



## Context

This Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 205 km<sup>2</sup> across south west Sutherland and north west Ross-shire, from Drumrunie in the south, to Lochinver in the north west and Loch Assynt in the north east. One of a cluster of seven WLAs in the north west of Scotland, flanked by main roads to the north, east and south, it is relatively distant from large population centres.

This WLA includes the prominent and unique rocky mountains of Suilven, Canisp, Cul Mòr, Cùl Beag and Stac Pollaidh which tower up above a wide horizontal expanse of rocky cnochan. This composition represents the underlying geology, with the mountains comprising Torridonian sandstone that rises up above a rocky platform of hard Lewisian gneiss. The area lies within the North West Highlands Geopark, for which it is described<sup>i</sup> as exhibiting ‘... a unique relationship between its landscape and the underlying geology, not seen to such a spectacular degree anywhere else, i.e: *The landscape is the geology and the geology is the landscape*’. These qualities are highlighted in the views and information presented at the Knockan Crag National Nature Reserve visitor centre that is located at the south eastern edge of the area.

Land within the WLA is used mainly for deer stalking, fishing, nature conservation and recreation. This is influenced by the majority of the area being owned by The Assynt Foundation, whose aims include managing the land ‘... *for the benefit of the community and the public in general, as an important part of the protection and sustainable development of Scotland’s natural environment*’<sup>ii</sup>.

The WLA is largely uninhabited, but the area contributes significantly to the visual backdrop of Lochinver and a number of dispersed crofting communities and residences along adjacent coast and straths. In addition, the isolated mountains form key foci from the A835, A837 and A894 main roads and open sections along the minor roads between Lochinver and Aird of Coigach and Drumrunie. The area attracts many visitors, including those who tour through the area by vehicle, people that fish the lochs, lochans and rivers, and hillwalkers (three Corbetts punctuate the area). There are a number of paths and tracks that enter the area and create routes through the cnochan and up the hill tops. Stac Pollaidh is a particularly popular ascent being easier to access than remoter and higher peaks. Walkhighlands<sup>iii</sup> describe Assynt and Coigach as being ‘*a truly extraordinary landscape*’, with the mountains ‘...*eroded into fantastic, individual shapes...*’

The high scenic value of the WLA is recognised by its inclusion within the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area, whose description<sup>iv</sup> highlights as a special quality ‘*the absence of modern artefacts, or overt human activity, over much of the landscape emphasises the feelings of openness, remoteness and wildness*’.

Beyond the WLA’s edges marked by public roads, mountain and peatland ranges and the open sea extend in every direction, including the Rhiddoroch – Beinn Dearg – Ben Wyvis WLA (29), the Quinag WLA (33) and the Reay – Cassley WLA (34). This means that its wild land qualities are influenced by areas beyond its edges and vice versa.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **An awe-inspiring contrast of isolated, steep rocky mountains that tower above open expanses of cnocan, peatland and waterbodies, with a strong sense of naturalness**

This WLA combines a wide expanse of cnocan and peatland from which rise striking isolated mountains. The openness and horizontal emphasis of the cnocan, peatland and waterbodies at a broad scale accentuate the steep, rocky and vertical forms of the mountains and vice versa, so that the *awe-inspiring* qualities of each seem accentuated.



There is a prominent influence of geology and geomorphology throughout the WLA. This is evident in the broad scale composition of the landform, but also with local geological features and a predominant cover of exposed rock that appears very ‘raw’ in character, contributing to the *sense of naturalness*.

Despite the contrast of landform, the area is consistently open and exposed, with ‘wide skies’ and views of dynamic weather conditions; in addition, the area’s landform is consistently *rugged* and *physically challenging* to access. These attributes all combine to result in a strong *sense of risk*.

The difference in vertical scale between the mountains and surrounding cnocan and peatland means that the mountain tops offer panoramic and aerial views over the surrounding landscape. This allows a greater appreciation of the complex pattern of cnocan, peatland and lochans that contribute to the *sense of naturalness* but is difficult to appreciate on the ground due to local landform screening. These aerial views also reveal the wide *extent* of the WLA, influenced by seeing beyond its edges to the open sea to the west.



From the mountain tops, the aerial views reveal a prevailing absence of *human artefacts and contemporary land use* across the WLA. In contrast, these views also reveal some human elements that influence the wild land qualities. Most of these lie outside the WLA, such as electricity poles, main roads, the Ledmore mast, and the crofting settlement of Elphin; but some occur within the area, for example fenced enclosures/ exclosures, which tend to be particularly prominent where contrasting to the openness or irregular pattern of the cnocan, peatland or waterbodies. Notably, however, there are no large scale wind farms or hydro-electric schemes clearly visible from the hill tops.

