IUCN Conservation Outlook Assessment 2017 **(archived)**
Finalised on 08 November 2017

Please note: this is an archived Conservation Outlook Assessment for Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast. To access the most up-to-date Conservation Outlook Assessment for this site, please visit https://www.worldheritageoutlook.iucn.org.

Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast

SITE INFORMATION

Country:
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK)
Inscribed in: 1986
Criteria:
(vii) (viii)

Site description:
The Giant's Causeway lies at the foot of the basalt cliffs along the sea coast on the edge of the Antrim plateau in Northern Ireland. It is made up of some 40,000 massive black basalt columns sticking out of the sea. The dramatic sight has inspired legends of giants striding over the sea to Scotland. Geological studies of these formations over the last 300 years have greatly contributed to the development of the earth sciences, and show that this striking landscape was caused by volcanic activity during the Tertiary, some 50–60 million years ago. © UNESCO

SUMMARY

2017 Conservation Outlook

Significant concern

Because of its inherent robustness against anthropogenic impact and the effective management of the property itself, the conservation outlook for the site’s geological values is good. At the same time, the conservation outlook for the exceptional natural beauty of the site, which depends on of the integrity of the surrounding landscape, is of significant concern, mainly because of the planned and approved tourism development project in the immediate vicinity of the site and potential additional development projects in the future.

Current state and trend of VALUES

Low Concern
Trend: Stable

The current state of the geological values of the property is good and stable, whereas its scenic and aesthetic values have the potential to be threatened by future development in the site’s vicinity.

Overall THREATS

High Threat

While geological values of the site are highly robust against anthropogenic threats, its outstanding natural beauty is under a serious threat from potential development projects in the site’s vicinity.

Overall PROTECTION and MANAGEMENT

Mostly Effective

The property has many layers of protection and the management of the property itself is highly effective. However, the management of the immediate surroundings is crucial for the preservation of the property’s Outstanding

Universal Value and particularly its scenic value.

FULL ASSESSMENT

Description of values

Values

World Heritage values

► Extraordinary geological complex formed by basaltic lava flows

Criterion:(viii)

The property, with the Giant's Causeway itself (a sea-level promontory of almost entirely regular polygonal columns averaging 45 cm in diameter and numbering approximately 40,000 columns), the Giant's Organ (about 60 regular columns, 12 m high, and Chimney Tops (a number of columns separated from the cliffs by erosion), together with a number of associated features, form an exceptional example of geological activity with successive lava flows and inter-basaltic beds, and hence extraordinary testimony to Tertiary geological events. The extremely regular columnar jointing of the Tholeiitic basalts is a spectacular feature that is displayed in exemplary fashion at the Giant’s Causeway. The Causeway itself is a unique formation and a superlative horizontal section through columnar basalt lavas (World Heritage Committee, 2013b; UNEP-WCMC, 2011). The site is a classic locality for the study of Tertiary basalts and has played a fundamental role in the historical development of geological interpretation. Its value for scientific research, which has made important contributions to petrogenesis over a period of nearly 300 years, marks it as a site of international significance in the history of earth science (World Heritage Committee, 2006; 2013b).

► Geological spectacle of exceptional natural beauty

Criterion:(vii)

The cliff exposures of columnar and massive basalt at the edge of the Antrim

Plateau, within their spectacular landscape setting, present a spectacle of exceptional natural beauty. The extent of visible rock sections and the quality of the exposed columns in the cliffs and on the Causeway combine to present an array of features of international significance (World Heritage Committee, 2013b).

Other important biodiversity values

► Significant coastal ecosystems with their associated biodiversity

This relatively small site nevertheless harbors valuable coastal ecosystems with their associated flora and fauna, including seashore, cliff, scree, grassland, scrub, heathland and marsh habitats. Notweworthy examples of the 200 plant species at the site include Red Broomrape Orobanche alba, Sea Spleenwort Aspenium marinum, and Frog Orchid Coeloglossum viride. Avifauna is represented by 50 resident and 30 migrant species, including Razorbill Alca turda, European Storm Petrel Hydrobates pelagicus and Peregrine Falcon Falco peregrinus (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). The coastal waters bordering the site are part of the WWF priority global 200 ecoregion “North-east Altantic Shelf Marine” (WWF, 2012).

