

Context

This is one of 11 island Wild Land Areas (WLA), located on South Uist, extending 100 km² from Loch Sgiopoint in the north to Loch Baghasdail in the south. It comprises a long, narrow range of hills, edged by a spectacular eastern coast of cliffs, rocky promontories, lochs and bays. One of 12 WLAs defined in part by the coast, the main island spinal route flanks its western and southern edge, and a minor road provides access to Loch Aineort.

South Uist is an island which differs greatly between its west and east sides, with low-lying croft land and machair in the west, and high, rugged hills, cnocan and peatland bordering The Minch to the east. The linear range of hills that run north – south along the island include Beinn Mhòr, the highest at 620m AOD, as well as other distinctive peaks such as Thacla and Beinn Choradail that all appear high, steep, rocky and rugged.

The WLA, alike much of the Outer Hebrides, is underlain by Lewisian gneiss; however, following the line of the Outer Hebrides Fault, the higher hills are formed of metamorphosed gabbroⁱ.

Since 2006, most of South Uist has been owned and managed by the community company Stòras Uibhistⁱⁱ. Land within the WLA is currently used mainly for deer and wildfowl shooting, sheep grazing, fishing and recreationⁱⁱⁱ.

Many people see the South Uist hills from outside the WLA's edges, as part of the visual backdrop to the surrounding sea, settlements, crofting townships and roads. The area itself is popular for hillwalking, typically accessed via a number of peat tracks leading from the main A865, as well as footpaths into the margins from the south at Loch Baghasdail, from the centre around Loch Aineort, and from the north at Loch Sgiopoint. Conversely, there are few paths within the interior and access is mainly off-path, which is challenging due to the rugged, rocky and boggy terrain. Some hillwalkers are attracted to the highest peaks, such as Beinn Mhòr, or walk along the coast or to inland lochs, whilst other people travel around the coast using sea kayaks or boats, and some stay at the remote MBA bothy at Uisinis.

The South Uist hills landscape is not designated, but it is recognised for its value in relation to the South Uist Machair National Scenic Area whose description^{iv} notes '*... a backdrop of hills frames all views inland, the level foreground making the hills appear all the higher*'.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A contrast between dramatic landforms and a remote coast to the east, and open, sweeping peatland leading to crofting settlements to the west**

The hills within this area have contrasting sides: to the west, they tend to descend to gently-sloped peatland and then to the edge of crofting settlements (outside the WLA) near the west coast; whilst, in contrast, the eastern slopes plunge abruptly into a mixed composition of hill ridges, cliffs and corries towards the east coast. This means, within the WLA, there is strong difference between the two sides in terms of distant views to *human artefacts* and *evidence of contemporary land use*. Views to the east tend to include very few human elements, with a corresponding strong perception of *remoteness* and *sanctuary*; whilst, to the west, distant views include many human elements outside the WLA, for example telecom masts, houses and roads that have cumulative effects.



- **Awe-inspiring mountains highlighted in contrast to their low-lying surroundings, and possessing a rugged and rocky landform with arresting features**

Within this WLA, the mountains appear arresting in their vertical scale and distinct forms that are highlighted in contrast to the lower-lying surroundings which are more horizontal in emphasis, including lochs, the sea and flatter peatland within and outside the WLA. This contrast of elevation also means there is very good visibility from the hill slopes and tops over the surrounding landscape, including elevated views of the irregular and intricate pattern of lochs, lochans and pools that convey a *sense of naturalness*.



Although the hill range within this WLA is fairly small and is split by Loch Aineort, it nonetheless contains a dramatic range of *rugged* landform features, including rocky ridges, cliffs, buttresses, crags and boulder fields, with a predominance of exposed rock upon upper slopes. These seem awe-inspiring in their vertical scale and complexity of form, particularly upon the eastern faces.

The landform features limit access and consequently influence the perception of *remoteness*; however, they can also provide local shelter and shield distant views, contributing to a strong sense of local *sanctuary* and *solitude*.



The hills and surrounding lower-lying peatland and cnocan reveal a wealth of glacial features, such as U-shaped glens, hanging valleys, corries and glacial lochs, as well as evidence of ongoing erosion and weathering, for example freeze-thaw and waterfalls, that reinforce the *sense of naturalness*.

- **A strong influence of the sea, particularly in the east, affecting the perceived extent of the area and the sense of naturalness, as well as revealing distinct coastal features**

There is a consistent presence of the sea throughout this WLA, as it is never far away, but it has varying influence in different places. The east of the WLA directly adjoins the sea and this strongly affects the wild land qualities within this area, including its perceived *extent* and *sense of naturalness*, which is amplified by the dynamic character of the sea and exposure to changing weather conditions.

In contrast, the sea to the west is separated from the WLA by an area of crofting, settlement and infrastructure and thus, although featuring in the background of views, does not directly affect the wild land qualities within the WLA.

Within the indents along the east coast, local shelter is provided that combines with local screening of interior views to amplify the *sense of sanctuary*. The rocky and *rugged* nature of the coast also limits access and thus may increase perceived *remoteness* and *risk*.

Although there is a prevailing lack of *human artefacts* and *contemporary land use* seen on the eastern side of this WLA, evidence of past settlement occurs in a number of isolated locations along the east coast, particularly at the head of lochs and around bays. This includes ruined stone buildings, enclosures and feannagan, as well as the maintained MBA bothy at Uisinis. These features appear as *human artefacts*, but their effects tend to be localised as they appear isolated, small in scale, discrete in siting, and low-key in character.

Present day activity and *human artefacts* located just outside the WLA include boats upon the sea and the presence of fish farm cages within some locations. In addition, more distant human elements can be seen across and upon the opposite shores of some of the lochs around the WLA edges, including Lochs Baghasdail, Sgiopoint and Aineort.

- **Extensive open peatland slopes and cnocan which are arresting in their simplicity at a broad scale and challenging to access at a local level**

In the northern part of the WLA, rocky cnocan extends out from the higher hills to Loch Druidibeag and the north east coast, whilst more gently sloped peatland occurs in the south of the area towards Dalabrog. The horizontal emphasis, open expanse and exposure of these areas at a broad scale contribute to their *arresting* qualities, while their simplicity and/or repetitive pattern also makes it difficult to estimate size and distance, resulting in these areas often seeming more *extensive* than they actually are.

Although the landscape is simple at a broad scale, it is *rugged* at a more detailed level, including bogs, pools and peat hags, which increase the *physical challenge* when crossing these areas and the associated *sense of risk*. This is amplified by most parts of the peatland and cnocan needing to be accessed off-path.



Within the cnocan and peatland, local irregularities in the landform can sometimes create local semi-enclosed spaces where there is a stronger *sense of sanctuary* due to screening of human elements in the distance.

Across the peatland and cnocan areas within the WLA, there is evidence of deer and sheep grazing, with the latter tending to be most obvious in the western, southern and northern parts. There are notably few fenced enclosures or exclosures, or conifer plantations within the WLA which influences the prevailing openness and *perceived naturalness*.

Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Goodenough, K. and J. Merrit (2011) *The Outer Hebrides: A landscape fashioned by geology*. Redgorton, SNH. Available at: <http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/geology/outerhebrides.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Information available at: <http://www.storasuibhist.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} SNH (2010) *The special qualities of the National Scenic Areas*. SNH Commissioned Report No 374.

Site assessment carried out May 2014