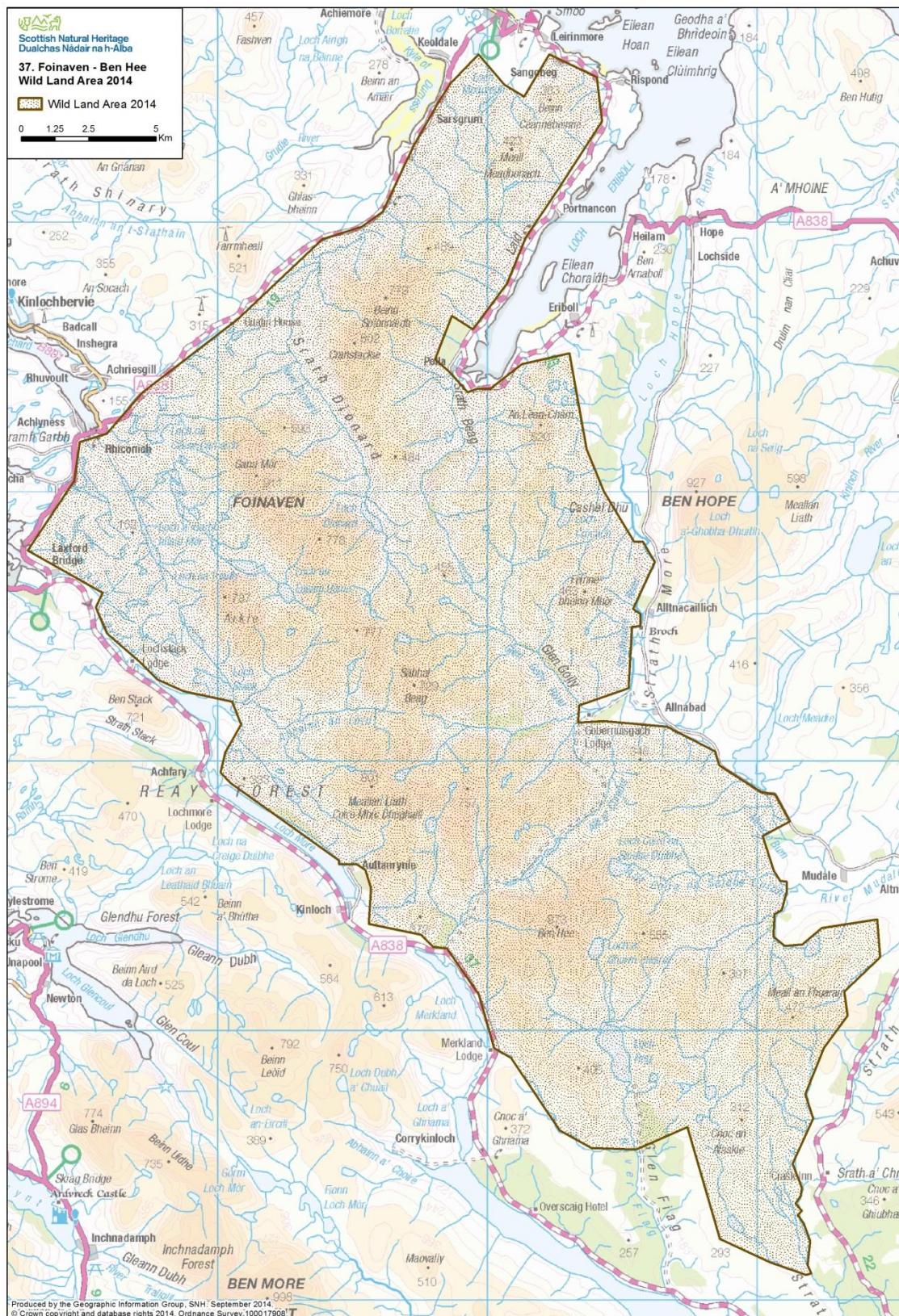


Foinaven - Ben Hee Wild Land Area



Context

This large Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 569 km² across north west Sutherland, extending from the peatlands of Crask in the south east to the mountain of Foinaven in the north west. The northern half of the WLA mainly comprises a complex range of high mountains in addition to a peninsula of lower hills extending towards Durness. In contrast, the southern half of the WLA includes extensive peatlands and the isolated mountain of Ben Hee. One of a cluster of seven WLAs in the north west of Scotland, flanked by main (predominantly single track) roads to the north, west and south, it is relatively distant from large population centres.

The geology of the area has a strong influence on its character. Along the Moine Thrust Belt that passes through the north west, rocky mountains such as Foinaven and Arkle are highly distinctive with their bright white Cambrian quartzite and scree, with little vegetation. The geological importance of this area is recognised by its inclusion within the North West Highlands Geoparkⁱ.