Assessment information

Threats

Current Threats

High Threat

The inherent robustness and effective management of the property so far have controlled threats to its values. However, ongoing plans for large scale tourism/golf development in the immediate vicinity of the property acutely threaten its Outstanding Universal value, because its outstanding natural beauty depends not only on the site itself but also on its wider landscape

setting.

▶ Tourism/ Recreation Areas

High Threat
Outside site

A preliminary notice, (Proposal of Application Notice (PAN)) was submitted for a large scale development involving car parking and road realignment adjacent to the entrance to the site in a greenfield site in January 2017. The adjacent area is under development pressure and subject to various development proposals that have potential to impact the site.

▶ Other Activities

Very Low Threat
Inside site, localised(<5%)

Some basalt columns were removed or damaged during the 19th Century but this practice has now ceased and the threat from removal of basalt columns is considered very low (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

▶ Tourism/ visitors/ recreation

Low Threat
Inside site, scattered(5-15%)
Outside site

Some footpaths inside the property need to be closed for maintenance and reconstruction and path erosion was considered an issue of concern in the past. It was then noted that an overall visitation and tourism management strategy for the site was missing (UNESCO and IUCN, 2003). However, the overall effective management ensures that visitation-related threats are well-controlled at this property (UNEP-WCMC, 2011), and these threats are hence considered low threats.

Potential Threats

Low Threat

There is a potential threat to the landscape setting of the site from further onshore development including offshore wind farm developments and petroleum exploration. However, this threat is considered low because there

appear to be no immediate plans to go ahead with any development. Other potential threats include climate change, which needs to be studied further.

▶ Storms/Flooding

Data Deficient
Inside site, throughout(>50%)

Climate change might in the long term affect coastal stability and ecosystem distribution (Zacharioudaki and Reeve, 2011). It may also increase rates of coastal erosion and the extent and frequency of marine flooding. Sea level rise will increase the hazards associated with access to parts of the site and may render some areas inaccessible (Orford et al., 2008). The potential threat climate change poses to the overall slope stability of the various cliff elements making up the property, was identified in the 2008 National Trust Report (Orford et al., 2008) and further made explicit in Smith et al. (2009), but which requires further active consideration. The geomorphological activity of the cliffs is increasing and the potential risk from various slides, slumps and falls is rising with increasing seasonality and changing precipitation patterns. The ‘sea/landscapes’ making up the Causeway Coast need to be more central to the future visitor experience, as access to the cliff face paths may be reduced by increasing activity of cliff face and debris slopes with time. This could cause a major change in management of visitors.

▶ Renewable Energy

Low Threat
Outside site

There was a discussion about a proposed offshore wind farm in 2003. IUCN and the World Heritage Centre then recommended to carefully assess possible impacts of such developments on the property and the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty surrounding it (UNESCO and IUCN, 2003). A 2009 Strategic Environmental Assessment for potential offshore renewable energy installations in Northern Ireland, which was commissioned by the EC’s European Regional Development Fund and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment of Northern Ireland, follows this recommendation (AECOM and Metoc, 2009). However a low threat of offshore wind farm development affecting the property remains.

► Tourism/ Recreation Areas

High Threat
Outside site

A plan to construct a large hotel/golf course and auxiliary infrastructure between Bushmills and the property, and inside the Causeway Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, was approved by the Northern Ireland Environment Minister early in 2012 (National Trust, 2012a). The National Trust challenged the approval of the plan in court, because it would compromise the landscape setting of the property and therefore its Outstanding Universal Value (criterion vii), as well as additional biodiversity values, such as at the Bushfoot Dunes Site of Local Conservation Concern (National Trust, 2012b). The challenge was rejected by the court in February 2013.
The State Party Report of November 2015 states that consent was granted taking full account of potential adverse impacts and in accordance with relevant planning legislation, policies and procedures. For permission to remain active, development works relating to the golf resort must have begun on or before 29th March 2017. This has not happened and the existing permission will have lapsed.
The lands involved were subsequently sold to another party and no development has taken place.

