



## **Species Action Plan**

### **'Oysterplant'**



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**Living Shetland Biodiversity Action Plan  
May 2004**

## Species Action Plan

### OYSTERPLANT *Mertensia maritima*

#### Species profile

##### **UK B/D status**

Not listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan

##### **UK lead partners**

Not relevant

##### **Shetland status**

Locally rare, Local Priority Species

##### **Relevant HAP's**

Strandline, Marine BAP

##### **Statutory Protection**

None specifically related to this species

### Current Status

#### UK Status

Oysterplant is listed as a nationally scarce species in Britain (Stewart *et al* 1994), which means that it has been recorded from fewer than 100 x 10km squares of the national grid. It has undergone a decline since 1970 and is now found in North Wales, North-West England and Scotland (Preston *et al* 2002).

**The plant is classified in the U.K. as Nationally scarce. It is not listed as a UKBAP priority species.**

#### Local Status

In Shetland, oysterplant has been recorded at 49 sites since the first record back in 1769. It has, however, been in long-term decline and this decline accelerated during the latter half of the last century. It is currently restricted to just 12 sites and at only two of these (Lochend and Urafirth, both in north Mainland) is the population thriving. At many others there are just one, or a handful of plants left (Scott *et al* 2002)

#### Associated culture and folklore

The plant gets its name from its smooth grey, fleshy leaves which when eaten taste strongly of oysters, so much so that one Scot who had once been poisoned by oysters found that he was forced to retch upon first browsing the leaves of Oysterplant!

#### Ecology & management

It is a perennial plant, with unmistakable bright blue flowers, and is found above the strandline on shingle and pebble beaches.

The seeds can be dispersed by sea, which enables the plant to colonise new beaches, although many such colonies are short-lived.

#### Current factors causing loss or decline

**Grazing:** sheep graze extensively on the foreshore in Shetland, seaweed often being an important component of their diet, and oysterplant appears to be selected by sheep when they are grazing in its vicinity. Heavy grazing will eliminate the plant from the strandline.

**Gravel extraction:** there is a legal right for crofters to extract beach gravel and beach sand for domestic use in Shetland. Such extraction can have a direct impact on colonies of oysterplant if beach material upon which

the plant is growing is extracted. Plants may also suffer indirect damage through being crushed by heavy machinery *en route* to, or from, extraction sites.

**Transplants to gardens:** oysterplant is one of Shetland's most attractive plants, and there have been suggestions that plants have been taken from the wild and placed in ornamental rockeries etc in gardens. This activity is illegal, contravening the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981.

**Accidental damage:** there have been cases where oysterplant has been subject to accidental damage, these relating to the use of heavy machinery on the foreshore to service or relocate salmon cages.

**Storms:** oysterplant has been lost from some beaches in Shetland through natural causes, notably where beaches have suffered a major upheaval following winter storms. There is little that can be done to mitigate losses of this kind, and they are part of the natural cycle of colonisation and extinctions faced by plants that occupy strandline habitats.

## **Opportunities and Current action**

**Fair Isle:** on Fair Isle an area in which oysterplant was found in 1990 was fenced off in the late 1990s to prevent sheep grazing. The island community also agreed not to extract shingle from the area and by 2001 22 plants were present, nearly half of which were large and flowering (Scott *et al* 2002).

**Shetland Amenity Trust:** SAT successfully germinated seed collected in October 2000 from oysterplant growing at Urafirth in its nursery at Kergord. These seedlings are now ready for transplanting back into the wild.

