

Cape Wrath Wild Land Area



Context

This Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 226 km² across rolling hills and peatland of Sutherland, the most northern mainland WLA and one of only three mainland areas that are partly defined by the coast. Edged on two sides by the sea with a spectacular coastline of cliffs and beaches, inland it is flanked by main roads to the east and south, and lies relatively distant from large population centres.

Cape Wrath or *Am Parbh* (commonly known as ‘the *Parbh*’) is renowned for being the furthest north-west extremity of mainland UK, with its name derived from the Norse word ‘*hvarf*’, meaning turning point. The end of the promontory is marked by the Cape Wrath lighthouse, while its margins are delineated by the sea on the south west, north west and north east sides, and the Kyle of Durness and River Dionard glaciated valley to the south east. The cape forms part of the North West Highlands Geoparkⁱ, with its Torridonian sandstone and Lewisian gneiss most clearly evident along the coast, including the highest sea cliffs on the British mainland at Clò Mòr.

The northern part of Cape Wrath and its coastal waters are used for training by the Ministry of Defence, during which times public access may be limited. In contrast, the John Muir Trust own and manages the southern part of the WLA, including the renowned Sandwood Bay and Am Buachaille sea stack. It promotesⁱⁱ this area as ‘*a special wild place of awe-inspiring coastal beauty...*’ The remaining land within the WLA is used mainly for deer and sheep grazing, with the latter being particularly prevalent closer to the crofting communities of Blairmore and Oldshoremore.

The reputation of Cape Wrath draws many visitors. Many of these access the area in season via the small passenger ferry from Keoldale and then a minibus to and from the Cape Wrath lighthouse (a trip marketed as going ‘to the edge’ⁱⁱⁱ). Elsewhere visitors walk (or cycle in smaller numbers) the four-mile path from Blairmore in the south to Sandwood Bay. Some cross the entire WLA north - south along the unmarked ‘Cape Wrath Trail’^{iv} and some stay at the bothies at Kearvaig in the north and Strathchailleach and Strathan in the south. A high number of runners also visit the northern part of the area once a year whilst taking part in the Cape Wrath Challenge^v marathon.

The scenic value of the Cape Wrath coast is recognised by its inclusion within the Oldshoremore, Cape Wrath and Durness Special Landscape Area. The description^{vi} for this area includes reference to ‘*extensive, unbroken stretches of remote coastline dominated by high cliffs and related landform features including stacks, caves and ravines*’ and ‘*extreme difficulty of access to much of the area*’.

The WLA interior is not easy to see from its edges, due to screening by the outside hill slopes and sea cliffs. However, the south eastern margins are seen forming the western slopes of the striking glaciated U-shaped glen between Gualin and Keoldale, as well as forming the hill backdrop to views west across the Kyle of Durness, experienced by many whilst travelling along the A838 road. To the east of this glen lie the prominent rocky mountains of Foinaven and Cranstackie, which form part of the Foinaven – Ben Hee WLA (33). The greater height of these mountains compared with the Cape Wrath hills means that their tops offer elevated views over the WLA; whilst, in reverse, they are sometimes seen from the WLA as mountain foci that protrude up above the intervening hill horizons.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **Peripheral and remote area, with a strong sense of isolation and challenging access**

This WLA is difficult to access as it is surrounded on two sides by steep cliffs and exposed seas, on the third side by the Kyle of Durness and a deep glaciated glen, and on the fourth by extensive peatlands. This contributes to a strong sense of isolation and *remoteness* (more than the actual distance from public roads and settlements might suggest). It also means that access to the area requires great effort and is dependent on the vagaries of the weather and the ability to land boats if crossing the Kyle of Durness. These access constraints, and particularly the very strong influence of the sea and weather, amplify the sense of *naturalness*.



The *remoteness* of the area means that few people visit the majority of the WLA and there is a corresponding strong *sense of solitude and sanctuary*. Nonetheless, there are specific times and places when and where there are relatively high numbers of visitors, including the main routes into the area (via the passenger ferry from Keoldale and minibuses, and along the path from Blairmore) and at the Cape Wrath lighthouse and Sandwood Bay. In these locations, the *sense of solitude and sanctuary* can be temporarily diminished during busy times.



