

# UNITED KINGDOM

## St Kilda

### Brief description

Initially inscribed on the World Heritage List for its outstanding natural features and wildlife in 1986, the site's inscription was extended today to cover its cultural value, thus becoming a mixed site. This volcanic archipelago, comprising the islands of Hirta, Dun, Soay and Boreray, uninhabited since 1930, bears the evidence of more than 2,000 years of human occupation in the extreme conditions prevalent in the Hebrides. Human vestiges include built structures and field systems, the cleits and the traditional Highland stone houses. They feature the vulnerable remains of a subsistence economy based on the products of birds, agriculture and sheep farming.

### 1. Introduction

**Year(s) of Inscription** 1986, 2004, 2005

#### Agency responsible for site management

- Mailing Address(es)  
The National Trust for Scotland (NTS)  
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United Kingdom  
e-mail: [sally.thomas@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:sally.thomas@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)  
website: [www.kilda.org.uk](http://www.kilda.org.uk)

### 2. Statement of Significance

**Inscription Criteria** N (ii) (iii) (iv) C (iii) (v)

- Change to criteria proposed (do not include if no changes proposed)

#### Justification by the State Party

The St Kilda archipelago is of outstanding universal value in respect of both its cultural and natural significance.

##### (a) CULTURAL PROPERTY

As a cultural property the St Kilda archipelago is of outstanding universal value because :-

- the history of the archipelago is an early and well documented example of the crucial distinction between the sympathetic support necessary for the survival of an isolated culture and the harmful effects of close contact with a more expansive society.

- the existence of excellent descriptions of life on St Kilda in the 18th and 19th centuries and the promise that archaeology can extend those descriptions back 2,000 years gives a chronological depth to the story of the extinction of the culture. The stone-built structures on the island include archaic structures of a pre-Norse type, through medieval settlements to the modern period with the 1865 village which has been conserved by the National Trust for Scotland. There are structures on all of the islands and the 2 great stacs which are related to the historical use of the islands as sheep pasture and to the harvesting of sea-fowl and their eggs.

- the Soay sheep are of considerable interest as relics of a once more widespread primitive domesticated type similar to those of Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age times and their introduction probably predates the Norse occupation in the 9th century.

- the last years of occupation of St Kilda, and the evacuation of its inhabitants are, and were at the time of the world-wide dispersal of the Scottish people, part of the national consciousness.

##### (b) NATURAL PROPERTY

In terms of its natural heritage the St Kilda archipelago is of outstanding universal, scenic and nature conservation value because:-

- The scenery of the archipelago displays graphically its tertiary volcanic origin, weathered and glaciated to produce dramatic profiles. The three larger islands contain the highest sea-cliffs in Europe and these present stark, black, precipitous faces plunging from steep grass-green slopes in excess of 375m (1,200 ft) above the sea. Scenically, every element appears vertical and the caves and stacs are a feature of every coast except the smooth amphitheatre of Village Bay on Hirta and even the myriad of sea-birds assume a significant scenic role in this majestic maritime landscape.

- St Kilda provides an outstanding example of remote island ecological colonisation and development in isolation, with genetic divergence shown by endemic populations of St Kilda mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus hirtensis*) and St Kilda wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes hirtensis*).

- The islands contain impressive sea-bird colonies containing the highest populations in Europe, of over 1,000,000 birds. These include:

Gannet - 25% of North Atlantic population

Puffin - 50% of British population (300,000 pairs).

iv. The archipelago possesses two isolated populations of one of the most primitive domesticated sheep in existence, living in a feral condition completely unmanaged by man.

v. The islands are of outstanding worth for ecological research and already have high scientific standing with a bibliography seldom surpassed by other islands of their size.

#### **As provided in IUCN and ICOMOS evaluations**

IUCN Background note, 2004: St. Kilda was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1986 under natural criteria (iii) and (iv). At the time IUCN noted that:

The scenery of the St. Kilda archipelago is particularly superlative and has resulted from its volcanic origin followed by weathering and glaciation to produce a dramatic island landscape. The precipitous cliffs and sea stacks as well as its underwater scenery are concentrated in a compact group that is singularly unique.