The history of the Runkerry Golf Resort development, however, shows that the vicinity of the property is generally under threat from large-scale development that is may have implications for protection of the site’s values and integrity .

► Oil/ Gas exploration/development

Low Threat
Inside site, throughout(>50%)
Outside site

A license was issued for petroleum exploration in an area that included the site. The licence terminated in February 2016. No intrusive site works took place within the WHS. Potential future petroleum exploration remains a low-level threat to the site.

Protection and management

Assessing Protection and Management

► Relationships with local people

Mostly Effective

The property is uninhabited and mainly owned by the National Trust. The WHS Management Plan 2013-2019 prepared by the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust in 2012 was subjected to consultation and there is an active steering group
(Giant’s Causeway and Causeway WHS Management Plan, 2012)

► Legal framework

Mostly Effective

The coastline at the property has been legally protected since 1987 as a National Nature Reserve, and partly as an Area of Special Scientific Interest (since 2000). The entire Causeway Plateau is designated since 1989 as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In addition the property has been designated a Special Area of Conservation under the EU Habitats Directive (Protected Planet, 2012; UNESCO and IUCN, 2003). The overall legal framework of the property itself is considered highly effective, while some concern exists about the protection status of its surrounding landscape. There is, however, a management plan for the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – first written 2003 and updated in 2008 and a new one (for 2013-2023) is now in preparation (Causeway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2013-2023).

► Enforcement

Mostly Effective

The site is patrolled by wardens, contains information and warning signs and is difficult to access other than by approved routes. Measures appear effective in enforcing regulations.

► Integration into regional and national planning systems

Some Concern

The management framework for the property is integrated with 13 key policies and plans at different levels, including regional development, tourism development and spatial planning documents (Environment and Heritage Service, 2005). However, this has not prevented permission for a large-scale tourism development in the immediate vicinity of the property, which may compromise its Outstanding Universal Value.
A specific section in the Regional 'Single Planning Policy Statement (SPS)' published in Sept 2015 is devoted to the WHS. This states:

"6.6 Development that would adversely affect the Outstanding Universal Value of a World Heritage Site (WHS) or the integrity of its setting must not be permitted unless there are overriding exceptional circumstances.
6.7 Inclusion of a WHS on a list published by UNESCO highlights the outstanding international importance of the site as a material consideration in the determination of planning and listed building consent applications, and appeals. Planning authorities must carefully consider applications affecting the Outstanding Universal Value of such sites, particularly taking into account the safeguarding of critical views to and from the site, the access and public approaches to the site and the understanding and enjoyment of the site by visitors."
It also notes that:

"WHSs are designated under the UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972 on the basis of their acknowledged ‘Outstanding Universal Value’. The Giant’s Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site is currently the only WHS in Northern Ireland inscribed on the World Heritage list. It is inscribed because its natural and geological features are held to be of Outstanding Universal Value. Given their acknowledged international importance, it will be appropriate for a LDP having a WHS within the plan area, to identify the site and its broader setting and to include local policies or proposals to safeguard the Outstanding Universal Value of such sites and their settings from inappropriate development. "

► Management system

Highly Effective

The property has many layers of statutory and non-statutory protection. The National Trust holds most of the land in inalienable ownership, with approximately 5% of the property remaining in private ownership. A World Heritage Steering Group comprising relevant stakeholders provides the framework for implementation of the property's Management Plan (World Heritage Committee, 2013b). The current management plan for the World Heritage site (2013-2019) was prepared in 2012 by the Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust. The management plan "provides an agreed framework and important actions for the sustainable management of the Site and its environs" (Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site Management Plan 2013-2019).

