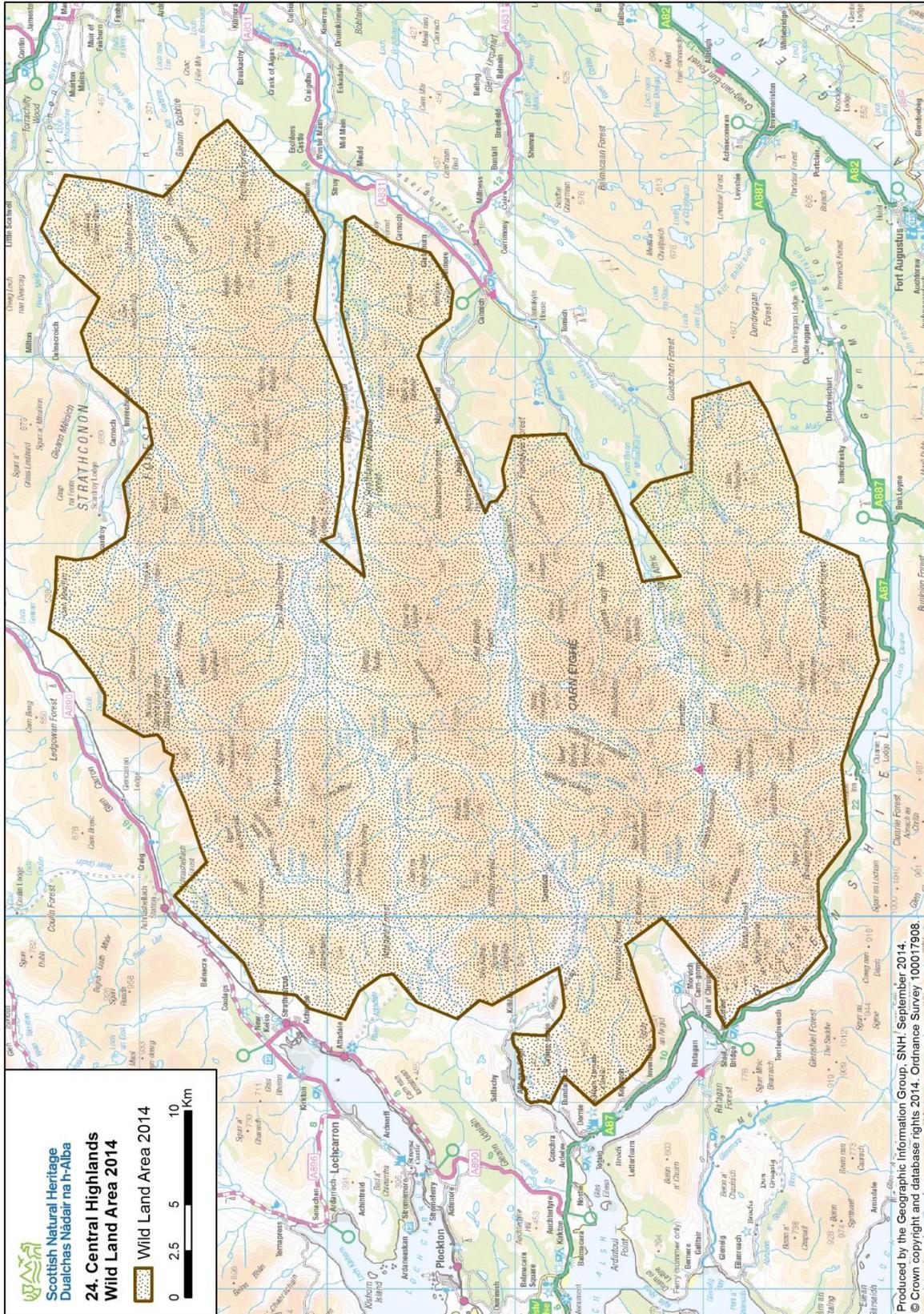


Central Highlands Wild Land Area



Context

This very large WLA of 1327 km² crosses the Highlands of Scotland between west and east. It is the second most extensive WLA, and only narrowly separated from the extensive Kinlochhourn – Knoydart – Morar WLA 18 to the south. Major routes from Inverness and Fort William flank its southern and north-western edges, but it is otherwise distant from large population centres.

It comprises a mix of large mountains, peatland and glens, reflecting the underlying geology of predominantly Moine schists, later carved during glaciation. The area wraps around a series of glens that run west – east, including: Killian; Strath Croe; Strathconon; Orrin; Glen Strathfarrar; Glen Cannich; and Glen Affric. Being so extensive, it also includes the watershed dividing west and east flowing rivers, with views from some mountain tops to both coasts.

