SITE SYNOPSIS

Site Name: Saltee Islands SAC

Site Code: 000707

This site comprises the Saltees Islands and a large area of the surrounding seas. There are two islands, Great Saltee and Little Saltee, and a constellation of islets and rocks. The islands are situated between 4 and 5 km off the south Wexford coast. As a group, they constitute a broken reef that protrudes from a seabed of sand and shell. The reef has a north-east/south-west orientation and is typically strewn with boulders, cobbles and patches of sand and gravel. Bedrock is metamorphic schist and gneiss.

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):

[1140] Tidal Mudflats and Sandflats
[1160] Large Shallow Inlets and Bays
[1170] Reefs
[1230] Vegetated Sea Cliffs
[8330] Sea Caves
[1364] Grey Seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)

The subtidal reefs at this site range from rugged bedrock with steep sided gullies to large boulders mixed with sand or cobbles and pebbles. They range from exposed, to moderately exposed, to wave action. The communities present are excellent examples of those typical of tide-swept areas and many have fauna and flora that are tolerant of sand scour. The area is notable for the range of colonial sea squirts present. With the exception of only a few samples, the communities are very species rich, with samples taken during the BioMar Survey having from 78 to 117 species. No other area surveyed during the BioMar Survey had so many species rich communities.

In shallow water the reefs support a forest of mixed kelp species, with scour tolerant fauna on tide-swept bedrock or a kelp forest of *Laminaria hyperborea* with a faunal cushion and foliose red algae. With increasing depth the kelp thins to a kelp park. The kelp understorey ranges from a turf of hydroids, bryozoans, sponges and numerous colonial sea squirts, to a community characterised by the bryozoan *Flustra foliacea* or an understorey foliose red algae. On the sides of boulders a community with Deadman's Fingers (*Alcyonium digitatum*), the keel worm *Pomatoceros triqueter* and algal and bryozoan crusts is found.

In deeper water (15-30 m) animal dominated reef communities occur. The most notable of these is a community dominated by the sea squirt *Stolonica socialis* and the bryozoan *Flustra foliacea*. This community is rich in colonial sea squirts, in which *Archidistoma aggregatum, Sidnyum elegans* and *Distomus variolosus* and the solitary *Pyura squammata* occur. *Stolonica socialis* is only known from the south-east and north-west of Ireland, while *S. elegans* has not previously been recorded in Ireland. *Distomus variolosus* is only known from between Galway and Tralee Bay on the west coast, and the east and south-east coasts of Ireland. *Pyura squammata* appears to have a widespread but local distribution in Ireland. The sea anemone *Cataphellia brodricii* occurs in this community and in shallow water, both around the Saltee Islands and in other areas in the south-east. The only other records for this species are from Roaringwater Bay, Co. Cork. Where the bedrock is steep or large boulders are present the community may be formed of cushion sponges, branching sponges, massive sponges, *Nemertesia* hydroids, the rose coral *Pentapora foliacea,* or *Alcyonium digitatum*. Beds of the brittlestars *Ophiothrix fragilis* and *Ophiocomina nigra* are also found in the area, and on very steep to vertical reefs the plumose anemone *Metridium senile* may be found.

Species not mentioned above, and with limited distribution in Britain and Ireland and considered to be worthy of conservation, include the sponges *Tethyspira spinosa* and *Plocamilla coriacea*, the hydroids *Aglaophenia acacia, Tamarisca tamarisca, Halecium muricatum* and *Sertularella gaudichaudi,* the sea slug *Okenia aspersa,* the bryozoan *Schizomavella sarniensis* and the burrowing brittlestar *Amphiura securigera*. The majority of these species occur in the ascidian dominated communities and the *Stolonica socialis* community in particular. *Tethyspira spinosa* is only known from the Saltees and Roaringwater Bay in Ireland. *Plocamilla coriacea* is a recently described species, only recorded from the Saltees, Carnsore Point and Tuscar Rock, Co. Wexford and Kilkieran Bay, Co. Galway. *Aglaophenia acacia* is a southern species and occurs at several sites around the Saltees, with only one previous record in Ireland. Prior to the BioMar survey the only 20th century records for *Halecium muricatum* in Britain and Ireland were from the Isle of Man. This species is now known to occur at the Saltees and in Co. Donegal. The records for *Sertularella gaudichaudi* from this area are the only Irish records. The sea slug *Okenia aspersa* occurs at two sites in the area and these are the only recent records for Ireland. *Schizomavella sarniensis* is a recently described species of bryozoan and to date in Ireland has only been recorded from around the Saltees. The current known distribution of the burrowing brittlestar *Amphiura securigera* in Ireland appears to be the south-east of the country and Kenmare River, Co. Cork.

