DESCRIPTION OF COASTAL CHARACTER TYPES

The following coastal character types were defined as part of a SNH Commissioned Report: *An assessment of the sensitivity and capacity of the Scottish seascape in relation to windfarms* (SNH Commissioned Report 103, 2005). In defining coastal character types, the coastal character was assessed then considered alongside hinterland and marine character.

Information on these three character types (coastal, hinterland and marine) was derived from:

- a review of the relevant landscape character assessments,
- analysis of national landscape character types,
- JNCC regional seas information,
- relevant sources such as sailing guides, pilot books and admiralty atlases,
- knowledge and experience drawn from SNH Area officers and landscape advisers; Seascapes study steering group (2005) of professionals drawn from Highland Council (on behalf of the Scottish Society of Directors of Planning) and the Scottish Renewables Forum.

Referred to in CR 103 as ‘seascape’ character types, the study essentially resulted in 13 coastal character types, defined at a national level and valid at the broad, strategic level (further detailed background information is given in SNH Commissioned Report 103 (2005), Section 2.6).

**Type 1 : Remote High Cliffs**

**Locations**

- St Abbs, Borders
- Mull of Galloway and some headlands on Solway Firth
- North west Sutherland Coast
- Atlantic coasts of Orkney
- Parts of Shetland Coast
- North Caithness

**Physical characteristics**

High cliffs, often over 200m tall, with occasional small sandy or stony bays at their base, contained by rocky headlands. Stacks, caves and collapsed cliffs are often features of this coastline. A strong contrast of line and form arises through the sheer verticality of cliffs and the wide, horizontal expanse of the sea.
This type usually has a high moorland, or occasionally, mountainous hinterland where semi-natural heathland is the dominant landcover. Settlement is generally absent, although occasional small villages are found tucked in bays and inlets; in Highland areas there may be extensive crofting on higher land. Lighthouses form prominent features on headlands. This type has a remote, wild character due to the absence of roads and settlement. Where roads exist they are aligned parallel to the coast, for example, the North Sutherland coast.

Access and views to the coast from the hinterland are restricted due to the cliffs. Wide elevated views are directed along the coast and out to the open sea, although on Orkney views of other islands are frequently gained from elevated locations. Views of rigs or boats are a focus within the maritime component of this type. The Northern quality of light often gives intense clarity in views.

**Experiential qualities**
Atlantic coasts of Orkney and Shetland, and other coastal parts of Shetland have a particularly exposed character and are physically remote from settlement. The coast is difficult to access and the water’s edge is often blocked by impassable steep cliffs. These are exhilarating and awe-inspiring coastlines due to the great height of cliffs giving elevated and distant views, and being particularly dramatic in high winds and turbulent seas. The noise of nesting sea birds on the cliffs and sound of waves add to the attraction and excitement of this seascape type.

**Type 2 : Mainland rocky coastline with open sea views**

**Locations**

- Extensive stretches of the north-east (Caithness, Angus and Aberdeenshire) coast
- East Lothian coast between Dunbar and Pease Bay
- East Sutherland

**Physical characteristics**
Long straight stretches of coastline with cliffs rising to some 30 metres height and often with a raised beach edge. There are few significant headlands although geological differences create variety where softer sandstone forms an indented coast
with bays and inlets, arches and caves; harder volcanic rocks produce a more resistant coastline of promontories, low cliffs and rocky shoreline. Notable gloups on the north east coast. Productive arable farming occurs up to the cliff edge and tree cover is minimal. Compact fishing villages are located at the base of cliffs in small bays, while castles and cliff-top forts perch on dramatic headland locations, for example Dunottar, near Stonehaven. These are highlighted against the simple sea backdrop. These settlements and built features all appear to be spaced at even intervals and thus provide a visual rhythm of foci along the coast. Views over the North Sea are generally expansive and open, although parts of the Caithness coast have views of Hoy over the Pentland Firth. Shipping is a common feature in gazing out to sea. Some isolated industry occurs along this coast, for example the cement works and Torness Power Station, south of Dunbar.

Experiential qualities
Exposed coastline with open views. Strong historical associations of castles and cliff top forts and cultural interest of fishing villages. These coastlines are of geological and ecological interest, and support colonies of seabirds. While there are exposed and open seascapes to one side, to the other the coast gives way to an agricultural hinterland, the presence of settlements and nearby roads. These features along with views of shipping and occasional industry, limit the sense of wildness likely to be experienced.

