DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

DECLARATION OF AREA OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AT THE GOBBINS, COUNTY ANTRIM. ARTICLE 28 OF THE ENVIRONMENT (NORTHERN IRELAND) ORDER 2002.

The Department of the Environment (the Department), having consulted the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside and being satisfied that the area delineated and described on the attached map (the area) is of special scientific interest by reason of the flora and fauna and accordingly needs to be specially protected, hereby declares the area to be an area of special scientific interest to be known as the 'The Gobbins Area of Special Scientific Interest'.

The Gobbins cliffs are of importance for their geological interest, breeding seabird colony and a range of maritime plant communities and notable species. The Gobbins is an area of basalt sea-cliffs, up to 60m in height, on the eastern coast of Island Magee, Co. Antrim.

The basalts at Hill's Port at the south end of The Gobbins cliffs are amygdaloidal (bubbles, or vesicles, in lava that have been filled with minerals) and contain various zeolite minerals; analcime, chabazite, cowlesite, gmelinite, gobbinsite, gonnardite, heulandite, levyne and mesolite have been found here. Some vesicles also contain calcite and travertine. Of particular note is the occurrence of gobbinsite and gonnardite; both are restricted in their occurrence elsewhere and the former takes its name from The Gobbins cliffs. The basalts are Palaeogene in age and date from some 60 million years ago, a time when this area was subject to the massive fissure eruptions which formed the Antrim plateau.

Older rocks occur at the southern end of the site with an Upper Triassic and Lower Jurassic series found on the beach. These marine sedimentary rocks are some 200 million years old and are of importance as they contain information on the environment at this time. When assessed with other sites of this age in the east Antrim area, a very detailed picture of sedimentary basin form, contemporary tectonic activity and the range of life forms present during this fascinating geological time, becomes apparent.

At the time of the Seabird 2000 survey The Gobbins held 791 pairs of Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) and 552 Razorbills (*Alca torda)* respectively 1.6% and 1.1% of the all-Ireland populations for these species. The site also supports the only mainland nesting Atlantic Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) in Northern Ireland and significant populations of Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*) and Common Guillemot (*Uria aalge*). Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) also breed within the designated area.

The Gobbins is also notable for its maritime cliff plant communities. The diversity of these communities is influenced by a number of factors, including exposure to salt spray, soil depth, aspect, slope and degree of water-logging, in addition to nutrient enrichment from breeding sea-birds.

Much of the area consists of steep vertical cliffs, where the vegetation is restricted to rock ledges. Less vertical slopes include occasional scree deposits and tend to have a more continuous vegetation cover.

The most common species over much of the area is the grass Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*, which achieves high cover values. Some of the less steep slopes are dominated by Bracken *Pteridium aquilinum*. Other prominent components in the sward include Thrift *Armeria maritima*, Common Bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, Sea Campion *Silene uniflora* and Kidney Vetch *Anthyllis vulneraria*.

To the south of the area, the cliff vegetation is influenced by the presence of the nesting seabirds, which provide enrichment to the soils through their guano. Additional species such as Hogweed *Heracleum sphondylium*, Sea Mayweed *Tripleurospermum maritimum* and Sea Campion *Silene uniflora* occur here.

Notable plant species include Sea Spleenwort *Asplenium marinum*.

The intertidal area is generally rather narrow, and is dominated by bedrock with wave-cut platforms. Most of the site is very exposed with reduced species diversity, but there are some localised pockets of shelter with high fucoid cover (Spiral Wrack *Fucus spiralis* and Toothed Wrack *Fucus serratus*) and Channelled Wrack *Pelvetia canaliculata* is present in the more sheltered areas. The area is characterised by an upper splash zone dominated by the lichen *Verrucaria maura*. Occasional upper shore rock pools contain ephemeral species of green algae, including *Enteromorpha* spp. and *Cladophora* spp and the brown alga *Chorda filum*. Shallow eulittoral rock pools are characterised by the red alga *Corallina officinalis*.

Many of the exposed mid-shore rocks are dominated by the Acorn barnacle *Semibalanus balanoides* and the Common limpet *Patella vulgata* and there is a zone in the lower eulittoral zone dominated by the red algae *Mastocarpus stellatus*. Common invertebrates include the Periwinkles *Littorina* spp., the Dog Whelk *Nucella lapillus* and the Beadlet Anemone *Actina equina*. The brown algae Oarweed *Laminaria digitata*, Dabberlocks *Alaria esculenta*, Thongweed *Himanthalia elongata* and Cuvie *Laminaria hyperborea* typify lower shores.

SCHEDULE

The following operations and activities appear to the Department to be likely to damage the seabird colonies:

1. Any activity or operation which involves the damage or disturbance by any means of the surface and subsurface of the land, including ploughing, rotovating, harrowing, reclamation and extraction of minerals, including sand, gravel and peat.

2. Any change in the present annual pattern and intensity of grazing, including any change in the type of livestock used or in supplementary feeding practice.

3. The application of manure, slurry or artificial fertiliser.

4. The application of herbicides, fungicides or other chemicals deployed to kill any form of wild plant, other than plants listed as being noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977.

5. The storage or dumping, spreading or discharge of any material not specified under paragraph 5 above.

6. The destruction, displacement, removal or cutting of any plant, seed or plant remains, other than for:

    i. plants listed as noxious in the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977;

    ii. normal cutting or mowing regimes for which consent is not required under paragraph 3 above.

7. The release into the area of any animal (other than in connection with normal grazing practice) or plant. 'Animal' includes birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates; 'Plant' includes seed, fruit or spore.

8. Burning.

9. Construction, removal or disturbance of any permanent or temporary structure including building, engineering or other operations.

10. Alteration of natural or man-made features, the clearance of boulders or large stones and grading of rock faces.

11. The killing or taking of any wild animal except where such killing or taking is treated as an exception in Articles 5, 6, 11, 17, 20, 21 and 22 of the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

12. The following activities undertaken in a manner likely to damage or disturb the wildlife of the area:

    i. Educational activities;

    ii. Research activities;

    iii. Recreational activities;

    iv. Exercising of animals.

13. Changes in game, waterfowl or fisheries management or fishing or hunting practices.

14. Use of vehicles or craft likely to damage or disturb the wildlife of the area.

15. Sampling of rocks, minerals, fossils or any other material forming a part of the site, undertaken in a manner likely to damage the scientific interest.

FOOTNOTES

(a) Please note that consent by the Department to any of the operations or activities listed in the Schedule does not constitute planning permission. Where required, planning permission must be applied for in the usual manner to the Department under Part IV of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

(b) Also note that many of the operations and activities listed in the Schedule are capable of being carried out either on a large scale or in a very small way. While it is impossible to define exactly what is large and what is small, the Department would intend to approach each case in a common sense and practical way. It is very unlikely that small scale operations would give rise for concern and if this was the case the Department would normally give consent, particularly if there is a long history of the operation being undertaken in that precise location.