

PE2202/A: Stop the Guga Hunt

Scottish Government written submission, 1 December 2025

Does the Scottish Government consider the specific ask[s] of the petition to be practical or achievable?

The Scottish Government fully appreciates the Petitioner's concerns over the protection of this important species. Section 16(2)(a) of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes specific provision for the granting of a licence for the traditional hunting of gannets on the Island of Sula Sgeir to provide food for human consumption on the Isle of Lewis.

The guga (or gannet chick) hunt, which takes place in August each year, is a traditional activity which goes back hundreds of years and is of considerable cultural significance to the people of Ness on the Isle of Lewis. It is not uncommon for guga to be served at public events on Lewis.

In considering an application for a licence, NatureScot gave consideration to two main issues. The first is whether the hunt is sustainable, and by that the focus of the consideration is whether the activity would have an adverse effect on the conservation status of the species concerned, namely gannets. The second issue is whether the practices of the hunt are consistent with animal welfare legislation, namely section 19 the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 ("the 2006 Act").

For 2025, it is the first time an application has been received since 2021. The people of Ness did not apply in 2020 due to Covid-19, and in 2022, 2023 and 2024 in light of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. NatureScot thoroughly assessed the application, taking into account survey data and population analysis, and granted a licence with a limit of 500 birds.

This is significantly fewer than in previous years where licences for up to 2,000 birds have been granted. This revised limit for 2025 is aimed at safeguarding the sustainability of the Sula Sgeir gannet population and to support its continued recovery following avian flu. The limit is considered on an annual basis based on the most up to date information.

NatureScot count the guga ashore to ensure compliance with the bag limit specified in the license issued. The actual number of guga taken in 2025 was 485. It should also be noted that the guga are almost fully grown when they are taken.

Turning now to the issue of animal welfare, and the potential for an activity to cause unnecessary suffering. Whilst it is the responsibility of those persons operating under the terms of the licence to make sure that they do so in compliance with any other legislation, including with respect to animal welfare considerations, it is a condition of NatureScot's licence that birds should be killed humanely. NatureScot assessed this

part of the licence application as meeting animal welfare requirements. Most of the gugas will be killed by a single blow to the head. Where a second blow is required, it is very likely that the first will have rendered the bird unconscious. In our view therefore the method used to kill the gugas does not involve unnecessary suffering.

Given the above and that the guga hunt is carried out in accordance with a licence issued by NatureScot, we are confident that the guga hunt is compatible with the requirements of the 2006 Act, which allows the killing of an animal in an appropriate and humane manner.

What, if any, action the Scottish Government is currently taking to address the issues raised by this petition, and is any further action being considered that will achieve the ask[s] of this petition?

NatureScot keep licensing matters under continual review and if there was any change in the circumstances of this traditional activity, they would be prepared to reconsider the issue of a licence under section 16(2) or the terms of any such licence.

On this basis, the Scottish Government does not intend to amend Section 16 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to remove the power to grant licences for taking Gannets on Sula Sgeir.

Directorate for Environment and Forestry