Type 3 : Mainland deposition coastline with open views

Location

- East coast of Angus and Aberdeenshire
- Parts of the East Caithness and Sutherland Coasts
- Parts of the Outer Solway Firth

Physical characteristics
Low-lying coastal sections comprising long, sweeping curved sandy beaches. These are often backed by dunes and form a soft linear edge to the sea. This type is distinguished by a simple horizontal visual composition of sky, sea and land. Grassland and gorse occurs behind dunes and in turn, this is backed by flat, mixed or
arable farmland. Some areas of dunes (e.g. Barry Links) are reserved for military live firing. Golf courses occur within this type and settlements are located within farmland. Larger settlements such as Carnoustie, are popular holiday and golf resorts. St Fergus Gas terminal is a distinct, visually prominent feature in Aberdeenshire.

Uninterrupted views are long and expansive along beaches with low level, and sea-level views over the North Sea. Shipping traffic is a common feature.

**Experiential qualities**

This type is located within a relatively well-populated area and beaches are an important recreational resource. The straightness of the coast and open views of the sea give a degree of exposure. The Northern coastal light can often accentuate particular textures, shapes and colours. This type has a dynamic character – physically, visually and experientially – noticeable in the migration of sand, the constantly changing character of the sea and passing weather systems.

**Type 4 : Outer Firths**

**Locations**

- Outer Firth of Forth
- Outer Firth of Tay
- Outer Moray Firth
- Outer Dornoch Firth/Loch Fleet
- Outer Solway Firth

**Physical characteristics**

Sandy beaches are interspersed with low rocky headlands. Backed by a farmed plain of varying width with viewshed contained by the Lammermuir hills in the Lothians, and coastal hills in Fife and the Black Isle which can often considerably restrict the coastal edge. Broader agricultural plains are present against the coast in East Lothian and Morayshire, although views in the latter are often restricted by coastal forestry located on dune systems. Relatively well populated with small towns and villages set out along the coast, some comprising small holiday resorts.
Internationally renowned golf courses on links and dunes backing the coast. Occasional industry, roads and railways are aligned parallel to the coast.

Views focus on distinctive islands (Bass Rock, Isle of May) within the Firth of Forth. Islands are less significant in views over the Moray and Tay Firths. Common to all these types is the focus onto the shores on each side of the Firth, with settlements, and often masts and other infrastructure located on ridges forming significant features in views. The profile of land on the opposite Firth shore tends to flatten due to both the distance and often subtle topography. The Outer Firths, and particularly the Firth of Forth, are major shipping routes.

The outer Dornoch Firth and Loch Fleet are less developed and relatively sparsely settled. Extensive intertidal zones and wetlands occur. The Dornoch Firth is generally narrower than the larger East coast firths, and backed by high hills. Forestry is commonly planted on coastal dunes, some of this is ecologically important in Loch Fleet, and this limits views of the coast from inland.

The outer Solway Firth coastline, lying west of Southerness Point, is more diverse than other outer firths, with a distinctive pattern of narrow inlets interspersed and contained by distinct rocky headlands. These inlets often have an intimate scale and contain broad estuarine flats and marsh. Forestry and policy landscapes are a feature of the hinterland with small settlements generally located within these sheltered inlets. Long views over estuarine sand, mud, salt marsh of the Firth are a feature, with the mountains of the Lake District and isolated hills, such as Criffel on the Scottish coast forming foci in views.

**Experiential qualities**

The containment of the Firths where land is visible and provides shelter, generally give a less exposed and dramatic seascape. However, this sense of enclosure weakens further eastwards in the Moray Firth and Firth of Forth, where the firths suddenly broaden and flatten thereby creating a more open seascape. The presence of ships, rigs (in the Moray Firth and Firth of Forth), settlements (particularly visible at night) and other built features and well farmed hinterland given this type a developed character.
Type 5: Developed inner firths

Locations

- Inner Firth of Forth
- Inner Firth of Clyde
- Cromarty Firth

Physical characteristics
Coastline of low rock platforms, small rocky headlands and raised beaches, often highly modified by settlement and communications, particularly within the Firth of Clyde. Further inland, the coastline is often fringed with tidal mud flats. These Inner Firths are backed by the well-defined ridgelines of coastal braes. Bridges, communications and industry are prominent features within this type. Industrial structures can often be tall and include oil refineries and docks within the Forth and oil rigs within the Cromarty Firth. Dockyards and ferry terminals dominate the Firth of Clyde.

