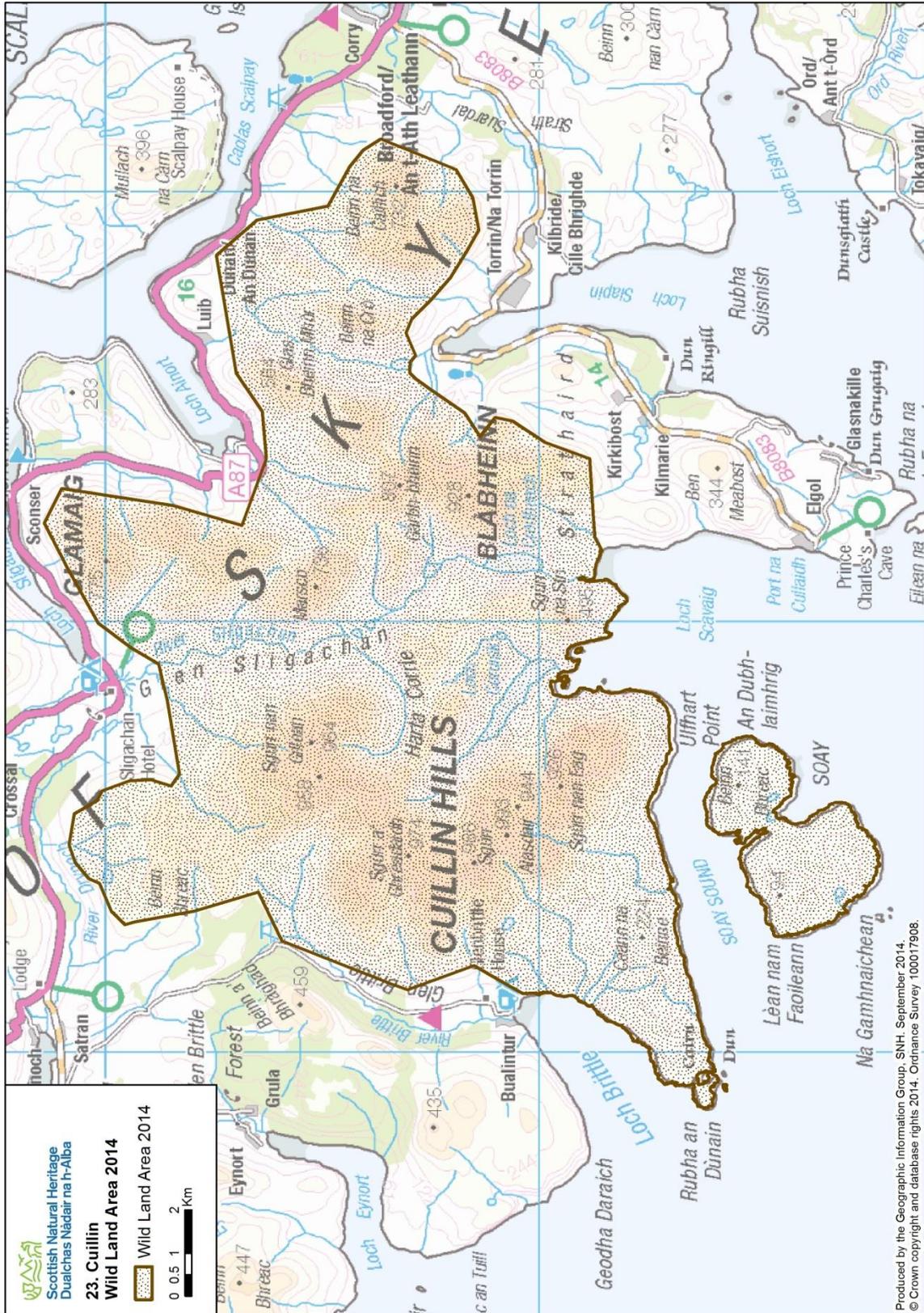


# Cuillin Wild Land Area



## Context

This is one of 11 island Wild Land Areas (WLA), one of two on the Isle of Skye and the most mountainous of any. Centred on the Cuillin mountains it extends 183 km<sup>2</sup> from Glenbrittle in the west to Sligachan in the north and Elgol in the south east, and includes the island of Soay. One of 12 WLAs defined in part by the coast, access from a main road is restricted to the north, or minor roads to the east and west.

