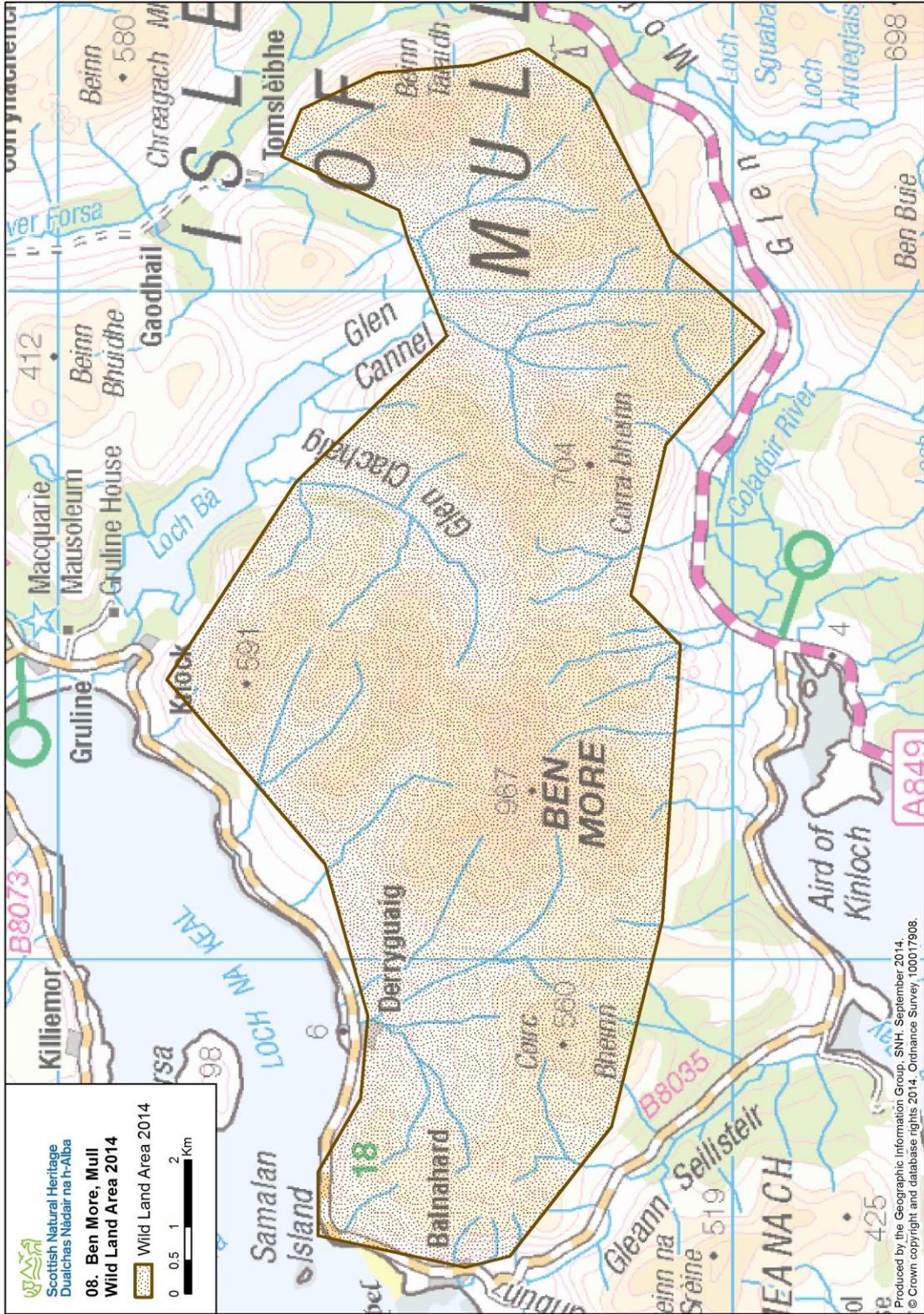


Ben More, Mull Wild Land Area



Context

This relatively small WLA (area of 87 km²), one of 11 island WLAs, is located in the mountainous heart of the Inner Hebridean Isle of Mull. Elongated in shape, the WLA stretches east and west of the distinctive peak of Ben More, the only island Munro outwith those found on Skye. Unusually for an island WLA it is not defined by the coast, although the sea strongly influences the qualities of the area with the 12km long north-west boundary less than 1km from the sea.

To the east of Ben More the mountain range continues as large areas of scree and exposed rock that have been carved out of the roots of a huge volcano to form a variable landscape punctuated by the conical peak of Beinn Talaidh. This marks the eastern extent of the WLA before coniferous forestry wraps around the base of the hill. To the west of Ben More is an arc of hills that envelop and provide a sense of enclosure for the wide, concave watershed of the grassy slopes of Gleann Doire Dhubhaig.