The area is largely uninhabited and used mainly for deer stalking and fishing. However, there are some isolated estate lodges, cottages and stock grazing within some of the glens, as well as hydro-electric reservoirs and forest plantations around the margins.

Many people view the WLA from outside its edges, including along the A890, A887 and A87 main roads and the Dingwall to Kyle railway. The area is popular with visitors - Kintail, Glen Affric and Glen Strathfarrar tending to attract the highest number. It is used for many different recreational activities; for example, short, low-level walks from the ends of the glen roads, mountain bike rides, longer hill treks, ascent of the 36 Munros and 16 Corbetts, and multi-day walks within the interior via a network of paths. The Falls of Glomach is a particular attraction as well as the Alltbeithe Youth Hostel that is used by through-walkers between the west and east, most commonly via Gleann Lichd and Glen Affric.

While the glens individually aid access into the WLA, to travel by car between them and the north, south, west and east sides of the area involves very long distances and time. Even if taking one of the through-paths, the area is so large and divided by mountains that only certain parts of it tend to be experienced during any single trip.

The WLA is generally of high scenic value, as recognised by the fact it includes the Glen Affric National Scenic Area (NSA), the Glen Strathfarrar NSA, The Kintail NSA and the Strathconon, Monar and Mullardoch Special Landscape Area. These recognise the superlative characteristics of the glens and mountains and the native pine woodland in Affric and Glen Strathfarrar. WH Murray wrote in 1962ⁱ *“In Kintail, nothing lacks; all things culminate. It is the epitome of the West Highland Scene.”*

The WLA lies adjacent to other mountain and peatland areas and appears to extend into these and vice versa where intervening human elements are screened. Its relationship is particularly close with the Kinlochhourn – Knoydart - Morar WLA (18) to the south, on the opposite side of Glen Shiel, and the Coulin and Ledgowan Forest WLA (26) to the north, on the opposite side of Glen Carron. In contrast, there is a more gradual reduction in wild land qualities in other directions, mainly reflecting the increasing influence of human artefacts and contemporary land use.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **An extensive and awe-inspiring range of large scale, high and rugged mountains**

This WLA includes an extensive area of high, steep-sided mountains. The elevation, jagged forms and rocky faces of these, in combination with natural features such as corries, waterfalls and *rugged* slopes, contribute to a strong *sense of awe*. Their vertical dimension is emphasised where seen in contrast to the horizontal surface of adjacent lochs or glen floors, whilst the open space created by these also increase visibility of their distinctive mountain forms.



The large scale, steep slopes and *rugged* landforms resulting from glaciation, as well as predominant rock cover, contributes to the *sense of naturalness* and means the ascent of the mountains is *physically challenging*. Their high elevation is also emphasised by snow cover upon the tops between autumn and spring, particularly on north facing slopes.

Although the mountain range possesses a repetitive pattern of numerous glens and lochs running west to east at fairly equal interval, this regularity is not usually discernible on the ground, even from high elevations. Instead, the hills seem jumbled together as a number of interlocking high ridges of similar prominence, which increases the *sense of naturalness*. It also means that it can be difficult to orientate and the area appears even more *extensive* than it is, contributing to the *sense of risk*.



From the mountain tops and ridges, there are open and exposed panoramic views over an *awe-inspiring* and extensive range of mountains – some located within the WLA and some beyond in neighbouring wild land areas (as human elements within the intervening glens are screened by the landform). These elevated views indicate a prevailing *absence of human artefacts and contemporary land use* across the WLA interior and increase the *sense of remoteness*.

In contrast, some tall and/ or elevated human elements are seen from some of the tops and outward facing slopes around the margins of the WLA, for example wind farms and power lines, which can affect the wild land qualities within the area.

- **An extensive, remote mountain interior with strong qualities of sanctuary and solitude**

Within the interior of this WLA, there is a strong perception of *remoteness, sanctuary, solitude* and *risk*. This is mainly because the interior is very large, few people visit, as access requires a long walk, mountain bike, canoe or boat ride in, and because the great height and range of the mountains limits outward views. The wild land qualities are also influenced by a prevailing lack of *human artefacts and contemporary land use* as well as human activity or noise.



Within the WLA, the winding and undulating nature of routes can result in perceived distances seeming greater than they actually are, and thus amplifying the *sense of remoteness*, especially as there are few definite size indicators from which to estimate distance.

Apart from paths, the only other *human artefacts* within the interior tends to be isolated historic features, such as old enclosures and cottages, for example the Maol-bhuidhe MBA bothy. These create prominent foci and appear obvious as a *human artefact*, but tend to be isolated, discrete in siting and low-key in design so their effects are localised.



