

**NW Rockall SAC Selection Assessment supplementary brief
November 2009**

The scientific justification for the existing North West Rockall Bank pSAC boundary is outlined in the current SAC Selection Assessment Document version 2.1 (JNCC 2008). During the informal dialogue conducted by JNCC before formal consultation on the site recommendation, Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF) offered additional data on location of fishing effort over a long period, along with data on fishermen's records of coral locations around Rockall Bank.

The SFF data consisted of outputs from fishermen's own navigational plotter systems, showing trawl lines and 'marks', some of which were where fishermen had either recorded coral coming up in their nets or coral causing damage to fishing gear whilst on the bottom. Images of some of these data had been used in developing the fisheries closed area recommendations for Rockall Bank from 2005-08 through ICES (International Council for the Exploration of the Sea) working groups, implemented through the European Commission and North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission. However, the electronic data files from the 'Sodena' plotting system were supplied to JNCC in July 2009 as electronic output. After conversion of the data format, and filtering of data, the points could be plotted in a Geographic Information System (GIS) alongside all the other data JNCC had used to make the 2008 pSAC recommendation. These trawl lines and marks were mostly from Scottish vessels fishing off Rockall Bank, and dated from the late 1970's to 2008. Most fishing activity on Rockall Bank is from a small number of Scottish fishermen, with Russian fisheries interest in the southern part of the bank, and Spanish interests further west off the bank itself.

It was not possible to plot the trawls and marks from different years separately, nor to ascertain if coral marks correlated with particular trawl lines. The location of some of the earlier records (both trawls and marks) may also not be as precise as later records, due to improvements in the accuracy of navigational systems over the years. Coral marks may also actually be at a small distance from where the corals occurred on the seabed, due to the occurrence of coral only being recorded once the trawl was recovered, and to the possibility of a vessel moving off station before the mark was recorded. However, accepting these qualifications, the records do provide relevant information to supplement the other data used to define the pSAC boundary. The trawl lines and coral marks can be seen in Figure 1, along with Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) data points for 2008 obtained from Scottish Government for comparison, and biological sample points used to define the pSAC boundary in 2008.

JNCC, SFF and Scottish Government have had an initial consideration of the fishermen's data provided, alongside the data used to define the possible SAC. The initial conclusion was that the SFF data indicated that revision of the pSAC would be likely to be justified following consultation. Changes suggested were to reduce the pSAC area in the north and west where trawling has occurred over time and there are no or few coral records, and to extend it in the east where there is evidence of corals and no or little trawling – shown as the black dotted line in Figure 1. This potential refinement of the current pSAC boundary is in line with the revised UK guidance for defining boundaries for marine SACs (JNCC, 2008b). The guidance indicates that where interest features are at risk from bottom trawling, a margin should be included in the proposed boundary to ensure their protection. On the western side of the site, coral records occur in approximately 300m water depth, so a margin of twice

water depth (600m) was applied to these points. On the eastern side of the site adjacent to Rockall Rock, coral records occur in approximately 200m water depth, so a margin of twice water depth (400m) was applied to these points.

If this initial conclusion is supported through the public consultation, and accepted by Government, then the SAC boundary would need to be modified, and discussions held with ICES and with the European Commission and North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission held over potential modification of the boundary of the current fisheries restrictions on Rockall Bank.

References

JNCC, 2004. UK Guidance on defining boundaries for marine SACs for Annex I habitat sites fully detached from the coast. Peterborough, JNCC. *Note – a more recent version revised in 2008 is now available.*

JNCC, 2008. Offshore Special Area of Conservation: North West Rockall Bank SAC Selection Assessment. Version 2.1. JNCC Peterborough. Available online: http://www.jncc.gov.uk/pdf/northwestrockallbank_selectionassessment_2.1.pdf

JNCC, 2008b. UK Guidance on defining boundaries for marine SACs for Annex I habitat sites fully detached from the coast. Peterborough, JNCC. Available online: http://www.jncc.gov.uk/pdf/SACHabBoundaryGuidance_2008Update.pdf