- **Extremely distinctive individual mountains that are arresting and possess rugged, rocky and steep slopes that contribute to the physical challenge and risk of ascent**

The isolated mountains within this WLA - Suilven, Canisp, Cul Mòr, Cùl Beag and Stac Pollaidh - are astonishing in their form and features. Their very steep slopes and rocky peaks appear *arresting*, whilst their unconventional and irregular shapes amplify the *sense of naturalness*.

The mountains are all *rugged* and reveal many different rock features, such as rounded slabs, crags, pinnacles, cliffs and boulder fields, which contribute to the *sense of naturalness*.



They are *physically challenging* to access because of being both steep and, in most cases, remote, resulting in a strong sense of *risk*.

The unique mountain landforms create prominent landmarks within the open surroundings. This means that views of the position of one mountain relative to another changes as you move through the landscape, indicating orientation and location.



All the mountains are remarkable, but Suilven stands out for its exceptionally *arresting* linear and vertical form with horizontal banding, and its highly *remote* location within the interior. This means that access requires a long walk prior to ascent, and there are high levels of perceived *risk*, *sanctuary* and *solitude*.



The mountains are accessed by a relatively high number of hillwalkers - these being attracted to their landmark properties, as well as to the fact they include three Corbetts and two Grahams. Access is also facilitated by a number of parking areas and stalkers' tracks and paths on the lower slopes, including a through route between Ledmore and Lochinver/ Little Assynt, and there is a MBA bothy at Suileag. Most of the hills possess a strong sense of *sanctuary* due to their *remoteness* and distance from *human artefacts and contemporary land use*, although these specific qualities are not so great on Stac Pollaidh and Cul Beag due to their closer distance to a public road.

The numbers of visitors have in some places resulted in path erosion and braiding that diminishes the *sense of naturalness*, whilst some stretches of constructed path are also very prominent and appear as an obvious *human artefact*. Nonetheless, away from these constructed paths, it is easy to 'lose yourself' within the irregular landform, with very high levels of perceived *sanctuary*, *solitude* and *risk*.

- **An awe-inspiring, broad scale expanse of cnocan that contains, at the local level, a complex pattern of features that contribute to the sense of naturalness and sanctuary**

The rocky cnocan is extremely irregular and *rugged* in form, although not high in elevation. Away from the mountain foci, the broad scale horizontal expanse of this appears *awe-inspiring*; whilst, at a detail level, it harbours an intricate mix of lochans, bogs, burns and, in some places, woodland and waterfalls. These features are all very irregular in form and pattern, which combines with the predominant rock cover to amplify the *sense of naturalness*. The cnocan also creates intricate small spaces at a local level where there is a strong sense of seclusion, *sanctuary* and *solitude*. These attributes are amplified by a prevalent *absence of human artefacts* within the cnocan interior and little evidence of *contemporary land use*.



A simple mosaic of vegetation across the interior, in combination with an absence of human elements, means that it is difficult to perceive scale and distance and results in the area often appearing more *extensive* than its actual size warrants.

Within the cnocan, there is a wide range of pools, lochans and lochs – some very small, and some extending over a wide area with many projections, such as Loch Sionasgaig. These waterbodies emphasise the *rugged* nature of the adjacent landform with their indented shores and contrasting horizontal water. They also limit movement on foot, increasing *remoteness* in some places, whilst others are accessed by boat and are popular for fishing.



Native woodland occurs upon some of the sheltered slopes within the cnocan, where it contributes to local shelter and the *sense of naturalness*. In some parts of the WLA, often near to rivers or lochs, there are also historic features such as ruined croft buildings, stone walls and enclosures that indicate past settlement and grazing. These appear as *human artefacts*, but have localised effects where appearing isolated, small and low-key in siting and character.



The presence of deer fences in some places indicate human intervention with grazing regimes and thus diminish the *perceived naturalness* of the vegetation, as well as the fences appearing as *human artefacts*.

Where *human artefacts* and *contemporary land use* occur within the cnocan around the margins of the WLA, views of these are typically limited to the local area by the landform. When walking into the WLA, this can mean there is a perception of *remoteness* and *sanctuary* after just a short distance and time, in places that are not actually physically very remote. Conversely, however, where lochs occur around the edges of the WLA, distant visibility is increased to *human artefacts* and activity outside the area; for example, looking across Loch Assynt from within the WLA, there is high perceived *remoteness* due the long distance and time required to walk in, yet human activity is seen at relatively close proximity across the narrow loch, reducing the perception of *sanctuary*.

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#### Endnotes and select references

<sup>i</sup> Information available at <http://www.nwhgeopark.com/landscape/>

<sup>ii</sup> Information available at <http://www.assyntfoundation.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Information available at <http://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/ullapool/assynt.shtml>

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

**Site assessment carried out April, May and August 2014**