Land within the WLA is used mainly for deer stalking and fishing and, except for a few isolated estate lodges and farms, is uninhabited. Many people view the area from outside its edge as a visual backdrop, particularly when travelling along the A838 between Lairg and Laxford Bridge and Durness, and along the A836 between Lairg and Altnaharra, through Strath More, and around Loch Eriboll.

The mountains within this WLA typically draw fewer hillwalkers than some other areas, partly due to the lack of Munros. Nonetheless, they attract many who seek their particular qualities, which include high, rocky mountains with long, complex and narrow ridges, and some very remote tops where there is a strong sense of risk. Some people aim for the seven Corbetts that have strong landmark qualities, such as Foinaven, Arkle, Cranstackie and Ben Hee. However, others choose to walk through the area via lower-level through-paths, such as between Gualin House and Gobernuisgach, or between Loch Stack and Gobernuisgach, the latter forming part of the unmarked Sutherland Trailⁱⁱ. In addition, the area is also visited for mountain biking, fishing and stalking.

The WLA's scenic qualities are recognised by its inclusion in part within the North-West Sutherland National Scenic Area. Its descriptionⁱⁱⁱ highlights: '*This is an uncompromising, open, landscape of ancient, hard rock, sparsely clothed with vegetation*', but that '*although this landscape can appear harsh and unforgiving, it also contains areas of intimacy – small crags, lochans, burns and hollows*'. The WLA also overlaps by a small amount with the Eriboll East and Whiten Head SLA in the north east, which is recognised^{iv} in part for its '*sheltered loch and open coastal waters, and exceptional views to neighbouring mountains*'.

The WLA is fairly linear in shape, flanked by roads that follow Lochs Merkland, More and Stack on the western side, and Loch Eriboll, Strath More and Loch Meadie on the east. It is nonetheless surrounded by other wild land areas in addition to the sea, so that its wild land qualities seem to extend beyond its boundary. This includes the Reay - Cassley WLA (34), Cape Wrath WLA (40), Ben Hope - Ben Loyal WLA (38), and Ben Klibreck – Armine Forest WLA (35). Its relationship with adjacent wild land appears particularly strong in the northern part of the WLA where, from elevated locations, the intervening glens containing human elements are screened by the landform; in contrast, the margins of the area are more prominent in the south due to the openness of the peatland which clearly reveals human elements around the outer edge of the WLA.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- Towering, rugged mountains, highlighted by their prominent rock covering, that appear awe-inspiring and contribute to a strong sense of naturalness**

Within the northern part of the WLA, there is a complex arrangement of large and *rugged* mountains that includes Foinaven, Arkle and Cranstackie. This is striking for its impressive geological and topographical features and predominance of exposed bright grey rock, which conveys an ‘elemental’ quality to the landscape and a strong *perception of naturalness*. The distinctive elevation, shapes, colours and textures of the mountains and their *arresting* forms are emphasised by contrast with neighbouring strath floors, lochs and cnocan. These are also highlighted in comparison to greener and gentler hills outside the WLA that form the distant backdrop to some views (including hills within Cape Wrath WLA 40).



As well as influencing landform, the distinctive geology is highlighted by prominent rock faces, boulder fields and scree, as well as the presence of deep corries from which the surrounding towering cliffs appear imposing and *arresting*.

It is *physically challenging* to ascend the mountains because of their great *ruggedness* and elevation, but also because there is a need to negotiate very narrow ridgelines, loose boulders and scree (particularly difficult during wet or icy conditions). This results in a high *sense of risk*, amplified even further by few paths being clearly defined, due to the hardness of the rock. The high level of *physical challenge* and long time required to ascend the mountains contributes to the *sense of remoteness* upon the tops, even where views from here reveal relatively close distances to the WLA edge.



- A remote, secluded interior with very few human elements and a strong perception of sanctuary and solitude**

The *remoteness* of the mountains is emphasised by the long and time-consuming travel required to penetrate and cross the area. From the interior, there is a strong *sense of sanctuary*, influenced by the presence of few *human artefacts* or *evidence of contemporary land use* and a sense of seclusion created by the screening of surrounding mountain slopes. Furthermore, with few visitors to the interior, there can be an intense appreciation of the wild land qualities and a strong *sense of solitude*.

Within some parts of the interior, *human artefacts* can be seen at a far distance, for example the Meall na Moine mast. However, in these situations, the features tend to be so far away, minor in scale, or few in number that they don’t seem to directly impose upon the experience of the wild land qualities. In some places, there are also footpaths and signs of fishing activity; but the effects of these tend to be localised where they appear small, isolated and low-key in character.



- **A variety of shelves, corries and basins carved into the mountain landforms that harbour a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude- some with lochs, rivers and waterfalls**

The irregular mountain landform includes a number of shelves, corries and basins. The high and steep slopes surrounding these often tower above in an *arresting* manner, whilst also forming a shield that results in a perception of being hidden and a strong sense of seclusion and *sanctuary*. Few visitors to these areas can also lead to a strong *sense of solitude*.