► Management effectiveness

Mostly Effective

No formal management effectiveness assessment has been conducted for the site. Management of the property itself by the National Trust is considered highly effective, while the management of the surrounding landscape is of some concern (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

► Implementation of Committee decisions and recommendations

Some Concern

The 2003 monitoring mission recommended to "…carefully review all zoning arrangements in order to preserve the landscape values of the Area of Outstanding Natural beauty surrounding the World Heritage site. No developments, which could potentially threaten these values, should be allowed". The mission also recommended the establishment of a clearly defined buffer zone surrounding the property (UNESCO and IUCN, 2003). These key recommendations, which were adopted by the Committee in its Decision 27COM 7B.21, were not followed (see National Trust, 2012a) in regard to the Runkerry Golf Resort development. Other requests and recommendations contained in Decisions 27COM 7B.21, 29COM 7B.27 and 32COM 7B.28 of the World Heritage Committee relating to information about the management plan and visitor centre redevelopment have been

implemented by the State Party (WHC, 2003, 2005, 2008).

▶ Boundaries

Mostly Effective

The boundaries of this very small (70 ha) property reflect the distribution of its values under criterion viii but are very narrow to effectively protect its scenic landscape values and the additional biodiversity values of the area. A clearly defined buffer zone to achieve this, as recommended by the 2003 monitoring mission (UNESCO and IUCN, 2003), has been achieved by proposal for a slight alteration of the site boundary to accommodate slow cliff retreat. The World Heritage site is noted in the wider AONB Management Plan. Site Management process needs to work interactively with the local “super” council planning using the changing nature of NI Statutory Planning, to ensure that future commercial developments in any defined buffer zone are rebuffed on protected heritage grounds.

▶ Sustainable finance

Mostly Effective

Funding was assessed as insufficient by the State Party in 2006 (WHC, 2006). Additional funds were since raised for the construction of a new visitor centre (National Trust, 2012c). This was opened in July 2012.

▶ Staff training and development

Mostly Effective

There were about 12 full-time and 15 seasonal staff at the property in 2003 (UNESCO and IUCN, 2003). Staffing was considered inadequate by the State Party in 2006 (World Heritage Committee, 2006), but it is not clear if this referred to the National Trust staff or other staff (e.g. at the Local authority) involved in some management aspects of the property.

▶ Sustainable use

Highly Effective

This very small property consists of mainly coastal cliffs and foreshore, and is not important for sustainable use other than tourism (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

► Education and interpretation programs

Mostly Effective

The National Trust runs a wide range of education and interpretation programmes at and around the site, including a website and newly designed visitor centre with interactive exhibitions (National Trust, 2012c), school and student visits, guided tours and interpretative trails, and interpretation publications for a wide range of target groups and in eight languages.

► Tourism and visitation management

Highly Effective

The site received over 850,000 visitors in 2016, an increase on the average of 600,000. Facilities include new visitor centre with interactive exhibitions and cafeteria, a hotel run by the National Trust, parking and shuttle bus, trails and related facilities (National Trust, 2012c). An overall coordinated tourism management strategy was recommended in 2003 (UNESCO and IUCN, 2003). A Causeway Coast and Tourism Masterplan was published in 2004 (Northern Ireland Tourism Board, 2012). Other relevant documents include the Department of Enterprise Trade and Investment Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland 2010-2020 and the Causeway Coast & Glens Tourism Area Plan 2010-2020.

► Monitoring

Data Deficient

A comprehensive monitoring strategy and framework including 22 indicators on geology/geomorphology, landscape, ecology, cultural heritage, socio-economic and visitation trends, and the management of the wider setting of the site, was included in the 2004 management plan of the property (Environment and Heritage Service, 2005). However, no monitoring results appear to have been published.

