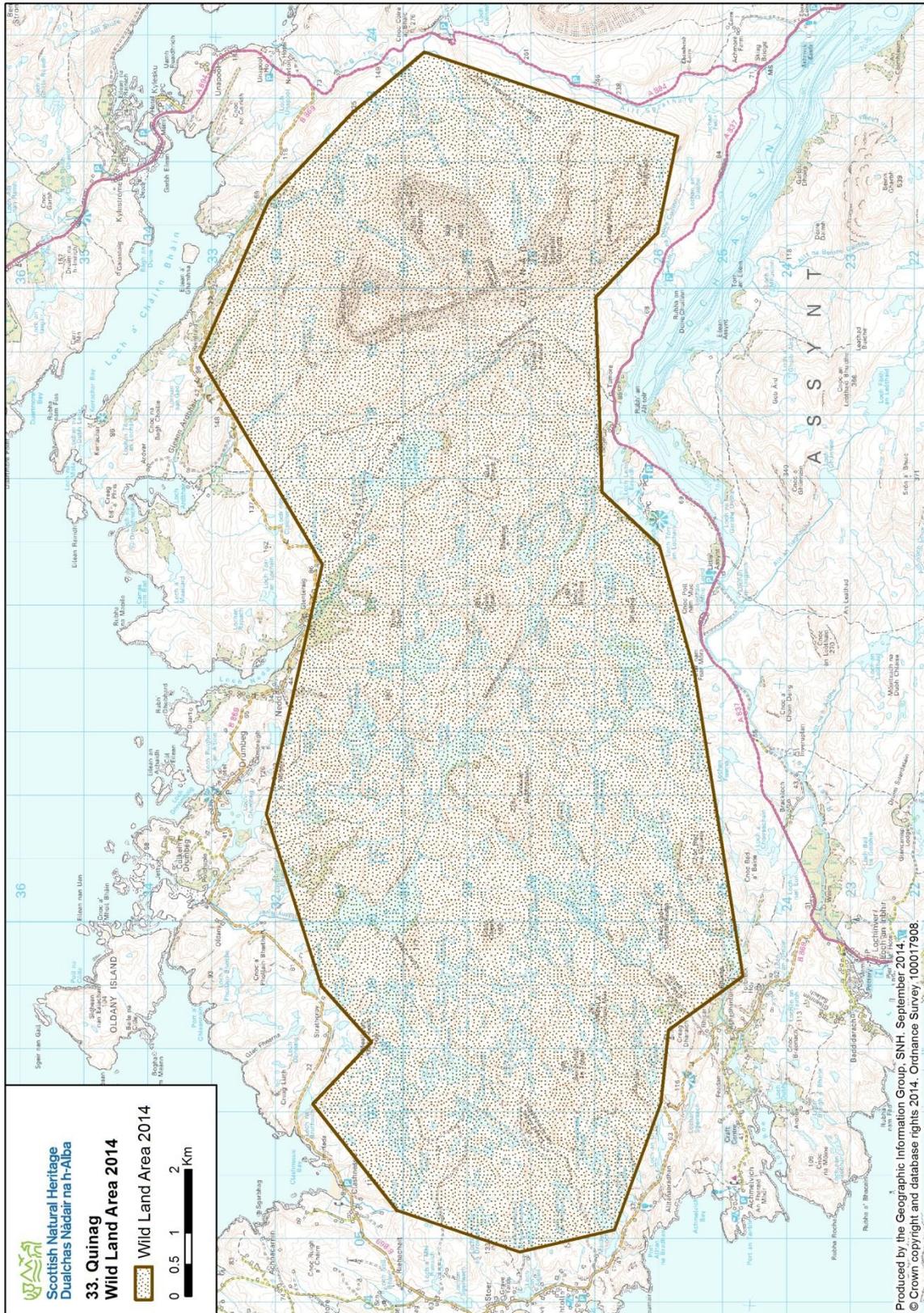


Quinag Wild Land Area



Context

This small WLA extends 104 km² across west Sutherland, from the distinctive mountain of Quinag in the east, over an expanse of rocky cnocan and lochan to the west. This forms the backcloth to the west coast and settlements such as Drumbeg, Clashnessie, Unapool and Kylesku. One of a cluster of seven WLAs in the north west of Scotland, flanked by main roads to the east and south, it is relatively distant from large population centres.