Many of these shelves, corries and basins contain lochs or lochans, with an associated strong sense of place and tranquillity. However, others include more drama and dynamic qualities, with rushing rivers or waterfalls that expose the underlying geology and highlight the steep *ruggedness* of surrounding slopes.



- **A complex mix of towering and arresting crags, cliffs and knolls with a predominance of bare rock, conveying a strong sense of naturalness**

In addition to the high mountains, the WLA includes some areas of mixed *rugged* crags, cliffs and knolls that seem random in form and pattern. At close proximity, the towering crags and cliffs are extremely imposing and *arresting*; but, equally, this means that they are also very difficult and *physically challenging* to ascend, and this involving high *risk*. Bare rock predominates over the crags and cliffs, conveying a strong *sense of naturalness*. This is further reinforced in places by the presence of native woodland that exploits the shelter and protection provided by the steep, rocky faces.



The distinctive steep cliffs, crags and knolls form foci within the landscape, for example Creag na Faoilinn at the southern end of Loch Eriboll. These frequently appear highlighted against simpler hill backcloths or may form ‘gateways’ on either side of a glen.



- **Long straths and glens that penetrate far into the interior – some with tracks or paths, that provide access through the landscape**

A number of long straths and glens penetrate this WLA; some relatively straight in line, whilst others snake through the landform. These aid access into the area from its margins and form the framework for a number of tracks, paths and through-routes via high bealachs, for example through Glen Golly and Strath Dionard or over Bealach Horn. Although the routes help people move through the landscape, the *sense of remoteness* within the interior is nonetheless retained, as travel is still lengthy, relatively slow and time-consuming. Additionally, despite the routes concentrating movement from within the wider landscape, the number of people using these routes within the interior is still fairly small, so a *sense of sanctuary* and *solitude* prevails.

The character of the paths and tracks varies across the WLA. Some are discrete and low-key in route and design and thus, although clearly seen as a *human artefact*, do not diminish greatly the experience of the WLA; with the walker feeling 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 tracks incorporate



cuttings and embankments and even-out the underlying landform irregularities.

The access track through Srath Dionard is particularly prominent, both locally and within elevated views from surrounding peaks. This high grade track has a surface colour that contrasts to its dark vegetation backdrop, and includes some large cuttings, embankments, bridges and culverts. As well as appearing as a very obvious *human artefact*, it introduces a notable amount of vehicle activity and noise, albeit intermittently.

In addition to access tracks, other *human artefacts* and *evidence of contemporary land use* can be found within some of the straths and glens, for example within Srath Beag and around Gobernusgach and West Merkland. These include estate buildings, fishing huts, fences and forest plantations. Their effects are usually limited where they are small, concentrated around estate settlements and confined within the glen floors; in contrast, they tend to be more prominent and imposing upon the wild land qualities where they are large, extensive, have cumulative effects, or extend up onto elevated slopes.

- **Extensive peatland slopes that appear awe-inspiring in their simplicity and contrast to neighbouring mountains, and allow wide open views of the surrounding area**

The southern part of the WLA comprises an extensive area of gently-sloping or flat peatland near the landmark mountain of Ben Hee. The striking contrast of the peatland and mountain landforms, in combination with a simple ground cover and strong sense of openness, generates a *sense of awe*.



There is a strong *perception of naturalness* within the peatland on account of its random pattern of rough vegetation, lochs, dubh lochan, bogs and peat hags at a detail level, as well as its exposure at a broad scale, highlighted by ‘wide skies’ revealing dynamic weather conditions. The rugged ground at a local level also makes access difficult and *physically challenging*. Altogether, these factors contribute to a perception of high *risk*.

The peatland within this WLA is visited by few people, partly due to its difficult access; however it forms an important component of key views looking into the WLA from outside the edge along the A836 and A838 main roads. Within these views, the peatland provides a simple, open fore and midground to the mountains beyond and, in doing so, highlights the distinct qualities of each that conveys a strong *sense of awe*. The peatland also provides open views to other neighbouring wild land areas, including to Ben More Assynt (WLA 34) and Ben Klibreck (WLA 35), so these contribute to the area’s wild land qualities.

A simplicity of landcover and landform means it is typically difficult to perceive scale and distance across the peatland, so the WLA often appears more *extensive* than its actual size. This also means, where human elements are seen, particularly around the margins of the WLA, these are highly prominent across a wide area; for example the Fiag forest plantation and the road, inn, telecom masts and shelter belts around The Crask.



This extensive visibility of *human artefacts and contemporary land use* outside the WLA influences the wild land qualities within the southern part of the area over relatively far distances, although other attributes may be strong, such as *ruggedness* and *perceived naturalness*.

Endnotes and select references

ⁱ More information is available at <http://www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱ Information available at: <http://www.sutherlandtrail.co.uk/>

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

^{iv} The Highland Council (2011) *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council.

Site assessment carried out July and August 2013