

# Eishken Wild Land Area



## Context

This Wild Land Area (WLA) extends to 142 km<sup>2</sup>, one of 11 island WLAs and one of two on the Isles of Lewis and Harris. One of 12 WLAs defined in part by the coast, landward access is limited to its north east corner from the minor road to Eisgein, being edged by Loch Siophort to the west, Caolas nan Eilean to the south, and Loch Sealg to the east.

The area comprises rugged peatland and hills, cut by long and narrow fjords, and surrounded by an indented coast. This reflects the geology of the area, which comprises very hard Lewisian gneiss, with some of this further heated along the Outer Hebrides Fault to result in higher hills<sup>i</sup>. The area has also been subject to glaciation and coastal erosion, resulting in features such as U-shaped glens, lochs and lochans, moraine, inlets, bays and islands. Inland there is also a network of burns, waterfalls and meandering rivers.

The WLA is uninhabited and land is used mainly for deer stalking and fishing, with access often by boat. Past occupation is indicated by the ruins of croft buildings and enclosures in a number of isolated locations around the coast.

Most people view the area from outside its edge, from the west and northern slopes of Loch Siophort, including the A859 main road and a number of small crofting communities dotted around the coast such as Reinigeadal, Màraig, Airidh a Bhruaich, Orasaigh and Leumrabhagh. From these, the WLA forms a dramatic backcloth, with open rugged slopes seen rising from deep waters up to high, rocky hills. The area is also clearly visible from the sea to the west, south and east, and is viewed by those in boats and sea kayaks.

The interior of the area is experienced by few people, with very few marked paths making walking challenging. Walkhighlands<sup>ii</sup> highlights that *'though the hills are not high, they are extremely rugged and remote and reward their relatively few visitors with remarkable views'*.

The landscape and scenic qualities of the south western half of the WLA are recognised by its inclusion within the South Lewis, Harris and North Uist National Scenic Area, whose description<sup>iii</sup> highlights *'...the general absence of development lends a wild and remote character to this whole region of rocky hills, precipitous glens, remote lochs and rushing rivers'*.

Around the WLA margins in the west, south and east, the sea has a strong influence. To the west, the Harris hills (WLA 30) also contribute to a dramatic hill backcloth, but are clearly divided by an intervening band of settlement and infrastructure. Conversely, to the north east the wild land qualities of the area seem to continue in this direction.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A very remote area with challenging access over a rugged landform, few visitors, and a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude**

This WLA is very *remote* and surrounded by sea, apart from its north eastern edge. In combination with a predominant absence of *human artefacts* and evidence of *contemporary land use*, as well as very few visitors, this results in a strong *sense of sanctuary and solitude*, particularly in the south and far east of the area. The absence of human elements, difficulty in perceiving distance (described below), and the open sea to the south and east also makes the area appear from some places to *extend* much further than its boundary.

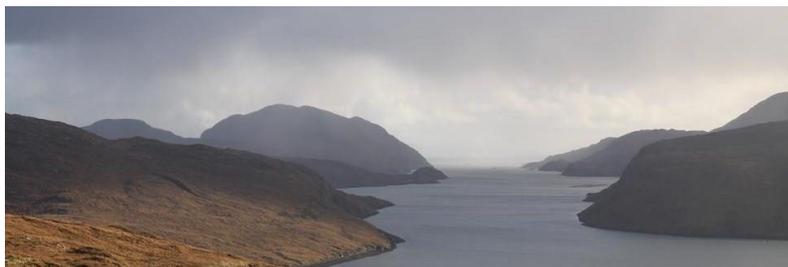


There are no paths entering this WLA aside from the short section entering from the head of Loch Sealg so the entire area needs to be accessed off-path. Given the *ruggedness* of the landform and presence of bogs, peat hags, lochans, rock outcrops and watercourses, this is *physically challenging* and poses associated *risks*. Whilst there is also the possibility of accessing the area from the sea, this too is not easy given the distances from launch points, exposure upon the sea, and the rocky and *rugged* nature of the coastline.

Although there is a predominant lack of human elements within this WLA, there are some isolated features around the coast associated with land management, such as pony enclosures at the head of Loch Sealg. Outside the WLA there are a cluster of *human artefacts* and evidence of *contemporary land use* to the far north east that have cumulative effects. Most prominent of these are several tall anemometers<sup>iv</sup> which can be seen in many views across the WLA, including from locations where other human elements are screened by the intervening landform.

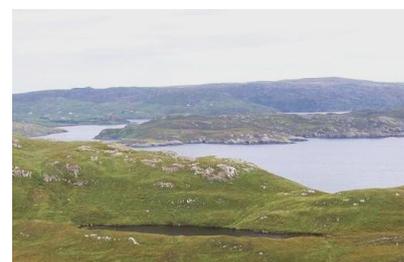
- **A strong influence of the sea across the area, including an indented, rugged coast, long sea lochs and a distant sea backcloth, contributing to perceived naturalness and awe**

No part of this WLA is far from the sea, and this contributes to the qualities of wild land across the area, particularly influencing the sense of isolation, *remoteness* and *naturalness*. The sea often forms the backdrop to views, as well as penetrating the interior via some long, narrow lochs. Around the coast, the dramatic dovetailing of land and sea elements around an indented edge appears *awe-inspiring*.