St. Kilda is one of the major sites in the North Atlantic and Europe for sea birds with over one million birds using the Island. It is particularly important for gannets, puffins and fulmars. The maritime grassland turf and the underwater habitats are also significant and an integral element of the total island setting. The feral Soay sheep are also an interesting rare breed of potential genetic resource significance.

Additional criterion in 2004: Criterion (ii) Ecological Processes

As noted in Section 3, St. Kilda is unique in the very high bird densities that occur in a relatively small area which is conditioned by the complex and different ecological niches existing in the site. There is also a complex ecological dynamic in the three marine zones present in the site that is essential to the maintenance of both marine and terrestrial biodiversity.

IUCN recommends the World Heritage Committee inscribe St Kilda in the World Heritage List on the basis of natural criterion (ii), as well as the existing criterion (iii) and (iv), and extend the boundaries of the site to include the surrounding marine area of 23,346.8 ha.

ICOMOS (1986): [...] In the opinion of ICOMOS, the St. Kilda archipelago corresponds perfectly to the definition of a cultural and natural property whose value should be taken into consideration in an evaluation complementary to that of IUCN. The nominated property could be listed on the basis of

criterion V of the "Guidelines" relative to the inclusion of cultural property.

ICOMOS (2004): That the property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria iii and v:

Criterion iii: St. Kilda bears exceptional testimony to over two millennia of human occupation in extreme conditions.

Criterion v: The cultural landscape of St. Kilda is an outstanding example of land use resulting from a type of subsistence economy based on the products of birds, cultivating land and keeping sheep. The cultural landscape reflects age-old traditions and land uses, which have become vulnerable to change particularly after the departure of the islanders.

#### **Committee Decision**

Bureau (1986): the Bureau noted that though there is a radar-tracking station in St. Kilda, it had remained small in size and under strict lease agreements with the Nature Conservancy Council. The facility, however, had helped in improving protection of the area and in providing services to the management staff of St. Kilda. The Bureau recommended that the authorities of the United Kingdom keep the World Heritage Committee informed of any further extension of the radar-tracking station. The Bureau also recommended that the United Kingdom should consider bringing forward proposals for the inclusion of the waters of St. Kilda archipelago, feeding areas for several of St. Kilda's bird species and the underwater landscape as parts of this natural property. It also noted that St. Kilda, though being recommended for inscription as a natural site in the World Heritage List, also had supportive cultural values as evidence of man's harmonious interaction with nature over time.

Committee (1986): the Committee was informed of the proposals to expand the radio tracking facilities on Hirta Island and was satisfied with the decision of the Secretary of State for Scotland, acting in concert with local nature conservation authorities, to take appropriate measures concerning the siting, size, and colouring of these facilities which would minimise their impact on the nature conservation values. Given the high value of the marine area surrounding the archipelago of St. Kilda, any proposal in the future by the authorities of the United Kingdom to extend the nominated area would be welcomed by the Committee.

Committee (2004), **Decision 28 COM 14B.19**: The World Heritage Committee,

1. Inscribes St. Kilda, United Kingdom, on the World Heritage List on the basis of natural criterion (ii), in addition to the property's existing 1986 inscription under natural criteria (iii) and (iv):

Natural criterion (ii): St. Kilda is unique in the very high bird densities that occur in a relatively small area which is conditioned by the complex and different ecological niches existing in the site. There is also a complex ecological dynamic in the three marine zones present in the site that is essential to the maintenance of both marine and terrestrial biodiversity;

2. Approves the extension of the World Heritage property to include the surrounding marine area of 23,346.8 ha;

3. Encourages the State Party to:

a) prepare a five-year business plan and budget,

b) develop initiatives for collaborative marine research and conservation management for offshore island-marine area workshops with colleagues in New Zealand, Australia and the United States of America and others in the North Atlantic that are involved with site based design and marine conservation as well and national based strategic planning for offshore areas;

4. Defers consideration of the cultural values of St. Kilda, United Kingdom, to allow the State Party to undertake a further comparative analysis of relevant relict cultural landscapes.