The mountain and cnocan composition reflects the underlying geology – Quinag consisting of 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 describedⁱ 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*’.

The land within this WLA is used mainly for deer stalking, grazing, fishing, nature conservation and recreation. This is influenced by land ownership, which is mainly by public and community trusts that have overriding aims to protect the environment and interests of people living within the area. The John Muir Trust own and manage the mountain of Quinag and the surrounding peatlandⁱⁱ, whilst the Assynt Crofters’ Trustⁱⁱⁱ own and manage the North Assynt Estate, and the Culag Community Woodland Trust^{iv} own the Little Assynt Estate.

The WLA is largely uninhabited, but the area contributes significantly to the visual backcloth of many small settlements just outside, including Lochinver in the south west and Kylesku in the north east, as well as a large number of dispersed crofting communities and residences dotted around the coast.

The WLA forms part of the wider Assynt landscape enjoyed by both residents and visitors. Within this context, Quinag (with its three Corbetts) forms a key feature which is prominent in views from the A837 and the north shore of Loch Assynt, as well as from the A894 and elevated slopes above Kylesku. At a local level, the cnocan is viewed at closer distances from coastal roads and settlements, with the rocky landform horizons and woodland creating some sheltered spaces. Visitor numbers are relatively high around the coast, access roads, and at key attractions such as Quinag and Little Assynt, where walking is encouraged by the presence of parking areas, information boards and/ or some constructed paths. Many of the lochs and lochans are also popular for fishing.

The high scenic value of the WLA is recognised by being located within the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area. Within the description for this area,^v Quinag is included as one of the mountains ‘...famed for their strange spectacular shapes, which are thrown into relief...by the comparatively uniform ground of moorland and loch out of which they rise’. This also describes ‘The absence of modern artefacts, or overt human activity, over much of the landscape emphasises the feelings of openness, remoteness and wildness’.

The public roads that flank this area are relatively minor and / or quiet in character and are often screened from within the WLA itself. Further afield, the area is surrounded in every direction by the open sea or other mountain and peatland ranges, including the Inverpolly – Glencanisp WLA (32) and the Reay – Cassley WLA (34). This means its wild land qualities are often perceived to extend far beyond its edges.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **Striking contrast between the mountain of Quinag and a wide expanse of rocky cnocan, with attributes that seem more extensive because of their presence within other wild land areas nearby**

This WLA combines two strongly contrasting elements - the prominent and isolated mountain of Quinag and an extensive area of rocky cnocan. The openness and horizontal emphasis of the cnocan at a broad scale accentuates the steep, rocky and vertical form of the mountain and vice versa, so that the *awe-inspiring* qualities of each are emphasised.



These elements also occur within other wild land areas outwith the WLA, and thereby contribute to the area's qualities, for example Glas Bheinn to the north and Suilven and Canisp to the south. In this way, whilst the edges of the Quinag WLA are clearly marked, it seems to form just one piece of a wider jigsaw of wild land.

Despite the contrast of landform across this area, the landscape is consistently *rugged* and *physically challenging* to access. In addition, because of its openness, both the mountain and cnocan are very exposed, contributing to a strong *sense of risk*.

The contrast between the mountain and lower-lying ground allows the tops of Quinag to offer *arresting* panoramic and aerial views over the surrounding cnocan.



These views allow greater appreciation of the prevailing absence of *human artefacts and contemporary land use* across the cnocan interior, as well as revealing the complexity of the pattern of rock and water that is difficult to discern on the ground due to landform screening. This contributes to the *sense of naturalness* and perceived wide expanse of the area, which is also influenced by seeing beyond the WLA to the open sea.

In contrast to the prevailing sense of openness and absence of human elements within the WLA interior, elevated views reveal some prominent human elements around the margins. Although these are mainly located outside the WLA, the openness of the mountain footslopes means they influence its wild land qualities. They are most prominent where comprising activity or forms, lines or colours that contrast to the landform and vegetation backdrop, for example the A894 main road. It is notable that distant views from Quinag do not clearly reveal large scale wind farms and very few conifer plantations.