The Black and Red Cuillin differ strongly in their form and colour; however they both consist of very steep, high and rugged mountains with a predominance of exposed rock. They also have a similar geological origin, comprising the deeply eroded roots of past volcanoes; but the Black Cuillin are made of dark, coarse-grained gabbro, whilst the Red Hills consist of granite which has been eroded more uniformly to create smooth outlines. The prominence of the mountains is increased by their contrast with surrounding sea or low-lying stepped peatland underlain by lava flows, whilst later glaciation is responsible for dramatic pyramidal peaks, corries and U-shaped glens, and depositing large amounts of moraine and till.

Land management includes deer and stock grazing, nature conservation and recreation. The area is uninhabited, but popular for visitors, as is the Isle of Skye in general. Many people view the WLA from just outside its edges, including dispersed settlements, as well as the A87, A863 and B8083 main roads, the minor road between Drynoch and Glenbrittle, and on local boat trips. Hillwalkers and climbers access the WLA itself via a number of mountain paths, around the coast and through the glens. Many are drawn to the 11 Munros and long curved Cuillin ridge walk, and the Munro and two Corbetts of Blabheinn and Glamaig, but there are other popular foci at lower levels such as the Fairy pools in Glen Brittle.

The popularity of the Cuillin follows a long history of exploration and their depiction in the arts and literature. Thomas Pennant, who visited Skye in 1772, described the Cuillin as “*a savage series of mountain*”; but, conversely, the mountains were celebrated during the Romantic period, drawing artists and writers such as Turner, Lord Cockburn and Sir Walter Scott. In the present day, the area is promoted by many publications aimed at tourists, hillwalkers and climbers.

The Cuillin possess very distinct landscape and visual characteristics and are of high scenic value, as recognised by their designation as a National Scenic Area. The description<sup>1</sup> for the area stresses how their superlative qualities derive from contrasts – the abutting Black and Red Hills, and juxtaposition with the sea, glens, extensive moorland and crofting townships.

The broad extent of the WLA is marked on all sides by public roads, forest plantations and the coast. Given the prevailing openness of the peatland and sea outside the area, the outward-facing mountain slopes of the WLA can be seen from all directions, whilst the interior is screened inside.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **Superlative high, steep, rocky mountains that are extremely rugged and contrast to the surrounding peatland and sea, emphasising a sense of awe**

The Cuillin mountains prompt a *sense of awe*, being steep, high, rocky and *rugged*, and highlighted by surrounding low-lying peatland and sea. Their ascent is *physically challenging* and leads to perceived high *risk*, requiring significant skill and fitness, but rewarded with stunning panoramic views from the tops.



The WLA includes both the Black Cuillin and the Red Cuillin. The differences between these highlight the distinctive and *arresting* qualities of each. The Black Cuillin are dark in colour, form a concentrated circle of peaks, have very angular slopes and jagged toothed skylines. In contrast, the Red Cuillin are pinkish or grey in colour, are slightly isolated from the main mountain cluster, are covered in scree and have conic hill profiles and rounded skylines.

The slopes of both the Black and Red Cuillin are predominantly rock-covered with little vegetation, which conveys a 'raw' image, increasing the *sense of naturalness*. This is amplified by a clear and very strong influence of geology, not only in the form of the mountains and dykes, but also with glacial features such as pyramidal peaks, corries, hanging and U-shaped glens, and moraine. The *sense of naturalness* is also reinforced by mountainside burns and waterfalls, as well as features stressing the dynamic nature of the environment, such as scree and land slips.



- **A circle of mountains that contain a remote and secluded interior and a strong sense of sanctuary, with contrasting outward-facing slopes where human elements are more influential**

This WLA is fairly circular in shape, with an outer arc of mountain slopes that shield the interior and screen outward views. This results in a strong contrast between the experience of wild land attributes within the interior and upon the outward facing mountain tops, ridges and slopes.

Within the interior, the *remoteness* and screening of surrounding areas results in a high level of *perceived sanctuary*, amplified by a lack of human elements, apart from a few footpaths and isolated historic structures. There is also a strong sense of *perceived naturalness*, mainly due to the



influence of the landform, rock, lochs, rivers and waterfalls, as discussed above.

