SITE SYNOPSIS

Site Name: Aran Island (Donegal) Cliffs SAC

Site Code: 000111

Aran Island is a fairly large island (approx. 18 km2) situated about 4 km west of Burtonport in Co. Donegal. The site itself encompasses the rocky sea cliffs which form the north and west, and part of the south coasts of the island. The cliffs are composed of Ards quartzites with some igneous intrusions.

The site is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) selected for the following habitats and/or species listed on Annex I / II of the E.U. Habitats Directive (* = priority; numbers in brackets are Natura 2000 codes):

[1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs
[4030] Dry Heath
[4060] Alpine and Subalpine Heaths
[8210] Calcareous Rocky Slopes
[8220] Siliceous Rocky Slopes
[8330] Sea Caves

The cliffs on Aran Island, which rise to 150 m, are exposed, precipitous and continuous. They are well indented, with predominantly north and west facing aspects. Numerous rocks and islets occur in the waters near the cliffs - these rocks and the surrounding waters also form part of the site. A number of sea caves, mostly intertidal, have been noted on the western and northern coasts of the island.

The vegetation of the cliffs of Aran Island is varied. Few plants survive on the sheer cliffs, while an interesting flora occurs on the fissures of limestone and siliceous cliffs. All the plants are tolerant of saline exposure, including Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*), Sea Mayweed (*Matricaria maritima*), Roseroot (*Rhodiola rosea*) down to spray-level, Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) and Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*).

The higher cliff vegetation merges into alpine heath, which is also found along the top of the cliffs particularly to the east of Torneady Point. It is interspersed with rocks and wet flush areas. Species present include Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), Bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), Crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*), Pale Butterwort (*Pinguicula lusitanica*), Wilson's Filmy-fern (*Hymenophyllum wilsonii*) and Hay-scented Buckler-fern *Dryopteris aemula*.

Dry heath occurs with the cliff vegetation and coastal grassland at the west of the site and especially the south west. The heath component supports Heather (*Calluna*

vulgaris), wood-rushes (*Luzula* spp.), Heath Bedstraw (*Galium saxatile*), Tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) and mosses including *Rhytidiadelphus loreus, Hylocomnium splendens, Polytrichum* spp. and *Pseudoscleropodium purum*. The dry heath and coastal grassland overlies peat and is closely grazed by sheep and rabbits.

The very rare Hart's Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hartii*), which is legally protected (Flora (Protection) Order, 2015), occurs on the cliffs. Aran Island is the only known location for this plant, which is endemic to Ireland.

The site is of ornithological importance for a number of bird species, including two which are listed under Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive - Peregrine and Chough. The Chough population, with 13 breeding pairs, is one of the largest concentrations in this region. The cliffs also have nesting seabirds. The populations prior to 1988 were as follows: Fulmar - 887 pairs, Great Black-backed Gull - 79 pairs, Lesser Black-backed Gull - 8 pairs, Herring Gull - 78 pairs, Kittiwake - 36 pairs, Shag - 55 pairs, Black Guillemot - 1 pair and possibly Manx Shearwater. In 1994, 80 pairs of Cormorants were counted on Torboy Island.

The cliff and alpine heath vegetation is of good quality and not threatened in any significant way due to their inaccessibility. However, the drier heath and grassland has been damaged by peat cutting and over-grazing by sheep.

The site is important for the presence of good examples of exposed western cliffs and associated habitats. The site is of particular conservation interest as it supports a number of habitats which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive. In addition, it provides the only known location for an endemic plant and supports some important bird populations.