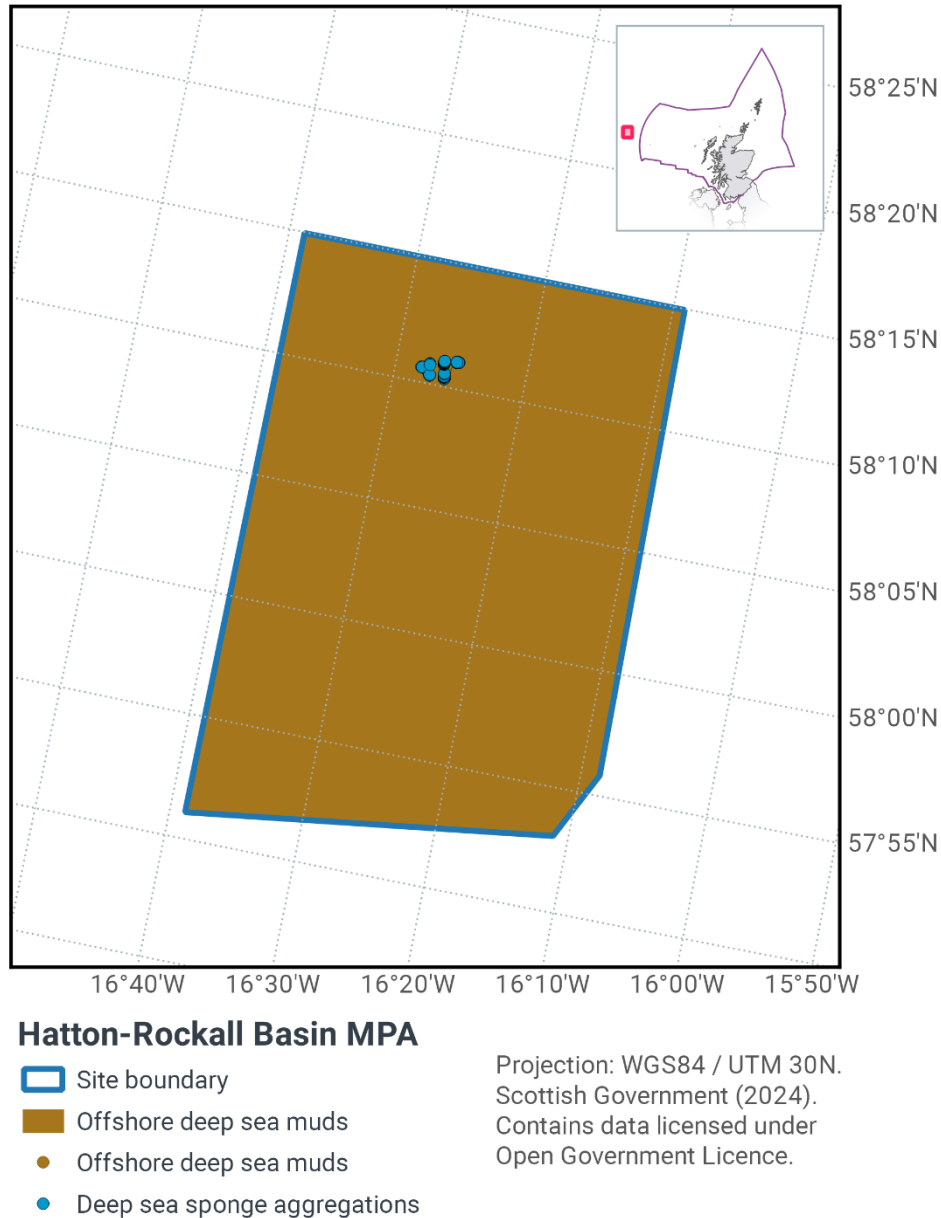


Figure 1. Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA site boundary and feature distribution.

1.3 Activities assessed

The assessments consider the impacts of fisheries activities at each NCMPA in terms of the conservation objectives stated for the protected sites. This was deemed appropriate, in order to assist in identifying potential management measures.

In this context, the implications of fishing activity in view of the conservation objectives for the NCMPA are being assessed through the fisheries screening stage (Part A), the fisheries assessment (Part B), and the in combination (cumulative effect) assessment (Part C).

Fisheries Assessments use the best available evidence to fully consider potential impacts of commercial fishing activity, and in combination (cumulative) effects with

other activities, against the conservation objectives of the site. If the assessment concludes that use of certain fishing gear would or might hinder achievement of the conservation objectives of the site, management measures will be considered.