- **A landmark mountain of irregular form and towering cliffs that attracts many hillwalkers**

Quinag possesses a distinct, irregular profile, with a long imposing face of towering cliffs on its south west side and three separate limbs on its north east side, marked by the separate tops of Sàil Ghorm, Sàil Gharbh and Spidean Coinich. The mountain is high in elevation and reveals many different rock features, such as rounded slabs, crags, cliffs and boulder fields, emphasising the *sense of naturalness* and its *ruggedness*. The *arresting* nature of these features is experienced from both above and below, and the mountain is *physically challenging* to access, with a resulting sense of *risk*.



Between its north eastern limbs, Quinag harbours two deep corries. These tend to be hidden from below by the surrounding *rugged* slopes, meaning they are revealed in surprise as the mountain is ascended. This screening also means that, when within the corries, there is a strong *sense of sanctuary*.

The tops of Quinag are visited by relatively high numbers of hillwalkers. These are attracted to the mountain's landmark properties, as well as to the fact it includes three Corbetts, with access facilitated by constructed paths on the lower slopes and several parking areas. Visibility of high numbers of hill walkers upon the mountain during busy times diminishes temporarily the *sense of solitude*, although other wild land attributes remain strong, such as the *sense of awe* and *sanctuary*.

- **Extensive open cnocan that is very rugged and possesses a strong sense of sanctuary and solitude, with little evidence of humans and visited by few**

The western two thirds of the WLA consist of rocky cnocan which, despite not being high in elevation, is very *rugged*. Away from the visual focus of Quinag, the expanse of cnocan forms a distinct horizontal feature in its own right that appears *awe-inspiring*.



The cnocan, lochans, rivers and waterfalls are all extremely irregular in form and pattern. In combination with predominant rock cover that seems very 'raw' in character, these contribute strongly to the *sense of naturalness*. In some places, this is amplified by native woodland that tucks into the undulations and lee slopes.

There is only one path crossing the cnocan interior (through Gleann Leireag) and a few short paths entering from the WLA's edges – usually to access fishing lochs and/or for land management purposes, although also used for local recreation. Off-path, access over the cnocan is very difficult and *physically challenging* due to the *ruggedness* of the landform, but also the rough vegetation, bogs and waterbodies that need to be negotiated. These obstacles and screening of distant views by the landform mean it is very difficult to follow a direct route through the area, resulting in a perception of greater *remoteness*, even at short distances 'as the crow flies' from the WLA's edges. The *physical challenge* of crossing the cnocan also contributes to the small number of people that visit the interior, resulting in a prevailing *sense of solitude*.

Most of the cnocan interior is free of *human artefacts* and with little evidence of *contemporary land use*, leading to a strong *sense of sanctuary*. This absence of human elements in combination with landform screening and a consistent mosaic of vegetation also mean it is very difficult to perceive distance across these areas, resulting in the area appearing from some places to *extend* further than its actual size.

Within the margins of the WLA, there are some historic features indicating past settlement and grazing, such as ruined croft buildings and enclosures, which typically form small, isolated and low-key-features with localised effects. There are also settlements and roads just outside the WLA boundary, but views of the *human artefacts and contemporary land uses* within and around these tend to be limited by the cnocan landform. The exception to this are tall or extensive elements



and those upon elevated slopes, such as wind turbines, masts or fences that are seen above the landform horizons or extending far over the open open slopes.

Endnotes and select references

- ⁱ Information available at <http://www.nwhgeopark.com/landscape/>
- ⁱⁱ John Muir Trust (2002) *Quinag (A' Chuinneag) – A John Muir Trust property*. Pitlochry, John Muir Trust.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Information available at <http://www.assyntcrofters.co.uk/page2.html>
- ^{iv} Information available at <http://www.culagwoods.org.uk/>
- ^v SNH (2010) *The special qualities of the National Scenic Areas*. SNH Commissioned Report No 374.

Site assessment carried out August and October 2013 and March 2014