#### **Decision 29 COM 8B.19**

The World Heritage Committee,

1. Having examined Documents **WHC-05/29.COM/8B, WHC-05/29.COM/8B.Add 2 and WHC-05/29.COM/INF.8B.1,**

2. Recalling Decision 28 COM 14B.19 adopted at its 28th session (Suzhou, 2004),

3. Inscribes St Kilda, United Kingdom, on the World Heritage List on the basis of cultural criteria (iii) and (v):

**Criterion (iii):** St. Kilda bears exceptional testimony to over two millennia of human occupation in extreme conditions.

**Criterion (v):** The cultural landscape of St. Kilda is an outstanding example of land use resulting from a type of subsistence economy based on the products of birds, cultivating land and keeping sheep. The

cultural landscape reflects age-old traditions and land uses, which have become vulnerable to change particularly after the departure of the islanders.

4. Requests the State Party to undertake a systematic archaeological survey to underpin future management of the cultural landscape.

- Statement of Significance adequately defines the outstanding universal value of the site
- State Party made no proposal for text
- No change required to UNESCO's official description of the site

#### **Boundaries and Buffer Zone**

- Status of boundaries of the site: adequate
- Buffer zone: no buffer zone has been defined but none is needed (the Revised Nomination Document for St Kilda for inclusion in the World Heritage List (2003) concluded that a buffer zone would not add to the site's protection)

#### **Status of Authenticity/Integrity**

- World Heritage site values have been maintained

### **3. Protection**

#### **Legislative and Administrative Arrangements**

- Special Protection Area (on land only), National Nature Reserve (on land only), Site of Special Scientific Interest (on land only), National Scenic Area, Marine Consultation Area, Scheduled Ancient Monument, Geological Conservation Review Site (on land only)
- The protection arrangements are considered sufficiently effective

Actions taken/proposed:

- Awaiting designation of SPA to cover marine area; awaiting establishment of management group for Marine SAC; establishment of Marine Environment High Risk Area identified – management plan, management group. management measures are not sufficient for marine features not covered by the European Habitats Directive
- Timeframe: not provided

### **4. Management**

#### **Use of site/property**

- Rural landscape

**Management/Administrative Body**

- Steering group (Strategic Management Group) formally set up on 01 January 2003 to recommend policies and review management plan
- No site manager but one is needed
- Management by the State Party; management under protective legislation; management under contractual agreement between the State Party and a third party; consensual management. Other: the site was managed by the government's Nature Conservancy Council/Scottish Natural Heritage up until 2003
- Levels of public authority who are primarily involved with the management of the site: national (DCMS; Historic Scotland); regional; local
- The current management system is sufficiently effective

## Actions proposed:

- Management plan for marine SAC and other habitats and species within marine component of the WHS must be developed
- Timeframe: not known

**5. Management Plan**

- Management plan is being implemented
- Implementation commenced: January 1996 (revised: January 2003)
- Very effective (implementation plan for the marine component has not yet been developed)
- Responsibility for over-seeing the implementation of the management plan and monitoring its effectiveness: The National Trust for Scotland

**6. Financial Resources****Financial situation**

- National Trust for Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage (Historic Scotland). Also: funding from charitable sources (e.g. Garfield Weston Foundation)
- No funding drawn in through World Heritage Fund
- Sufficient

**7. Staffing Levels**

- Number of staff: 3
- Also: Research scientists (eg Soay sheep researchers; university research generally)

Rate of access to adequate professional staff across the following disciplines:

- Very good: conservation, promotion, interpretation, education, visitor management
- Average: management
- Access to a boat and boat-handling skills would improve the conservation management
- Staff resources are adequate
- Annual volunteer work parties

**8. Sources of Expertise and Training in Conservation and Management Techniques**

- Access to The National Trust for Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage conservation specialists. Specialist advice is also available from Historic Scotland, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Joint Nature Conservation Committee and other government agencies. The St Kilda Archaeological Research Committee, which includes academics and practitioners, meets twice a year
- Training needs: none
- Training on site management for stakeholders

**9. Visitor Management**

- Visitor statistics: 1,518 visitors in 2004. Trend: slight increase
- Visitor facilities: museum, leaflet, services of a ranger, small shop, small campsite and accommodation for workparties
- Visitor facilities are adequate
- Visitor needs: none
- There is a tourism/visitor management plan for the site

