

Jura, Scarba, Lunga and the Garvellachs Wild Land



Context

This is the second largest of the 11 island WLAs with a total area of 279 km². It includes some 70% of Jura, and all of the island of Scarba, north of the Gulf of Corryvreckan, together with the smaller islands of Lunga and the Garvellachs which form a chain stretching to the north west. Jura is the only populated island, although with less than 200 inhabitants (2011 census), one of the least densely populated Scottish islands. All require time to reach from more populated centres, but only Jura is served by public ferry, the others requiring a private boat to access.

The elongated island of Jura comprises rugged hills covered in sparse, deer-grazed moorland vegetation and extensive areas of bare rock and scree. Outwith the WLA the main village of Craighouse lies on the more sheltered east coast where most settlement is concentrated, served by one, single-track road that does not extend as far as the island's northern tip. Within the WLA the uninhabited west coast extends 80 km between Inver Cottage in the south and Kinuachdrachd to the north. Although it is an established long distance walking route, the demanding terrain, bog holes, few paths and absence of any way-marking make it particularly challenging for walkers, but rewarding for those seeking solitude. The only buildings along the route are three bothies and the summer house at Glenpatrick Bay. Peter Edwards describes how *'few places in the British Isles combine such multifaceted splendour with the possibility of complete solitude'*.ⁱ

Walkers are also drawn by the dramatic appeal of the Paps of Jura. The three Paps are steep-sided, quartzite hills with distinctive conical shapes. They dominate the Jura landscape as well as the wider area and are visible from Islay, Knapdale, Kintyre, Arran and, on a clear day, from Skye and Northern Ireland. Although widely known and easily recognised, the Paps are not as well visited as their mainland counterparts, because of their comparatively remote, island location. At 785 metres Beinn an Oir (mountain of gold) is the highest (a Corbett), and frequently climbed along with the other two peaks: Beinn Shiantaidh and Beinn a' Chaolais. The annual Isle of Jura Fell Race includes the three Paps.

The northern part of Jura is designated as an Area of Panoramic Quality by Argyll and Bute Council. Scarba, Lunga and the Garvellachs as well as the southern part of Jura, from Loch Tarbert southwards, are designated a National Scenic Area (NSA) in recognition of their outstanding scenic value. The NSA description for Jura notes the dominance of the Paps in views from the mainland and Islay and how: *'Their shapely cones rise abruptly from rolling moorland, and their summits shimmer with quartzite screes.....their steep sided elegance can be compared only with the famous Cuillins of Skye'*.ⁱⁱ

Scarba, Lunga and the Garvellachs are uninhabited, rocky and remote islands. The NSA description notes how: *'The dark pyramid of Scarba (449 m) raises its summit high above these lower islands (Lunga and the Garvellachs), supporting moorland that is in striking contrast to their green meadows or slate wastes. On its eastern flank Scarba is well-wooded, an element of surprise in this oceanic context. Between the islands tidal races rip with ferocity that is easily seen, and the streaming waters are themselves an important visual element in the total scene'*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **All-pervading influence of the sea and sense of being perched on the edge of the land**

Crossing by sea, visitors first encounter the *rugged and arresting* mountains of this WLA as a backdrop to the expansive sea views. The WLA follows the western Jura coastline, whilst to the east it generally lies no more than 3 km from Jura Sound.

The presence of the sea is all-pervading. It is intermittently visible throughout, contributing to the *sense of naturalness* and making the WLA seem more *extensive*. Most seaward views from Jura include other islands or the mainland and, although its immediate edges are often clearly defined, it seems to form part of a wider seascape with similar wild land qualities.

From the west coast of Jura, the open Atlantic forms the backdrop to Islay and the more distant Colonsay. To the east, the mountains of Arran punctuate the horizon beyond Kintyre and to the north, across the Gulf of Corryvreckan, the *rugged* island of Scarba is often shrouded in mist. The sea loch of Loch Tarbert cuts into the centre of Jura from the west, its boggy shores largely inaccessible.



This interplay of land and sea highlights the difficulty in accessing all parts of the WLA, contributing to the *sense of remoteness* and of being perched on the edge of the land. After dark, the moving beams of lighthouses, such as that at Rhuvaal on Islay, become visible, emphasising the island location and hazards of the surrounding sea.

From the tops, both east and west coasts are visible, emphasising the influence of the sea and highlighting the narrowness of the area, but from some places at lower elevations the undulating landform obscures the sea and the *extent* of the WLA.

- **Inaccessible and remote, with a strong sense of solitude, despite the proximity to the mainland**

Although short, the sea crossing to Jura contributes to the *sense of remoteness*. The one, single-track road has limited influence on the wild land qualities, with little traffic north of Craighouse. At Road End, north of Ardlussa, vehicle access is restricted to a rough track that ends at Kinuachdrachd. Beyond this a rough and boggy footpath leads 3 km to a vantage point where sea cliffs and steep rocky gullies add to the *sense of remoteness, sanctuary* and solitude of this part of Jura. Views of Scarba and the Gulf of Corryvreckan from the north coast are *awe inspiring*. Scarba, Lunga and the Garvellachs are accessible only by private boat in favourable sailing conditions and across sometimes dangerous tidal races, adding to the *strong sense of remoteness*.