► Research

Some Concern

The site has been studied intensively over the last 300 years, and has contributed significantly to the current understanding of the origin of igneous

rocks, and Tertiary geology (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). It continues to support research in these fields. However, there was no agreed research framework or strategy for the property in 2006 (WHC, 2006). Some areas, such as climate change impacts and potential responses merit further research

Overall assessment of protection and management

Mostly Effective

The property has many layers of protection and the management of the property itself is highly effective. However, the management of the immediate surroundings is crucial for the preservation of the property's Outstanding Universal Value and particularly its scenic value.

▶ Assessment of the effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the site

Some Concern

The effectiveness of protection and management in addressing threats outside the property, mainly development of tourism infrastructure and potentially offshore wind farms, is the main area of concern in relation to the overall management of the property because this might seriously compromise its Outstanding Universal Value.

▶ Best practice examples

New (2012) visitor centre with interactive exhibitions and additional facilities.

State and trend of values

Assessing the current state and trend of values

World Heritage values

▶ Extraordinary geological complex formed by basaltic lava flows

Good
Trend:Stable

The geological values of the property are very robust against anthropogenic

impact and well managed. The 18th/19th century practice of removing/damaging basalt columns for ornamental use has long ceased (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). Therefore, their current state is assessed as good and stable.

► Geological spectacle of exceptional natural beauty

High Concern
Trend:Improving

In contrast to the geological values of the property, which can be effectively managed within its boundaries, the exceptional natural beauty crucially depends on the wider landscape setting. This was under serious threat from planned development of a Golf Resort at Runkerry (National Trust, 2012a). Through a combination of circumstances, including a change of ownership of the site of the planned development, this threat has now receded. The WHS may, however, come under additional threats from other development projects in the weakly-protected surroundings.

Summary of the Values

► Assessment of the current state and trend of World Heritage values

Low Concern

Trend: Stable

The current state of the geological values of the property is good and stable, whereas its scenic and aesthetic values have the potential to be threatened by future development in the site’s vicinity.

► Assessment of the current state and trend of other important biodiversity values

Good

Trend: Data Deficient

The site includes sections of North Antrim Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Giant’s Causeway National Nature Reserve (NNR), Giant’s Causeway & Dunseverick Area of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Skerries and Causeway Marine Special Area of Conservation (Marine SAC) – data is

recorded and reported for these designations.

Additional information

Benefits

Understanding Benefits

► Outdoor recreation and tourism

Historically there have been over 600,000 visitors to the property annually, half of them from abroad, and nature based tourism is practiced at a high intensity (UNEP-WCMC, 2011). 2016 figures suggest this to be increasing (850,000 in 2015-16). The site offers a unique opportunity to experience not only its OUV but also the coastal landscapes of Northern Ireland. This contributes significantly to income generation and the socio-economic development in the property’s vicinity.

► Importance for research

The site has critically contributed to the scientific understanding of igneous rock formation and Tertiary geology since the early 18th century, and continues to support extensive scientific research and publications (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

► Contribution to education

Based on the site’s immense importance for geological knowledge generation and its new visitor and educational facilities, it also functions as a hotspot for scientific education and interpretation, which helps people understand how Earth has evolved (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

► History and tradition

In the 18th Century, the myth of the prehistoric hero Finn MacCool emerged, which links the Giant’s Causeway with Staffa Island in Scotland and gained

considerably international popularity, in connection to the epics of Ossian (J. Macpherson), thereby becoming an international literary reference (UNEP-WCMC, 2011).

Summary of benefits

The main benefits of the property are knowledge generation, education and nature based tourism, together with the immense socio-economic benefits that depend on them. However, the property also offers significant nature conservation benefits.

Projects

Compilation of active conservation projects

№	Organization/ individuals	Project duration	Brief description of Active Projects
1	National Trust		Several projects directly contributing to the management of the property
2	Tourism NI		Causeway Coast & Glens Tourism and Destination Management Strategy 2015 - 2020
3	Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust		Several projects on communication, education and awareness raising in relation to the property, and promotion of sustainable environmental management and sustainable development in the region

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