The WLAs edges are marked by narrow single track roads and tracks on all sides. The inland loch of Loch Ba and Glen Cannel mark the eastern half of the northern boundary and provide gentler slopes interspersed with some native woodland cover only separated from the WLA itself by the estate track. The sea loch of Loch na Keal lies along the western half of the northern boundary. Salen is the closest settlement of any size, which serves as an important gateway to visitors to the west of the island.

The WLA has some signs of historic settlement at its edges but is uninhabited, with land mainly used for deer stalking and hill walking. Ben More is a popular destination for hill walkers *“It is a grand, rocky mountain and a fantastic viewpoint for scores of islands dotted around the Minches.”* Three SSSIs lie within or partly within this WLA the largest of which being the Ben More – Scarisdale SSSI covering the central mountain area where the geomorphology is a key featureⁱⁱ.

The WLA is covered entirely by designations that reflect its landscape and scenic qualities, with the northern slopes of Ben More down to Loch na Keal recognised by their inclusion within the Loch na Keal, Isle of Mull National Scenic Area (NSA). Its descriptionⁱⁱⁱ highlights *“... the bold rugged and wild character of outer Loch na Keal, ... share views of the same group of islands. The ancient lava flows give a horizontal emphasis to the whole area. Geometric, strongly stepped profiles lead up and back from a rocky, steeply edged coastline to flat topped summits... Passage along the eastern shores of Loch na Keal is tightly confined to the narrow and spectacular coastal road. In the case of western Ardmearach, ‘The Wilderness’, there is no road at all.”* The remaining WLA is included within an Area of Panoramic Quality (APQ)^{iv}.

This WLA is appreciated from locations outwith it including the A489 in the south but especially from the north side of Loch na Keal on the B8072 where views are readily obtained across the water, along the lower grassy slopes and up to the more rocky scree slopes of Ben More and its surrounding peaks.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A landscape which is well defined where the dominant Munro of Ben More accentuates the rugged and remote interior**

The most prominent foci of this WLA is the central Munro of Ben More which together with its surrounding peaks is notable from outwith the WLA including from the mainland ferry appearing as a high, *remote* and *rugged* interior to the island.

The mountains appear as large areas of scree and exposed rock often forming conical peaks and ridges which are very *rugged* interspersed with lower slopes of interlocking glens of boggy grassland. The combination of these features makes for a *physically challenging* landform which for some can result in *risk* and a sense of *anxiety* especially with increasing altitude. Conversely from some of the lower glens where Ben More towers above and remains visible, it provides a distinct landform feature which can aid orientation.



The rapid gain in elevation away from the surrounding coastline allows panoramic views from much of the higher ground, revealing the intricate pattern of the indented coastline and surrounding islands resulting in a perception of *awe*, *arresting* and *inspiring* qualities whilst enhancing the wider perception of *naturalness*. These elevated views also reveal some prominent human elements around the margins and although these are mainly located outside the WLA, the openness of the foothills means that they influence its wild land qualities. It is however notable that these views do not reveal wind farms.



There are few *human artefacts* within this WLA aside from a short section of wood pole power line, small scale hydro features, a fish hatchery at Clachaig and the fencing of native woodland within Glen Clachaig, but these are all located close to the edges of this WLA and have localised effects. Evidence of *contemporary land uses* tend to be limited to signs of stock feeding, fencing and grazing around the lower glens and close to the margins of the WLA and although clearly visible from limited locations, the low-key character of all these features means they again tend to have localised effects.



Human artefacts and contemporary land uses outwith the WLA that have an influence in the WLA are generally limited to large areas of forest plantation blocks along the southern periphery and wrapping around the eastern mountain of Beinn Talaigh. In contrast, elements that are present around the north and western margins of this WLA are either; low lying following the sinuous features of the landscape such as the peripheral roads, or, small in scale such dwellings or estate buildings. Boat and ferry activity

although infrequent is noticeable on outward facing slopes and peaks, introducing sound and movement that can temporarily reduce the *sense of remoteness, sanctuary and solitude*.

- **Rugged summits sweeping down to steep, dramatic cliffed and scree covered hill slopes result in a surprising high sense of remoteness within relatively small extent of area**

Although Mull is readily accessible from the mainland, the sea crossing heightens the perception of *remoteness* and isolation. The nature of the peripheral very narrow and single track roads which tightly hug the often sharply rising landforms results in surprisingly few entry points to this WLA, this is highlighted around the *inaccessible* cliffs at Gribun where access on foot is simple not possible. Those routes that do exist are limited to the publicised sometimes braided, path to Ben More from Dhiseig, the estate track running along Loch Ba through Glen Cannel, and the less well defined drove roads through Glen Clachaig to Glen More which become indistinct on the ground further into the interior, reinforcing a high sense of *remoteness* and an increased *physical challenge* required. The numerous steep and scree covered slopes, together with large extents of boggy ground between these creating more convoluted routes around and through the lower glens, accentuate *remoteness* and the resulting perception of *risk* where actual distances from roads may not be all that great.