In the south, the area is divided by a series of very long and deep fjords: Loch Siophort forming the north western edge; Loch Sealg forming the eastern edge; and Lochs Claidh and Bhrolluim in-between. These sea lochs form very dramatic, *arresting* features that highlight the strong geological influence.

The indented coast includes bays, islands and promontories that reach out like fingers into the sea (forming a key feature of views from the west, outside the WLA, for example from Reinigeadal and Loch Trolamaraig). Although not extremely high, the cnocan around the coast offers open, elevated views, with an overriding sense of exposure. Within these locations, as inward views are limited by landform screening, the sea



tends to have greater influence than the land on the experience of the wild land qualities.

Near the coast, the activity of the sea, marine wildlife, and landscape features such as cascading waterfalls appear dynamic, and contribute to the *sense of naturalness*, which is also amplified by exposure and views to dynamic weather conditions. The rocky and *rugged* nature of the coast also limits access and results in an associated *perception of risk* – from both land and sea.



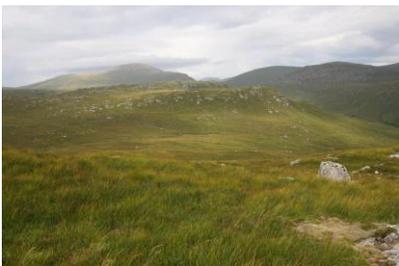
At the head of the lochs and around the bays, for example by Ceann Loch Shealg, access is easier and there is often evidence of past settlement, such as ruined stone buildings, enclosures and feannagan. These create foci and appear obvious as *human artefacts*, but tend to be isolated, discrete in siting and low-key in character so their effects are localised.

Present day activity within and visible from the WLA tends to be focused around the coast and upon the sea, including the use of boats. From the west and northern margins of the WLA, looking across Lochs Siophort and Sealg, *human artefacts* and evidence of *contemporary land use* can be seen upon the lochs and opposite facing slopes outside the WLA, including the main A859 road, the Aline forest plantation, telecom masts, fish farms and coastal settlements. Given that some of these are only a short distance away from the WLA, they affect some wild land qualities around these margins despite actual physical separation by deep waters in-between.

- **A simple and wide expanse of peatland and hills at the broad scale, containing a very rugged landform at the local level, with a strong sense of naturalness**

This WLA comprises a wide open area of peatland slopes and hills that is simple in composition at a broad scale and appears *awe-inspiring*. In contrast, at a local level, it contains a *rugged* composition of rock, peatland vegetation, bog, lochs and lochans, waterfalls and meandering burns, resulting in a strong *sense of naturalness*.

Although there is a predominance of *rugged* ground throughout the area, the landform within the north is simpler, with gentler sweeping, vegetated slopes; whilst the peatland in the south and far east is rockier, more deeply undulating and includes more cnocan and lochans. These attributes, in combination with prevalent exposure, makes the landscape seem uncompromising and dominated by natural processes that contribute to a strong *sense of naturalness*.



There is an irregular combination of landform features such as hills, depressions and glens that weave together fairly subtly at a broad level, although there is some stronger orientation north west – south east within the south of the area. This prevalent lack of strong pattern means it is difficult to perceive scale and distance and to navigate within the interior, and this unpredictability influences the *sense of naturalness* and *perception of risk*.

The undulating nature of some slopes also mean that, as you move through the area between low and high points, there is intermittent screening and revelation of views, with a strong sense of exposure upon the tops and a greater sense of shelter and *sanctuary* within the depressions. This makes it difficult to take a direct route through the area and, in addition to the *ruggedness* of the landform, lack of paths, and the need to avoid bogs, lochs, peat hags and watercourses, results in access being

*physically challenging*. The long time that it takes to walk through the landscape also affects the *perception of remoteness*.

The peatland interior extends up into some prominent hills within the WLA. The highest of these, Beinn Mhòr, is only 572m in altitude, but it and the other hills nonetheless appear very high and *arresting* relative to the surrounding peatland, lochs and sea. Some of these hills also include *awe-inspiring* crags and cliffs, such as the west side of Creag Mhuaiteseal and the east side of Gormol. The hills are widely spaced, so they do not change the predominant openness of the landscape; however, they do increase local screening within the area, and may thereby contribute to the local *sense of sanctuary* within the interior.

The hill tops offer elevated views of the surrounding lower-lying areas and, from these, it is easier to discern the complex arrangement of peatland, cnocan, lochs and lochans, and watercourses below. These vantage points also reveal distant human elements located outside the WLA, such as wind turbines, roads, forest plantations and fish farms, which highlight the limited *extent* of the area.

The *ruggedness* of the landforms is highlighted in contrast to the open waters of the sea, lochs and lochans which also assist views into and through the area. In some places, the openness of the landscape also allows views to distant mountains in North Harris (WLA 30) which can contribute to the *sense of awe* where intervening human elements are not visible.



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#### Endnotes and select references

<sup>i</sup> Goodenough, K. and J. Merrit (2011) *The Outer Hebrides: A landscape fashioned by geology*. Redgorton, SNH. Available at: <http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/geology/outerhebrides.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Information available at: <http://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/outer-hebrides/lewis.shtml>

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

<sup>iv</sup> Five observed during site assessment. These may be temporary structures with planning consent for a limited time period.

**Site assessment carried out November 2013 and August 2014**