Settlements tend to be closer together and larger, often extending onto lower slopes of the enclosing braes. Settlement along the coast is usually backed by farmland and policy landscape. A more upland character exists within the Inner Clyde, with distant views of mountains present to the north, and within the Cromarty Firth to the north and west.

Views of the opposite firth shores are prominent due to the narrowness of the firth. The Clyde and Forth are a focus in views, the flat plane of light-reflective water, although narrow, acts as a foil to the land on either side; the strong containment of hills directs views towards the water.

Experiential qualities
Although tidal, the Inner Firths do not have the same experience associated with the expansiveness, light and openness of the sea – there are no large waves or exposure to the elements. Views of settlement and industry dominate. Views of the opposite shore, close by, give a well-settled character. The context of the Firth within a wider, highly man-modified landscape is a distinct feature.
Type 6: Narrow coastal shelf

Location

- East Sutherland Coast between Golspie and North of Helmsdale
- South Ayrshire Coast

Physical characteristics
Predominantly rocky, ‘straight’ coastline backed by a narrow corridor of level land tightly constricted by inland hills and the open sea. This creates a distinctly linear space. The coastal shelf forms an important corridor for communications including major roads, railway lines and power lines. Steep sided narrow glens intersect the coastal shelf, which are often wooded. The coastal shelf is largely utilised for agriculture due to favourable drainage and soils. In Sutherland, crofts are often located in a linear fashion parallel to the coast. This type is generally sparsely settled with small harbour settlements situated on inlets; and with their historic churches, harbours and houses forming foci. Views focus on open sea, although Ailsa Craig is a key focus from the Ayrshire coast.

Experiential qualities
The Coastal shelf can feel remote due to the containment of inland hills/coastal scarp, although communications often are aligned close to or within this type. Views are directed over sea rather than hinterland due to the presence of steep hills inland.

Type 7: Kyles and sea lochs

Location

- North Sutherland Coast

Physical characteristics
This type occurs on the deeply indented coastline of North Sutherland, forming a transition between the open sea and the glens and straths which extend from the interior landmass of large-scale mountains and moorland. The sea lochs form a
narrow inlet of water, strongly enclosed by steep high hills. Kyles tend to be broader, surrounded by a low and gently sloped landform. The kyles are quite densely populated along their shores with small settlements concentrated at bridging points at the inlet mouth, and forming a key focus in the landscape/seascape. Access routes are aligned around the shoreline or over the kyles via causeways. This landscape tends to penetrate into areas of moorland slopes and hills, and its central, open water space offers views of mountains.

Views are funnelled along the kyle or sea loch to the open sea, although islands can sometimes restrict views of open waters. Fish farms have significant impacts within this type, forming foci within coastal waters.

**Experiential qualities**
The containment of kyles and sea lochs limits experience of the open sea with views focussing on the shores to either side with an often mountainous interior. The settled character of this type, together with this containment gives a calm, secure feel. There is a strong visual rhythm to the kyles and sea lochs, also experienced when travelling sequentially though these landscapes and formed by the settlement located at bridging points.

**Type 8 : Enclosed bays, islands and headlands**

**Location**

- North west Sutherland
- Wester Ross

**Physical characteristics**
An indented coastline with sheltered rocky and sandy bays, exposed rocky promontories and islands, creates a small scale seascape character. Offshore islands, sited within or at the edge of bays, allow some views to distant open sea. Views from headlands are of open sea, often with a ‘Minch’ influence and with distant views of the low Lewis coastline. Settlement and crofting is concentrated along the coast, particularly in the sheltered bays. This contrasts with the more remote and exposed headlands. The hinterland generally comprises rough grazing and
moorland-clad hills, rising to steep sided mountains in some areas, giving a diversity of views. A main road is aligned close to the indented, bayed coast and elsewhere it traverses across the base of headlands; narrow roads form dead end routes on headlands, islands in the bays form strong focal points and from within the bays, they tend to restrict views of distant open sea.

**Experiential qualities**
A breathtakingly diverse seascape, experienced as each headland is traversed and successive bays open up to view. The contrast between the remote, rough moorland of headlands and the sheltered settled bay and inlets, which provide a sense of tranquillity and sanctuary, gives this area special scenic qualities. Dominant westerly weather systems often differentially highlight sea, islands and mainland landscapes. A diverse type to travel through with views thrown back and forth, variably focussing on distant vistas or foreground details. Remote headlands can often give a sense of intense wildness.