Commercial sea fishing activity has the potential to vary in nature and intensity over time. This assessment considers fishing activity based on activity levels and type between 2015-2019. This date range was considered to provide the best available data on current fishing activity levels for the assessment. Using a five-year date range provides an average view of fishing activity within the site; latter years (2020 – 2021) were not considered representative of regular fishing activity due to the Covid pandemic. The selected date range (2015 – 2019) was used consistently across all assessments within the consultation package. Changes in fishing activity after this time period may be considered in future reviews of this assessment (see Section 4).

2. Part A Assessment – Fisheries Screening

2.1 Fisheries screening overview

Part A of this assessment considers whether the fishing activity would be capable of affecting the protected features. This section looks at the pressures exerted by the fishing activity occurring in the site (within the assessment period) in relation to the sensitivities of the protected features. Activities potentially capable of affecting the protected feature were identified where there was both a medium-high risk of a pressure arising from the fishing activity and if any of the features were considered sensitive to that pressure. These pressure-features interactions were then taken forward to the fisheries assessment stage (Part B) to determine whether the fishing activity in question could or might hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives.

For each activity assessed in Part A, there were two possible outcomes for each identified pressure-feature interaction:

1. The pressure-feature interactions were not included for Part B:
 - a. If the features are not exposed to the pressure, and is not likely to be in the future; or
 - b. If the effect/impact of the pressure is non-existent or insignificant.
2. The pressure-feature interactions were included for assessment in Part B:
 - a. If the features are exposed to the pressure, or is it likely to be in the future; and
 - b. If the pressure is capable of affecting the feature; or
 - c. If it is not possible to determine whether the pressure is capable of affecting the feature.

Part B of the assessment considers the potential for activities to affect the feature by assessing the impact of fishing gears identified in Part A. This involves determining the potential level of interaction between the feature and the fishing activity,

assessing the potential impact on the feature, and subsequently if fishing activities would or might hinder the achievement of the conservation objectives for the site.

Consideration of exposure to and the effect of a pressure on a protected feature of the NCMPA includes the consideration of exposure to and the effect of that pressure on any ecological or geomorphological process on which the conservation of the protected feature is wholly or in part dependant.

The [JNCC Conservation Advice Package for Hatton Rockall Basin](#) NCMPA has been used to inform this assessment. These are the most recent sources of conservation and management advice available. Where appropriate, this advice has been supplemented by information on pressures associated with fishing activity from [JNCC Marine Pressures-Activities Database \(PAD\) v1.5 2022](#) and the [Feature Activity Sensitivity Tool \(FeAST\)](#).

2.2 Activities taking place within Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA

To screen out fishing activities that were not taking place within the site or likely to take place in the future, vessel monitoring system (VMS) data within Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA from 2015 – 2019 was analysed to identify the gear types being used in the site. The data showed that no forms of fishing activity currently occur within the Hatton-Rockall Basin MPA.

The absence of fishing activity can be accounted for by the current fisheries restrictions in place across the site. The relevant restrictions in place for this site come under the [NEAFC Recommendation 19 : 2014 on area management measures for the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems in the NEAFC Regulatory Area, as amended](#), requires that any new fishing activity would require an environmental assessment to show damage would not be caused to Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs), which in this case constitutes one of the protected features of the site: deep-sea sponge aggregations.

An area in the north of Hatton-Rockall Basin NCMPA is also closed to bottom fisheries under [NEAFC Recommendation 19 2014: Protection of VMEs in NEAFC Regulatory Areas, as Amended by Recommendation 09:2015 and Recommendation 10:2018](#) to protect VMEs, namely deep-sea sponge aggregations as shown in Figure 2.

Under The Common Fisheries Policy and Animals (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 Statutory Instrument (S.I.) 2019, No. 1312 (amending S.I. 2019, No. 753) there is a prohibition on the use of bottom-set gillnets, entangling nets, and trammel nets at depths greater than 200 m for the protection of deep-water shark species. These protective measures are also applied in the North-East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) technical measures regulatory area (beyond European Union waters) through the same S.I. (Figure 2).

