



## Context

This WLA extends 374 km<sup>2</sup> across Lochaber, between Loch Linnhe in the south east and the intricate coast between Loch Moidart and Loch Ailort in the north west. A major road to nearby Fort William flanks its northern edge, but it is otherwise distant from large population centres.

The area includes a complex range of very rocky and rugged mountains – these appearing in some places to be extremely rough in their form and predominance of exposed rock. There are also some simpler and more massive hills in the east, as well as areas of elevated moorland towards the coast. These landforms reflect the geology of the area, formed of hard metamorphic rocks that were carved during glaciation to create striking features, such as pyramidal peaks, corries, U-shaped glens and piles of moraine, as well as the remarkable fjord of Loch Shiel which is 17km long and cuts through the mountains. The distinctive forms of the mountains are highlighted against the open space and horizontal emphasis of adjacent sea, interior lochs and glen floors.

The WLA is largely uninhabited, although there are a few isolated cottages within some of the glens. The land is used mainly for deer stalking, fishing, forestry and tourism. Many people view the area from outside its edges, including along the A830 ‘Road to the Isles’, the West Highland railway line, the A861 Moidart coast road, the A82, and whilst crossing Loch Linnhe on the Corran Ferry. From these places, views into the interior are, however, limited by the screening effect of the outward-facing slopes.

Within the WLA itself, the long, penetrating U-shaped glens attract hillwalkers and mountain bikers, with a number of through-routes, such as between Sallachan and Strontian, and along Loch Shiel. The high mountains and rocky ridges with 13 Corbetts attract hillwalkers, and boat trips along Loch Shiel are also popular in season<sup>i</sup>.

The WLA is covered almost entirely by designations that reflect its landscape and scenic qualities, including the Morar, Moidart and Ardnamurchan National Scenic Area (NSA), the Loch Shiel NSA, The Moidart, Morar and Glen Shiel Special Landscape Area (SLA) and the Ardgour SLA<sup>iiii</sup>.

The sea lies to the north west and south east of the WLA, forming the backdrop to views and increasing exposure within the area. However it doesn’t have a strong influence on the wild land qualities due to an intervening band of infrastructure and settlement around the coast. Similarly the Kinlochhourne - Knoydart – Morar WLA (18) to the north east is separated by the A830 main road, the railway and series of large conifer plantations between Glenfinnan and Loch Eil, whilst the Rannoch – Nevis - Mamores - Alder WLA (14) to the south east is separated by human elements and activity around Loch Linnhe.

## Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A complex range of irregular, high, steep, rugged and rocky mountains with a strong sense of naturalness**

Landform has a strong influence within this WLA, with a complex range of mountains that are irregular in form, very *rugged* and have a high proportion of exposed rock, giving them a ‘raw’ image that conveys a *sense of naturalness*. Some of the mountains have steep, sweeping slopes that rise up to the rocky peaks and ridges, whilst others are broader and bulkier in form; however the rocky slopes for all these are difficult and *physically challenging* to ascend, with a perceived *high risk*.



The mountains are not as high as others within the west Highlands; however, this is not clearly evident within the hills themselves, as they seem high and *arresting* in their vertical scale and steep slopes. Their overall profile is most clear where viewed against the open space and contrasting horizontal element of adjacent sea, lochs or wide glen floors.

Many of the physical features indicate geological processes, for example with deep carries, U-shaped glens, piles of moraine and exposed rock revealing convoluted banding that contribute to a strong *sense of naturalness*. Rivers and waterfalls also indicate the ongoing dynamic nature of the landscape, for example with water-sculpted river banks and deeply gouged gullies down the steepest mountain sides.



From the mountain tops, there are stunning panoramic views of a complex array of ridges and peaks continuing far into the distance – the jumbled nature of which seems *awe-inspiring* in its irregularity and scale. These extend into a backcloth of more distant mountains, including within Knoydart (WLA 18), Nevis and the Mamores (WLA 14). From these tops, the steep drops on some or all sides create *arresting* views of the landscape below, which contributes to a strong *sense of risk*, also influenced by exposure.



These elevated vantage points, particularly those around the WLA margins, reveal *human artefacts* and *evidence of contemporary land use*. Although surrounding roads, the railway, settlements and isolated cottages outside the WLA tend to appear fairly discrete, tucked in within the base slopes and/or partially screened by woodland, there are a number of extensive forest plantations around the margins (both within and outside the WLA) that are more prominent and imposing, particularly where extending part-way up mountain slopes.

In addition to the highest and most rugged mountains, there are some simpler, broader and more massive hills in the east, as well as some elevated cnochan in the far west. Located within the WLA margins, these areas often form the backcloth to views looking into the WLA from outside, for example across Loch Eil and Loch Moidart. In reverse, this also means that these areas tend to be influenced more strongly by views to human elements outside the area.

Within parts of this WLA, native woodland fits tightly below crags and along burns and waterfalls within the rugged mountain slopes, increasing shelter and contributing to the *sense of naturalness*, especially where extensive.