**Type 9 : Sounds, narrow and islands**

**Location**
- Applecross peninsula to Mid Kintyre, and encompassing the eastern seaboard of Islay, Jura, Mull, Small Isles and Skye
- Loch Fyne, Argyll
- Sound of Harris – Harris/North Uist; Sound of Barra – Eriskay/Barra; Loch Seaforth, Lewis

**Physical characteristics**
A deeply indented and fragmented coastline, with islands and mainland enclosing narrows and sounds to form a strong articulated coast. The coastline is generally low and rocky and is often an ‘incidental’ feature, the focus being the narrow elongated stretches of open water which act as a visual foil to the often diverse landform of mountains and craggy islands.

Sandy beaches occur occasionally at inlets, with a notable, more extensive series lying between Arisaig and Morar. The coast is strongly fragmented in places,
breaking up to form a myriad of small islands such as the Slate Islands of the Argyll coast. Settlement occurs along the narrow coastal edge of sheltered sea lochs. This type is backed occasionally by crofting land but mainly comprises moorland hills. Forestry occurs in places against the coast with ancient woodlands found in more inaccessible narrows and fjords. High mountain massif occurs close to the coast and dramatically features in views.

Views of islands tend to be the focus from the Mainland and vice versa, with mountain ridges e.g. Cuillin on Skye/Paps of Jura/Rum and Harris being particularly arresting. The profiles of sea, islands and mountain ranges build up different contrasting layers to create an overall high scenic quality. The open sea is not generally obvious because views are characteristically very contained in narrows and sounds, which are broken by islands. A broader bay containing the Small Isles between Mallaig and North Ardnamurchan allows more open views in contrast. Fish farming occurs in sheltered bays and the Sounds are important ferry routes between islands and the Mainland.

**Experiential qualities**

This type forms a highly scenic seascape due to the variety of landforms seen in views against the sea. Key ferry routes cross the sands and give changing views of islands, mainland and sea. Sandy beaches although rare, are magnets for recreation, and climbing and walking are all popular pursuits within this type due to the presence of mountains close to the shore. The sheltered waters of the sounds also attract sailors and scenic coastal road and rail routes, e.g. Fort William to Mallaig.

This type is not exposed to the open Atlantic being relatively calm and sheltered due to its inherent enclosure, however, views of mountains can often give it a dramatic character and it can feel remote in some of the more inaccessible narrows, e.g. parts of Knoydart, Morvern and Loch Nevis.

Between Eriskay/Barra, Barra/Mingulay and Harris/North Uist in the Western Isles, there is a diverse seascape of sea, islands, islets, skerries, sunken reefs and mountainous backdrops. The over-riding, distinct perception is of being on an island with glimpses of open sea, with occasional rougher sea being indicators of this. This perception is usually experienced from a ferry with the ‘end’ destination being the focus of views.
Type 10 : Outer firth with strong island influence

Location

- Outer Firth of Clyde

Physical characteristics
This type comprises a broad sea basin, distinct from the Outer Firth types on the East Mainland coast by virtue of the containment provided by hills, mountains and the large islands of Arran and Bute.

The coastline is generally low and rocky with occasional sandy and stony beaches – often a narrow coastal ledge with prominent scarp and coastal hills limiting views inland. This type is well-settled along coastal fringes, particularly on the mainland coast where many tourist facilities and resorts are present but also concentrated on the eastern island coasts. There are a number of key ferry routes and sailing is popular in the sheltered waters of the Firth. Industry and power stations on the North Ayrshire Coast form large-scale features.

Policy landscapes and woodlands are frequent features along the coast, and forestry is present on steeper hillsides, principally within Cowal, Kintyre and parts of Arran. Farmland occurs on lower ground where valleys abut the coast. The serrated ridge of Goat Fell on Arran dominates views within this Firth, but views of other islands are also a feature and these can often merge with the mainland in some views. These characteristics create a highly scenic, indented coastline of kyles and sounds backed by mountains, particularly evident to the north and east.