*Sites in Shetland where oysterplant has been recorded since 1990.*

- Bardister, Gluss Voe: 127 plants counted in 1990, just one small non-flowering plant remaining in 2000
- Burravoe, North Roe: last recorded in 1992
- Catti Geo, Yell: 10 flowering plants half way up a cliff face in 1999.
- North Wick of Sound, Yell: one small non-flowering plant and one seedling in 1999
- Cunnister, Yell: 11 plants growing in 1990, one non-flowering plant in 2001.
- Dury Voe, below Tua: 18 present in 1990, now considered extinct
- East Voe, Grunay, Out Skerries: 19 present in 1995, just 8 juveniles in 1999
- Easter Quarff: 24 present in 1990, just one non-flowering plant present in 2001
- Lochend, North Roe: 29 flowering plants and 40 seedlings in 1999
- Mousa: one plant present through the 1990s
- Fair Isle: 2 present in 1990, increased to 12 flowering plants and 10 juveniles in 2001
- Sand Wick, Hillswick: 3 non-flowering patches in 2000
- Tangwick: 178 plants in 1990, extinct since 1993.
- Urafirth: 56 present in 1990, 49 plants counted in 2001, 39 flowering plants in 2002
- Breckon, Yell: one flowering plant through the 1990s, with an additional seedling in 1999.

## **Species Plan objectives, targets and actions**

***To maintain the presence of viable colonies of oysterplant at ten or more sites in Shetland. These colonies should have a minimum of 10 adult (flowering) plants and the presence of seedlings on an annual basis by 2010.***

The following sites have either a long tradition of hosting oysterplant or the presence of a community or other agents that can undertake appropriate management. They also give a good geographical spread through the Islands, thus mitigating the impacts of localised natural events e.g. storm damage. These should form a core of sites where oysterplant is monitored annually, managed sensitively, consideration is given to raising its profile through interpretive measures, and/or transplants of seedlings is undertaken.

Bardister, Gluss  
Catti Geo, Yell  
Cunnister, Yell  
Tua, Dury Voe

Easter Quarff  
Lochend, North Roe  
Mousa  
Muckle Uri Geo, Fair Isle

Tangwick, Eshaness

Urafirth

**Site safeguard.** An assessment should be undertaken at each core site and a separate mini action plan drawn up for each by 2004. This should consider the current population trend, site vulnerability, positive management measures that could be implemented, the benefits of raising awareness at the site, the potential for transplants and the key community/agency that might be encouraged to safeguard the site.

**Monitoring.** Continue to monitor oysterplant at all its known Shetland sites on a five-year rotation, with the next monitoring planned for 2004-2005. All data, including negative results, should be submitted to SBRC

**SAT germination programme.** Seed should continue to be collected from the most viable colonies (Urafirth and Lochend). This should be germinated by SAT and seedlings transplanted to core colonies when as appropriate. Full records of all transplanted material should be retained by SAT/SBRC.

### **Key contacts**

- Community Councils – (areas with proposed core beaches)
- Shetland Biological Records Centre (SBRC)  
Shetland Amenity Trust, Garthspool, Lerwick  
Tel: 01595 694688  
Fax: 01595 693956  
Email: sbrc@zetnet.co.uk  
Website: <http://www.nature.shetland.co.uk/brc/>
- Living Shetland Officer  
C/o SIC Infrastructure Services  
Grantfield  
Lerwick  
ZE1 0NT  
Tel: 01595 690832
- Royal Society for Protection of Birds (Reserve Manager, Mousa)  
Sumburgh Lighthouse  
Sumburgh Head  
Shetland  
Tel: 01950 460800
- Shetland Crofting, Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group (Advisors)  
Agricultural Marts  
Staney Hill,  
Lerwick  
ZE1 0QW  
Tel: 01595 692633
- Scottish Executive Rural Affairs Department  
Charlotte House  
Commercial Street  
Lerwick
- Scottish Natural Heritage – (Species officer)  
**Ground Floor, Stewart Building, Esplanade, Lerwick.**  
**ZE1 0LL**  
Tel – 01595 693345  
Fax – 01595 692565  
Website: [www.snh.gov.uk](http://www.snh.gov.uk)
- Shetland Island's Council (SIC)  
Austin Taylor (Conservation Manager) Shetland  
Island's Council  
Infrastructure Services, Grantfield, Lerwick  
Tel: 01595 744833  
Fax: 01595 695887  
Email: [austin.taylor@sic.shetland.gov.uk](mailto:austin.taylor@sic.shetland.gov.uk)

## **References**

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- Scott, W., Harvey, P. V., Riddington, R., & Fisher, M. A. (2002). *Rare plants of Shetland*.
- Stewart, A., Pearman, D. A., & Preston, C. D. (1994). *Scarce Plants in Britain*

## **Contributors**

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PVH, March 2002