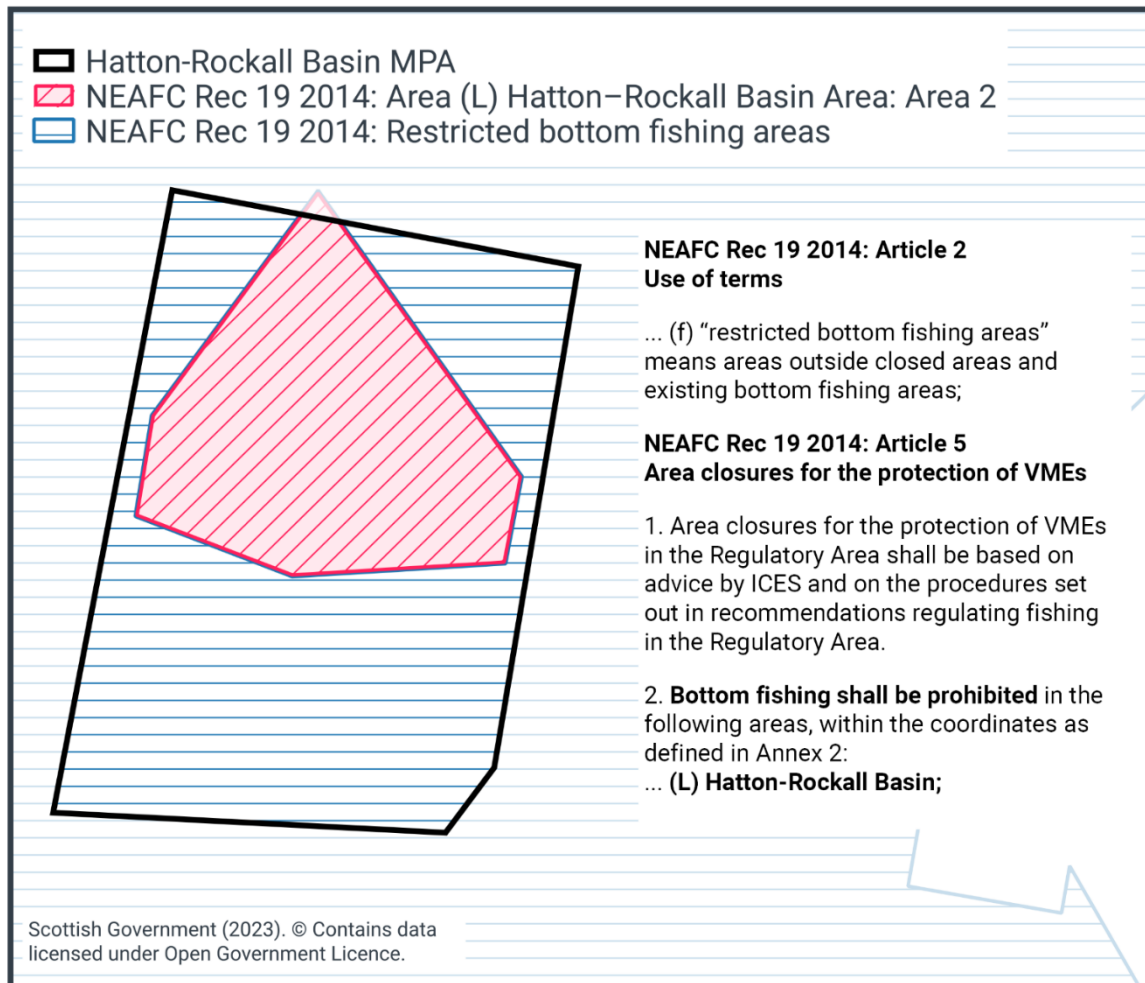


Figure 2. Restrictions currently in effect in Hatton Rockall Basin MPA.

2.3 Part A Conclusion

Considering the information above and the absence of any fisheries activity within Hatton-Rockall Basin MPA, there are no current fishing activities which have the potential to affect the deep-sea sponge aggregations and offshore deep-sea mud within the Hatton Rockall Basin NCMMPA. Therefore, no further assessment through Part B (fisheries assessment) and Part-C (in-combination) is required.

3. Management Options

There are no fishing activities currently operating within the site and therefore no activities capable of affecting the protected features of the site. Scottish Ministers consider that the current NEAFC fisheries closures in place suitably restrict any fishing activity and no further fisheries management is required above and beyond these measures (as shown in Figure 2)

4. Monitoring and review

Scottish Ministers will review this assessment as required. A review of this assessment may be required in response to updated conservation advice; updated advice on the condition of the feature; new information on the sensitivity of the feature to pressures arising from activities within the site; or information on changes in fishing activity within the site.

To coordinate the collection and analysis of information regarding activity levels, and to ensure that any required management is put in place, a monitoring and control plan may be developed for this site.

5. Conclusion

Scottish Ministers have had regard to best available evidence and conclude that no further fisheries management measures are required as current fisheries restrictions within the site restrict activity to a level that would not hinder conservation objectives of this Nature Conservation Marine Protected Area.



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This publication is available at www.gov.scot

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-83601-401-0 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, August 2024

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1470859 (08/24)

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