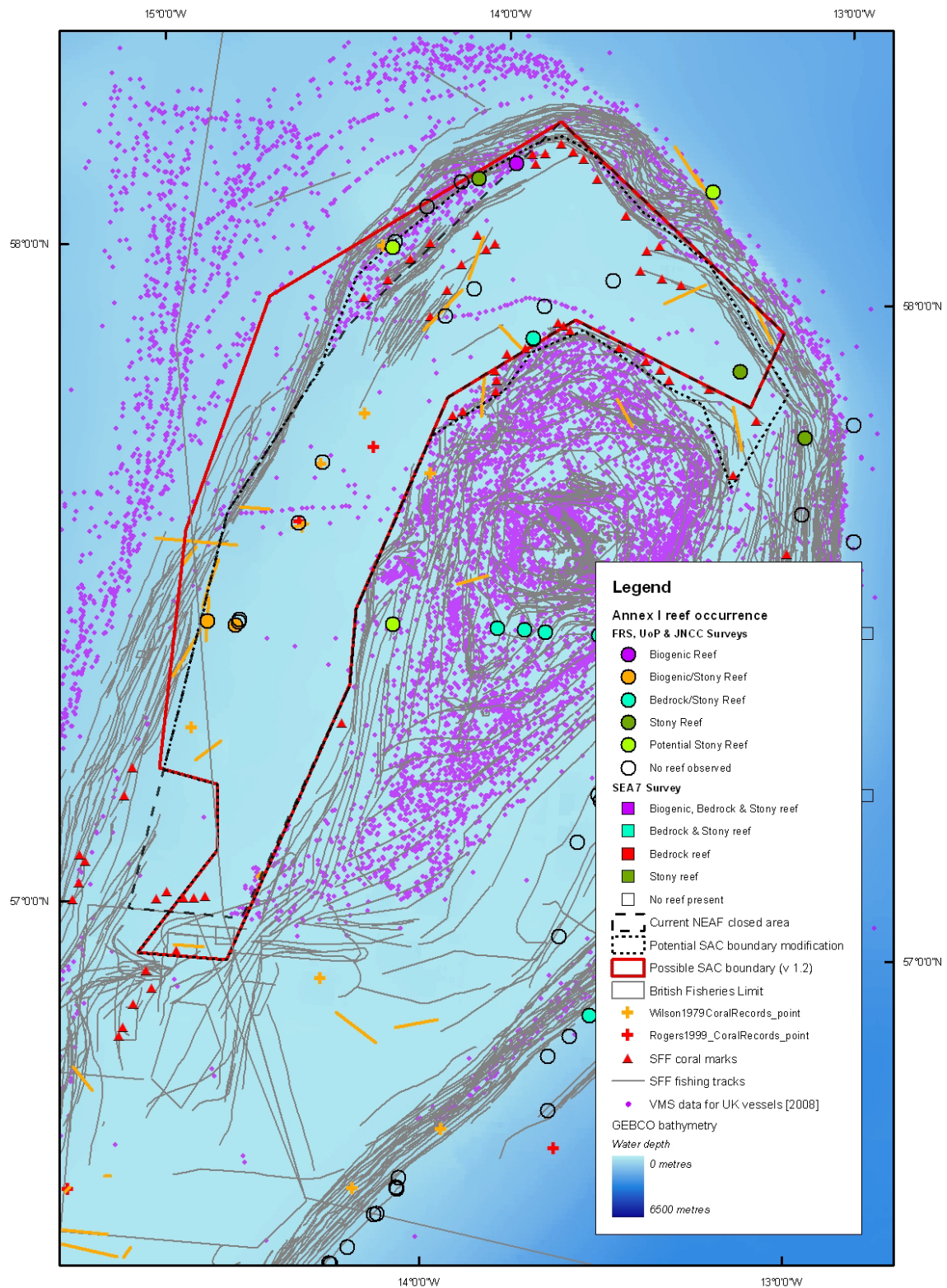


Figure 1: Showing the current North West Rockall Bank pSAC boundary (red line) and possible boundary revision (black dotted line) following incorporation of coral records supplied by the Scottish Fisheries Federation (SFF).