**10. Scientific Studies**

- There is an agreed research framework/strategy for the site
- Risk assessment, studies related to the value of the site, monitoring exercises, condition surveys, archaeological surveys
- A risk assessment was carried out in 2003; regular seabird monitoring takes place, coordinated by the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (reports available from the JNCC); research on the Soay sheep takes place every year, coordinated by the St Kilda Soay Sheep Project (the work has been summarised in a recent publication Soay Sheep: Dynamics and Selection in an Island Population, edited by Tim

Clutton-Brock and Josephine Pemberton. Cambridge University Press 2004); Monitoring of the St Kilda wren has taken place at c.10-yr intervals; surveys of the vegetation to National Vegetation Classification level and of the littoral and underwater habitats have taken place in recent years; observations of birds are recorded every summer, the work recently summarised in *Birds of St Kilda* by Stuart Murray, 2002; various other research projects have taken place or are in progress, including geological/geomorphological research

- Studies used for management of site: to date, predominance is given to letting natural process determine the direction of ecological change; hence the natural heritage aspects are, in effect, unmanaged. This includes the Soay sheep. In other words, the research undertaken helps us understand the natural processes, rather than guiding us on management. With the recent extension of the WHS nomination further out to sea, the risk assessment and future research may guide management of, for example, ship movements and fishing

### 11. Education, Information and Awareness Building

- An adequate number of signs referring to World Heritage site
- World Heritage Convention Emblem used on some publications
- Adequate awareness of World Heritage among: visitors, local communities, local authorities. Businesses: not provided
- There is no education strategy for the site but there are plans to develop education programmes or work with schools
- The museum on St Kilda describes the site's world heritage status
- Website available
- Local participation: local people were involved in the drawing-up of the current management plan; for those wishing to visit St Kilda, the website lists the local boat operators (who thereby benefit commercially).

### 12. Factors affecting the Property (State of Conservation)

#### Reactive monitoring reports

- World Heritage Bureau sessions: 22<sup>nd</sup> (1998); 23<sup>rd</sup> (1999); 25<sup>th</sup> (2001); 26<sup>th</sup> (2002)
- World Heritage Committee sessions: 22<sup>nd</sup> (1998); 23<sup>rd</sup> (1999); 25<sup>th</sup> (2001)

### Conservation interventions

- The aim of St Kilda as a natural site is to let natural processes determine the direction of ecological change: to date there has been no perceived need for major conservation interventions in relation to habitats and species. (Interventions relating to the cultural landscape have included numerous small-scale research excavations plus the repair of structures (when required. One structure, House No. 6, has been carefully restored since the 1986 inscription, and is used as the site museum.)
- Present state of conservation: very good

### Threats and Risks to site

- Development pressure; environmental pressure; natural disaster(s)
- Development pressure – infrastructure from the military base is a potential problem (although the management plan deals with this issue). Environmental pressure – factors affecting seabird breeding success is a potential problem, such as climate change causing changes in ocean currents and sea temperature; there are additional potential threats from commercial fisheries and from shipping. Introduced species, particularly rats, could pose a threat if they gain a foothold (including the introduction of sheep diseases). Natural disasters - relatively immune
- Emergency measures taken within the framework of the current management plan

### 13. Monitoring

- Formal monitoring programme
- Scottish National Heritage (SNH) carries out site condition monitoring of those aspects of the site designated as of European importance. (monitoring of the cultural heritage is carried out by the NTS St Kilda archaeologist.)

### 14. Conclusions and Recommended Actions

- Main benefits of WH status: conservation, social, economic, management
- Strengths of management: designation as a special protection area (Birds Directive) and special area of conservation (Habitats Directive); extension of the WHS in 2004 to include the surrounding marine area; designation of geological conservation review sites and a marine consultation area (by Scottish Natural Heritage); production of a comprehensive management plan, in

partnership with nine stakeholder organisations;  
preparation of a revised nomination to include  
cultural aspects; publication of research  
findings on the Soay sheep

- Weaknesses of management: lack of protection of marine elements not covered by the European Habitats Directive. Lack of marine SPA. Failure to retain moratorium on oil developments. Failure to designate Marine Environment High Risk Areas

**Future actions:**

- Continuing consultation with the relevant agencies
- No WH Funding is sought. No timeframe provided