The moorland interior of Jura and the majority of the west coast are reached by *physically demanding* journeys over rough and boggy terrain on foot or by sea. There are few footpaths and most are faint or braided, crossing ground that is rugged or poorly drained, navigating around sea lochs, water bodies and across burns. In summer months lush bracken also impedes access, increasing journey times and the *sense of remoteness*.



Along the west coast, the *rugged* terrain, lack of paths and absence of any way-marking contribute to the strong *sense of remoteness* and solitude. Although there is an established walking route across the Paps, much of it is across boggy areas with tussocky vegetation and no paths. The steep, scree slopes of the mountains are also *physically demanding* and the tops are very exposed, providing a strong *sense of risk*.



Other than those heading for the Paps or west coast, few walkers venture into the interior, which provides a very strong *sense of remoteness* and solitude as a consequence. Grass ATV tracks used for deer management do not generally provide through routes. Few constructed tracks penetrate the WLA and those on the periphery, such as that leading to Ardlussa hydro, have a limited effect on the wild land qualities.

- **Dramatic mountains, cliffs, islands, and tidal currents emphasise a sense of nature being in control**

The Paps dominate the surrounding land and seascape and their distinctive profile makes them readily identifiable landmarks, visible from much of the uplands and west coast of Argyll and from the north coast of Ireland. Their quartzite scree slopes reflect the light and their summits are often cloud-covered. Closer to, their sheer gradient becomes evident, increasing these *arresting qualities*. They are very exposed and the loose scree emphasises the dynamic process of weathering, contributing to a strong *sense of naturalness and physical challenge*. From the sea, the Paps appear dramatically *rugged* and it is only on close inspection that the settlement and forest plantations along the east and south coasts of Jura diminish their *sense of naturalness* to any degree.



Along the exposed and craggy north and west coasts of Jura, immense raised beaches, caves, rock stacks and arches and dramatic precipitous sea cliffs reflect past sea level changes. These geomorphological features emphasise the *sense of naturalness* and, with few paths other than those created by deer and wild goats, provide a strong sense of solitude and *degree of physical challenge*.

The moorland interior of Jura is largely free of *human artefacts* with little evidence of *active management* other than the random pattern of ATV tracks. It is clothed with natural vegetation of blanket bog and wet heath, interspersed with lochans, burns, dramatic waterfalls and rock outcrops that reinforce the *sense of naturalness*. Dense undergrowth impedes access in summer and shelters a significant population of adders, increasing the *sense of risk*. Burn crossings, boggy and indistinct paths and tussocky moorland provide a degree of *physical challenge* even where slopes are gentle.



Strong currents are clearly visible in the Sounds of Jura and Islay. As the flood tide enters the narrow channel between Scarba and Jura it speeds up and a variety of seabed features create whirlpools, standing waves and other surface effects. The roar of the water in the Corryvreckan whirlpool can be heard from the northern part of Jura and the sound and movement of tidal currents adds to the feeling of nature being in control.

- **Most signs of human activity are focussed within the southern part of the WLA, with few human artefacts or contemporary land use further north**

As Jura is one of the least populated islands, away from the eastern coastal strip there is little obvious sign of human activity and a strong *sense of remoteness and sanctuary*, amplified by seaward views. The uninhabited islands of Scarba, Lunga and the Garvellachs form a chain further north. These islands have traces of historic human occupation and were once on a key sea route. Established mainland monastic houses, especially Iona, took advantage of their overriding *sense of sanctuary* and solitude to establish monastic retreats. Apart from a few infrequently used bothies and small estate lodges at Glenbatrick Bay and Kilmory Lodge on Scarba, there are no other buildings and few *human artefacts* or *evidence of modern land use* across much of the WLA.



Within the WLA on Jura some ruined croft houses, broken iron fences, stone walls and enclosures reflect the long history of human occupation and activity. Although obvious *human artefacts*, these are usually small, isolated and low key features.

Along the south and east coast of Jura, coastal settlement, forest plantations, improved fields, small scale hydro infrastructure, power lines on timber poles and vehicles moving along the main road are visible from the tops and outward-facing slopes of the WLA, reducing the *sense of remoteness and sanctuary* and forming a distinct edge to the WLA. These human elements impose less on the wild land qualities when seen as isolated features and have little effect from much of the interior, where the expanse of rugged moorland is dominant, or from the northern or western coasts.

Some large forest plantations and coastal development on Islay and mainland Argyll and wind turbines on Kintyre also affect the *sense of remoteness and sanctuary* in places, although these are less imposing when seen amongst the complex pattern of skerries and water channels. Fishing vessels and ferries are more evident, especially within the Sound of Islay, introducing sound and movement that also affect the sense of solitude.



The newly constructed Inver hydro scheme includes a dam which increases the extent of Lochan Gleann Astaile at the base of Beinn a Chaolais, the southern-most Pap. The dam, impoundment, intake ditches, several kilometres of constructed tracks, ancillary structures, embankments and areas of disturbed moorland have a noticeable cumulative effect on the *sense of remoteness, naturalness and sanctuary* within the southern part of the WLA, also affecting the *arresting* quality of the views to and from Beinn a Chaolais.



Endnotes

ⁱ Peter Edwards (2010). *Walking on Jura Islay and Colonsay*. Cicerone Guide

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

Site assessment carried out September 2013