- **Deep, long glens that penetrate the remote interior and contain a strong sense of seclusion and sanctuary**

The mountains are penetrated by a series of deep, curved and branching glens. The towering side slopes of these are *arresting* in their vertical form and enclosure, with their aspect and steepness sometimes highlighted by strong contrasts of shadow. These glens are *awe inspiring* in their large scale and simple glaciated forms, for example with U-shaped glens, hanging valleys and elevated corries. Combined with moraine, dynamic rivers and waterfalls, these features contribute to a strong *sense of naturalness*.

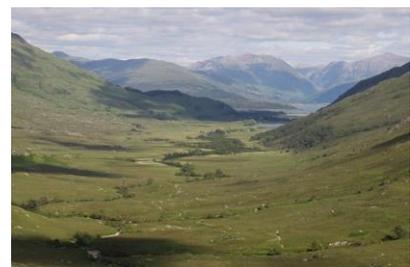


Lochs and watercourses have a strong influence within the glens, contributing to the *sense of naturalness*, but also creating barriers that limit access and increase *remoteness*, especially during times of spate. As well as a central meandering river, some glens contain tributaries that run down steep grooves in the side slopes, the steepness of these highlighted by waterfalls.

Within the glen floors, there is often evidence of past settlement, and some of the grazing is still used seasonally for stock. Some of the old cottages are also maintained as shelters, including for those that visit the glens to fish. These appear as *human artefacts* and indicate human activity, but their effects are limited where small or concentrated, isolated, low-lying, and discrete in siting and design.



The glens within this WLA tend to be very long and penetrate far into the mountains, resulting in a strong increase in *remoteness* from the margins. At the head of the glens and within the corries, the shielding side slopes create a sense of shelter and a strong *sense of sanctuary*. Nonetheless, the long and open form of some glens can also provide direct views out of the interior into the distance, often emphasised by the framing of side slopes. These views sometimes reveal human elements in the far distance that highlight the limited *extent* of the area.



Native woodland occurs within some of the glens, often concentrated along the rivers, tributary burns, or within the shelter of rugged slopes, and this contributes to the *sense of naturalness*. In some places, the presence of deer fences indicate human intervention in grazing regimes, which may diminish the *sense of naturalness*, as well as the fence appearing as an *artefact*.

The main access routes within this WLA run through the glens, with these sometimes linked by a bealach in-between. Some of the routes comprise discrete paths that wind around and over the landform and are low-key, maintaining the *sense of remoteness*. In contrast, vehicular tracks have been built through some glens which are prominent from the mountains above as *human artefacts* and diminish the sense of *remoteness* and *sanctuary*. Whatever the route taken, access into the upper

reaches of the glens on foot or bike takes a long time and is *physically challenging* – mainly due to their very long length and *rugged* surface.

Conifer plantations have a strong influence within certain glens. Some are located outside the WLA, but their effects extend inside, for example Glen Moidart and Ariundle, whilst others are located within the WLA, such as Callop, along Loch Shiel, and within Glen Aladale. These plantations indicate *contemporary land use*, mask the underlying *rugged* landform, and/ or diminish the *sense of naturalness* and *perceived awe* of adjacent mountains.



With some, there is ongoing forestry activity as part of a cycle of felling which, when evident, affects the *sense of sanctuary*.

- **The spectacular linear trench of Loch Shiel that cuts through the mountains, appearing awe inspiring in its form**

This WLA is crossed by a long, straight glen occupied by Loch Shiel. The sheer scale and simple form of this appears *awe-inspiring*, whilst the loch's simple colour, texture and openness emphasises the *arresting* nature of the steep, rugged slopes adjacent.

This glen tends to be viewed and experienced separately from the rest of the WLA, due to its strong contrast in character in relation to its surroundings. Its distinctive geological form is most clearly revealed from either end, and this contributes to the *sense of naturalness*.



Loch Shiel offers a route that cuts straight through the WLA from north east to south west. Many people experience this in summer by taking one of a number of boat trips that run along the loch between Glenfinnan and Acharacle, whilst others canoe, and some walk or cycle along the track on the south side (and some combine these in different directions). From the loch, there are stunning views along its length and to the steep mountain side slopes, but limited views beyond.

Both the northern and southern slopes of Loch Shiel contribute to the distinctiveness of the landform feature, but there is a strong difference in wild land experience between the different sides. The northern slopes are *remote*, with no overland access route, and possess a strong *sense of naturalness*, rocky *rugged* slopes and some large areas of native woodland.

Conversely, on the south side, there is a relatively wide constructed track<sup>iv</sup> along the entire length of the loch, as well as a number of other *human artefacts*, conifer plantations (described above) and fish farm cages; these have cumulative effects and diminish the *sense of sanctuary*.




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#### Endnotes and select references

<sup>i</sup> More information available at <http://www.highlandcruises.co.uk/timetable.htm>. Season end of March – beginning of October 2015.

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

<sup>iii</sup> The Highland Council (2011) *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council

<sup>iv</sup> Although privately owned, this was not gated to vehicles at either the north or south end during site assessment trips for this study

**Site assessment carried out June, July and September 2014**