Experiential qualities
This semi-enclosed, generally sheltered seascape is well settled and accessible. Diverse views of islands, sea and mainland focus on the mountains of Arran. This is a highly scenic seascape type alongside a well settled coast with the presence of isolated industry,
Type 11: Less developed inner firths

Location

- Beauly, Tay and Dornoch Firths
- Inner Solway Firth

Physical characteristics

Generally flat, fertile carselands or coastal deltas contained within ‘U’ shaped valley and semi-enclosed by steep hills or mountains further inland. The valley form creates a strong physical and visual connection with surrounding landscape character types and the Firth is therefore less of a dominant feature than in Outer Firth types.

These Inner Firths are farmed with large rectangular fields producing a distinct landscape pattern seen against a simple backdrop of rough grazing/moorland on hills and foreground of water. Estuarine reed beds and mud flats occur in the Firths and there is a narrow intertidal zone; tides bring dynamic qualities to this type. A well settled landscape although with no large scale urban centres. Roads and railways are aligned along the shore of the Firth and bridging points and causeways often provide distinctive views. Historic features create distinct landscape foci.

The Inner Solway Firth has a broad, open, flat character comprising extensive estuarine flats – an extensive intertidal zone – backed by a farmed coastal plain and occasional policy landscapes. While the character is predominantly rural, roads, railway lines and power lines are prominent features. Long views over estuarine sand, mud, salt marsh of the Solway Firth are a feature with the mountains of the Lake District forming a distant focus in views.

Experiential qualities

A calm landscape with less marine influence as the firth narrows, with land and landuse dominating views. The proximity of opposing sides of the firth give clear finite horizons and a feeling of enclosure and shelter, although the Inner Solway Firth has a more exposed and open character.
Type 12 : Deposition coasts of islands

Location

- Atlantic coasts of Western Isles
- Low lying coasts of the Orkney Islands
- West facing coasts of Coll, Tiree, Islay. Iona
- Harris and Barra

Physical characteristics
Long sandy beaches backed by dunes and low lying machair, or by pastures. Crofting or farms are set back from coast. An open, low lying, largely treeless and windswept landscape with views of the Atlantic Ocean or North Sea, although dunes can often screen views of open sea and coast inland. Sparsely settled, low-key land management and lack of coastal development.

On Harris and Barra, islands such as Taransay, and mountainous headlands funnel and add drama to sea views.

Experiential qualities
Often wild, remote ‘edge of ocean’ feel. Big breakers and low lying exposure of island landscapes, with few sights of land in large scale sea views. Combination of mountains with coast provides particularly high scenic quality and drama.

Type 13 : Low, rocky island coasts

Location

- Much of Lewis coastline
- East coast Western Isles
- West coast of Skye
- Coll, Colonsay and west coast of Jura/parts of Islay and west coast Mull
- Shetland Voes and Sounds
- Small Isles
**Physical characteristic**

Generally low rocky coastline, rising to cliffs in places. Moorland, either rocky, ‘stepped’ or boggy, tends to back a narrow sparsely settled open coastal fringe, usually some crofting and few settlements. Views of open Atlantic Ocean in the main; dramatic mountain backdrops. ‘Fragmented’ island coastlines.

Many island coasts are low and rocky with dramatic mountain backdrops, principally the eastern coasts of Lewis/Harris and South Uist; but also parts of the western coasts of Skye, Rum and Mull where mountains lie close to the coast and visually contain and lend a dramatic backdrop to views. In north east Lewis, views of the Assynt hills are a key feature across the Minch.

‘Fragmented’, low, rocky island coasts include the ‘Knock and Lochan’ and fragmented lower lying coasts of the Western Isles, particularly the east coasts of Harris and North Uist. Here, fragmented small knocks and flatter boggy islands, break off into the sea as rocky promontories and off-shore skerries. Sparsely settled, backed by small areas of crofting and mainly moorland hinterland. This is a small scale landscape with an intricate pattern where views to the open sea are restricted.

The farmed and settled coastal lowlands of Shetland have a deeply indented coastline, creating sounds and voes with fragmented islands. The coastal edge is generally insignificant, low, hard, often appearing smooth and ‘submerged’. Voes and sounds form sheltered narrow channels of coastal waters with open, gently sloping hinterland of pasture, rough grazing and scattered crofting. Views over small islands to open sea are often a feature.

**Experiential qualities**

These island seascapes can feel very remote due to the sparse settlement, the hinterland of moorland or low-key crofting, and exposure to the open sea. Strong sense of being on an island due to close proximity of the sea often with ‘all round’ views and closeness of the sea.