Some of the passes between glens form ‘knife edge’ bealachs, whilst others form wide elevated shelves that possess neither the enclosure nor linear form of the glens, or the exposure or panoramic views of the mountain tops. Screened from the glens below, but without the altitude and exposure of the peaks, these shelves tend to possess a secluded and hidden quality that contributes to a high degree of perceived *remoteness, sanctuary and solitude*.

- **Deep glens that have steep, arresting side slopes as well as rivers and waterfalls, with some containing lochs and some revealing human land use**

The mountains are divided by a network of deep glens – the main ones running east–west, but also tributary glens in other directions. From the floor of these, the side slopes tend to screen the adjacent mountain tops, but offer shelter, contributing to the *sense of sanctuary*.

Water has a strong presence within the glens, with lochs, rivers, burns and/or waterfalls contributing to the *sense of naturalness*, whilst also attracting people for recreation such as fishing and canoeing. Some of these watercourses and waterbodies limit access and thus increase *remoteness* and *risk* for walkers, although they also enable boat access into some areas that are otherwise difficult to reach. The horizontal loch waters and cascading waterfalls emphasise the steepness and *ruggedness* of surrounding landforms.



Despite the *remoteness* and *perceived sanctuary* within most of the glens, some contain reservoirs for hydro-electric generation that are highlighted by prominent drawdown scars, indicating *contemporary land use* and affecting the *sense of naturalness*.



Most of the key routes to and within this WLA pass along the glens, with a gradual decrease in the influence of *human artefacts and contemporary land use* from the margins to the interior, and an increase in *remoteness* and *sanctuary*. Some paths and tracks are low-key and, although appearing as *human artefacts*, do not diminish greatly the experience of the WLA, as the walker feels every twist, turn, rock and change in slope whilst travelling along them. In contrast, others are more highly constructed, prominent and diminish perceived *naturalness* and *sanctuary* within the locality, particularly where these cross steep slopes and include cuttings.



Some paths can get relatively busy with walkers during good weather between spring and autumn, including paths to the Munros and between Affric and Morvich via the Alltbeithe Youth Hostel. However, even during these times, the large size of the WLA interior means a *sense of solitude* can be experienced in other areas away from the main routes.

Estate management within the WLA tends to be focused within the glens, often around a main lodge and estate buildings, leading to other *human artefacts and evidence of contemporary land use* such as fences, access tracks and forest plantations. Where these are confined within the glen floors, their effects are usually limited and screened from the mountains above; in contrast, where they extend



up onto elevated slopes, they are more prominent and seem more imposing, for example diminishing the *sense of naturalness*.

Outside the southern edge of the WLA, the A87 road corridor through Glen Shiel divides this area from the Kinlochhourn – Knoydart - Morar WLA (18) to the south. This route offers motorists the opportunity to experience some of the *awe-inspiring* qualities of the adjacent mountains due to their proximity and imposing slopes above. In reverse, from the mountain ridges above, the road appears as an obvious *human artefact* and the activity and noise of vehicles can be seen and heard, diminishing the *sense of sanctuary* within the southern margins, whilst conifer plantation blocks along the glen appear prominent as *contemporary land use*. Similarly, the A890 between Achnasheen and Strathcarron offers some views of the northern mountain edge of the WLA on the opposite side to the Coulin and Ledgowan Forest WLA (26); but the wild land qualities visible from this road and the exchange of attributes between the opposite sides of the glen are less strong, due to the strath being wider and including a greater number and extent of human elements.

- **Small and extensive areas of native woodland that contribute to the sense of naturalness and highlight some arresting landscape features**

Native trees and woodland contribute to the *sense of naturalness* within parts of this WLA. Patches of woodland are often small and occur in isolated locations that are sheltered and difficult to access, such as along burns, gorges or upon steep rocky cliffs. However the WLA also includes some more extensive areas of native woodland, for example within Glen Strathfarrar and the far west of Glen Affric (the main part of Glen Affric lies outside the WLA). These include some mature woodland that appears particularly *arresting* due to its highlighting of other landscape features, such as waterfalls and steep rocky crags, as well as including some prominent granny pines.

Within some locations, the *sense of naturalness* of woodland is diminished by deer fences which indicate human intervention in grazing regimes, as well as appearing as a *human artefact*. Where there is a number of exclosures, there may also be cumulative effects.

Around the margins of some parts of the WLA, there is open visibility to a range of forest plantations upon elevated slopes outside the area. These highlight the limited *extent* of the WLA from some places where other human elements within intervening low-lying glens are screened.



Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Murray, W.H. (1962) *Highland landscape: a survey commissioned by the National Trust for Scotland*. The Aberdeen University Press.

Site assessment carried out May 2013 and August and October 2014