Although compact in size, the wild land qualities of this WLA appear to extend in almost all directions and contribute to a perception that the area is larger than its actual physical *extent*. Views across inner and outer Loch na Keal make a particular contribution to this quality as the *awe inspiring* pattern of islands and indented coastline is revealed, contributing to a sense of *naturalness* whilst reinforcing a sense of *remoteness*. In addition the hummocky moraines on the south side of the Glen More road outwith the WLA, consequently known as ‘the valley of the hundred hills’, further reinforce the perceived extension of *naturalness* across this part of the WLA.



The stepped landscape to the west of the lower slopes of Ben More extends outwith the WLA over the Ardmeanach peninsular. This area appears as a continuation of high rugged hills where the *lack of human artefacts* and *evidence of contemporary land uses* is enhanced as a result of the screening effect of the convex hills rising from the intervening glen hiding artefacts such as the road, conifer plantations and occasional buildings that are contained within it. Additionally the *ruggedness* of the mountainous interior appears to extend across some of the edges of this WLA where there is an extension of the remote mountain character, for example where the lower yet still rugged hills wrap around the lower reaches of Loch Ba and further to the east of Glen Forsa.

This quality can be affected where obvious forms of *human artefacts* or *contemporary land uses* such as roads and plantations outwith the WLA demarcate its physical *extent*. Conifer plantations around the southern and far eastern margins diminish some of the area’s *awe-inspiring* qualities of openness, as well as its *perceived naturalness*, and are particularly prominent due to their contrast of colour, texture and form.

- **A range of distinctive geological features contribute to a high sense of naturalness, distinctiveness and sense of awe**

This WLA strongly exhibits a range of distinctive geological features across its extent which collectively contribute to a strong sense of *naturalness*. This is evident in the broad scale composition of the mountainous landscape, but also with the local geological features such as stepped profiles, cliffs, and moraines.

The stepped landform profile clearly reflects the underlying geology of basalt layers and is most defined by the terracing around Gleann Doire Dhubhaig which, due to the lack of tree cover provides a *sense of awe* for some in its simplicity further emphasising the *perceived naturalness*. The plateau of Gribuns coastal cliffs and landslips in the far west are evidence of continuing movement of the land which together with the hummocky glacial moraines in the east, which highlight glacial retreat, further accentuate the openness of these landscapes providing *inspiring* views which are enhanced by the lack of *human artefacts*. Ancient lava flows give a horizontal emphasis to parts of the coastal edge and flat-topped summits when viewed from elevated locations further strengthening the *naturalness* and resulting *sense of awe* across much of this area.



- **A secluded yet open interior with a strong sense of naturalness and sanctuary**

U-shaped glens and corries divide the mountain ridges with Glen Clachaig the major glen within this WLA. Although large and open, the floor of the glen offers shelter and a strong sense of *sanctuary* and *solitude* due to the imposing steep corrie heading up to Ben More at its head. This feature in itself, when viewed from the lower gentler glen floor provides a sense of *awe* and *arresting* or *inspiring* qualities

Little woodland cover is apparent within the WLA with the exception of small patches of riparian woodland following burns and enclosures of stunted upland birch woodlands through lower reaches of the glen which themselves have a positive effect on the sense of *naturalness* accentuating the rugged nature of the open moorland. The lack of tree cover away from these areas is pronounced, and is highlighted where single isolated trees appear as vertical features contributing to the lack of shelter and sense of *remoteness* and resulting *risk*.



Occasional and seasonal sights and sounds of eagles soaring overhead and rutting deer enhance the perception of *naturalness* and *solitude* on more elevated slopes away from the lower glens and margins. In the lower glens the presence of management is more apparent including stock grazings and fencing.

- **The influence of the sea is striking contributing to remoteness and perceived naturalness and awe**

Crossing by sea, visitors first encounter the *rugged* and *arresting* mountains of Mull as a backdrop to the more expansive sea views where the wild land area is not clearly defined as its qualities appear to extend almost to the coastal edge.



From elevated locations within this WLA the presence of the sea, sea lochs and complexity of coastline, in addition to the inland loch of Loch Ba reinforce the *perceived naturalness* especially where these views are free from *human artefacts* whilst reinforcing the *remote* island nature and the relatively small physical extent of this WLA.

In contrast there is a notable lack of waterbodies within this WLA aside from the few small pools and lochans which tend to only be visible from more elevated locations. Similarly the network of streams running through the glens and across the hills is often hidden due to the lack of riparian woodland highlighting them as linear features. Where these streams are more deeply gouged into the rock then the sound of rushing water locally influences a sense of *perceived naturalness* leading to a peaceful *inspiring* and sense of *sanctuary* and *solitude*.



Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Information available at <http://www.walkhighlands.co.uk>

ⁱⁱ SNH (2005) *Mull and Iona: A landscape fashioned by geology*. Stephenson, SNH.

ⁱⁱⁱ SNH (2010) *The special qualities of the National Scenic Areas*. SNH Commissioned Report No 374.

^{iv} Area of Panoramic Quality Identified by Argyll and Bute Council

Site assessment carried out June and August 2015