The littoral sediments of the Saltee Islands area are moderately exposed to wave action. Talitrid amphipods live under drift algae on the strand line. The mid shore is characterized by polychaete worms (*Hediste diversicolor*, *Malacoceros fuliginosus*, *Spio filicornis* and *Arenicola marina*), crustaceans (*Crangon crangon*) and crabs (*Carcinus maenas*). The low shore is characterized by the polychaete worms *Spio filicornis* and *Lanice conchilega*, the burrowing crustacean *Atylus swammerdamei*, crabs and bivalve molluscs (*Fabulina fabula* and occasional *Cerastoderma edule*). The sublittoral sediment around the Saltees is composed of exposed, tide-swept shelly gravel characterised by

the burrowing sea cucumber *Neopendactyla mixta,* with hydroids and bryozoans attached to cobbles.

Both islands have exposed rocky cliffs on the south and east sides. On Great Saltee these are mostly around 30 m high, and about half this on Little Saltee. The cliffs have a typical sea cliff flora, with Thrift (*Armeria maritima*), Sea Campion (*Silene vulgaris* subsp. *maritima*), Sea Plantain (*Plantago maritima*), Sea Aster (*Aster tripolium*), Common Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia officinalis*), Rock Sea-spurrey (*Spergularia rupicola*), Sea Mayweed (*Matricaria maritima*), Red Fescue (*Festuca rubra*), Sea Spleenwort (*Asplenium marinum*) and Sea Samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*). Sea Stork's-bill (*Erodium maritimum*) also occurs, and Golden-samphire (*Inula crithmoides*) has been recorded in the past. Excellent displays of lichens (*Ramalina* spp. and *Xanthoria* spp.) are present. The northern and western sides of both islands are fringed with shingle and boulder shores, with small areas of intertidal sandflats. Sea caves occur at the base of the cliffs on Great Saltee. Some of these are sublittoral and some have boulder beaches at the back.

Since the abandonment of farming on the islands (apart from sheep grazing on Little Saltee), Bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) has become dominant over much of the terrestrial area and often occurs in association with Bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non-scripta*). Bramble (*Rubus fruticosus* agg.) are also frequent. Dry grassland still occurs in some of the old fields, with species such as Yorkshire-fog (*Holcus lanatus*), Ground Ivy (*Glechoma hederacea*), Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), Common Nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and thistles (*Cirsium* spp.).

Several springs and seepage areas provide habitat diversity. Species present include Water-cress (*Nasturtium officinale*), Jointed Rush (*Juncus articulatus*), Bog Stitchwort (*Stellaria alsine*), Marsh Pennywort (*Hydrocotyle vulgaris*) and, in at least one location, Early Marsh-orchid (*Dactylorhiza incarnata*).

Great Saltee has a breeding population of Grey Seal, one of the very few in eastern Ireland. The breeding population was estimated at 571-744 individuals in 2005. A one-off moult count in 2007 gave a figure of 246 individuals.

The Saltee Islands are internationally important for their colonies of breeding seabirds. Particularly notable are the Gannets on Great Saltee (2,050 pairs in 2000), Cormorants on Little Saltee (273 pairs in 2000), Shags on both islands (265 pairs), Fulmars (525 pairs 1998-2000), Kittiwakes (2,125 pairs in 1999), and auks – Guillemots (21,436 individuals), Razorbills (*c.* 4,000 individuals) and Puffins (1,822 individuals). There is also a small Manx Shearwater colony (*c.* 150-175 pairs) on Great Saltee. The breeding populations of large gulls have declined dramatically in recent years. The Lesser Black-backed Gull colony is still important (245 pairs), but numbers of Herring Gull (*c.* 50 pairs) and Great Black-backed Gull (*c.* 90) are now very low.

There are one or two pairs of breeding Peregrine, and one pair of Chough occur here - at the eastern edge of their Irish range. Both of these species are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive.
Great Saltee is a major site for spring and autumn landbird migration. Very large numbers of pipits, swallows, martins, thrushes, warblers and finches occur, while smaller numbers of a great variety of other species (some very rare in Ireland) have also been recorded.

The island is also a good site for migrant Lepidoptera, especially Red Admirals, Painted Ladies, Clouded Yellows, Silver Y moths and Humming-bird Hawk Moths.

This site is of high conservation importance for the occurrence of several habitats which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Habitats Directive, of which the reefs are of exceptional quality and diversity. The site is of international importance for breeding seabirds and has two species which are listed on Annex I of the E.U. Birds Directive. In addition, the site has a breeding population of Grey Seal, an Annex II species on the E.U. Habitats Directive.