Within the straths and over the foothills of the interior, the winding and undulating nature of paths over *rugged* ground can result in perceived distances seeming greater than they actually are, and thus also perceived *remoteness*, *risk*, and the *extent* of the area.

In contrast to the interior, views from the outward-facing hill tops and slopes include *human artefacts and evidence of contemporary land use* located outside the WLA, including conifer plantations, power lines and roads.

The prominence of these is amplified by the openness of the surrounding landscape, and because the steep mountain slopes provide relatively close, elevated views over their surroundings, where contrasts of shape and colour are highlighted against the simple peatland backdrop. The cumulative effects of these human elements are greatest from the outer ‘lobes’ of the WLA containing Beinn Bhreac, Glamaig and Beinn na Caillich as the hills are surrounded by these on several sides.



Visibility of human elements from the outer edges of the hills indicates the limited *extent* of the WLA. In addition, whilst many of these elements seem isolated or distant, some are located near the WLA’s edge, are extensive or numerous and thus result in cumulative effects. Consequently, these seem encroaching upon the margins within the WLA, diminishing the sense of *sanctuary*. These effects are often greatest where the human elements appear to extend out of the perceived confines of neighbouring glen floors onto higher open slopes, such as some of the conifer plantations around Glen Brittle and sections of power line around Glamaig.



One consequence of roads surrounding the WLA to the west, north and east, is that relatively high numbers of people are able to view the area’s outward-facing mountain slopes. These can appreciate some of the wild land attributes, such as *ruggedness* and *perceived awe*, even if other attributes do not occur locally (eg remoteness, solitude and lack of human artefacts).



- **A strong contribution of the sea to remoteness and the sense of naturalness and awe, as well as influencing the perceived extent of the area**

There is a close relationship between land and sea within this WLA, including an exchange of open views between each. The mountains form a prominent and *awe inspiring* backdrop to views from the sea; and, in reverse, the open sea provides a contrasting simple expanse that highlights the distinct characteristics of the landform, coast and islands. These compositions are often most clear and striking when approaching the land from the sea or vice versa.



The juxtaposition of the sea increases the perceived *extent* of this WLA and means that the sea contributes to its wild land qualities, including *perceived naturalness*, *remoteness*, *risk* and *awe*. These attributes may be diminished at a local level at times by boat activity and noise, although temporary.

The island of Soay which lies immediately to the south of the peninsula is included within this WLA and contributes to the setting of the area and its connection to the surrounding sea. The WLA also includes a peninsula of stepped peatland that extends to Rubha an Dùnain, between Loch Brittle and the Soay Sound. This has a track running along its north side, as well as sheep grazing and evidence of past settlement in the west. Nonetheless, the wild land qualities seem predominantly influenced by a strong *sense of remoteness* and *naturalness*, due in part to the projection and exposure of the peninsula to the sea on three sides. Its sense of isolation is also amplified by views towards the vertical edge of the Cuillin to the north east that appears *awe inspiring*.



- **A concentrated mountain area accessed by many different visitors to experience wild land qualities**

This area is very popular for recreation, particularly for hillwalking and climbing, and during good weather and the summer season. Its popularity is facilitated by roads on its west, north and eastern edges, as well as a number of parking areas, a campsite and Youth Hostel in Glen Brittle, a campsite and lodge at Sligachan, and tourist boat trips running seasonally between Elgol and Loch Coruisk.



Within the WLA, there are a number of different paths, from high elevation routes, to those along the coast, through glens, over the footslopes and along rivers. Despite this range, activity is focused within particular places. These include the Cuillin tops and ridge, due to its great attraction to hill walkers and climbers, as well as the beach at Camasunary, the Fairy Pools in Glen Brittle, and the south end of Loch Coruisk (the latter being a part of the interior that is accessible via a boat trip from Elgol, thus not requiring the physical challenge and skill of hill-walking). As these targeted areas are fairly small in extent, the *sense of solitude* within them is diminished during busy times, even though other wild land attributes may be strong, such as the *sense of remoteness* and *sanctuary*. Nonetheless, a strong *sense of solitude* can be experienced within the remainder of the WLA away from the popular foci.



<sup>i</sup> SNH (2010) *The special qualities of the National Scenic Areas*. SNH Commissioned Report No 374.