The northern track to the lighthouse and the southern path to Sandwood Bay appear as obvious *human artefacts*. Nonetheless, their low-key character and the significant time and effort required to travel along them, mean that they do not overwhelm the prevailing *sense of remoteness*.



Access off-path across the interior of the WLA is very difficult and *physically challenging*. This is partly because, although the area is not very high in elevation, its traverse requires negotiating a range of bogs, pools, peat hags and burns. Access around the coast is also difficult due to very steep slopes along the edge and a scalloped landform of promontories and inlets. This combines with prevailing exposure and a lack of landmarks and difficult navigation to result in a perceived high *risk*.

- **Spectacular coastline, with towering cliffs, sandy beaches and sea stacks, strongly influenced by the dynamic character of the sea**

This WLA is strongly influenced by the sea. This is primarily because this is never far away, but its juxtaposition also increases the perceived *extent* of the area as well as the *sense of naturalness*, influenced by the activity and sound of waves and sea birds. Geomorphological features such as high cliffs and sea stacks also contribute to the *sense of naturalness*, as well as appearing *arresting* in contrast to the simple, horizontal sea expanse.

The towering cliffs are extremely *rugged* and create a strong physical edge that restricts access and leads to a perceived high *risk*. They are seen most clearly from the sea or where there is an intersecting glen because, from the cliff-tops and area above, they are hidden by 'dropping away' below. The

inaccessibility of the cliffs and limited visibility of the coastal edge are two reasons why the beaches within the area tend to form the focus of activity and views.



Some of the beaches, such as Kearvaig and Sandwood, possess large expanses of light, bright sands and dunes. In combination with the wide expanse of the adjacent sea, and in contrast to the surrounding high cliff edges, these appear *awe inspiring*. Some coastal inlets also offer local shelter and a *sense of sanctuary* in contrast to the prevailing exposure of the cape.

Where shelter combines with better drained ground extending inland from the bays, past settlement is often evident, including historic buildings, enclosures and lazy beds, as well as a brighter green sward that is still grazed by sheep in some places. The small scale and low-key siting and character of these features mean their effects tend to be localised.



- **Subtle interweaving of rounded hills, peatland and cnocan across the interior that seems extensive, but in which it is difficult to navigate and estimate scale**

Away from the coast, the WLA comprises a subtle mix of sweeping peatland and rolling hills, with a small area of rocky cnocan in the south. This area's strong simplicity, horizontal emphasis, wide open expanse and exposure at a broad scale contribute to the *perceived awe*.



The interior hill and peatland slopes seem interwoven with no obvious foci. This means it can be very difficult to navigate, increasing the *sense of risk* that is already high due to the *rugged* ground cover at a local level which includes bogs, pools and peat hags. In combination with simple vegetation cover and a typical lack of size indicators, this also means that it can be very difficult to judge distance, so that the area often seems more *extensive* than its actual dimensions. The exception to this effect occurs along the wide U-shaped glen between Gualin and Keoldale, where the hills are steeper and scale reference is provided by adjacent human elements.

- **A simple peatland interior with a prevailing sense of ‘emptiness’, although there are some concentrations of military artefacts and infrastructure**

Within the interior of this WLA, there is a prevailing lack of *human artefacts* and *evidence of contemporary land use* and an absence of conifer plantations, so there is a sense of ‘emptiness’ in addition to *remoteness* and *perceived naturalness and sanctuary*. With few visitors or paths in most places, there is also a strong sense of *solitude*.

In contrast to these prevailing attributes, there are some concentrations of *human artefacts* that diminish the wild land qualities. These include structures in the north associated with the access road and lighthouse that have cumulative effects, as well as two elevated telecommunication masts near the eastern edge of the WLA (upon Farmheall and Meall na Moine), some agricultural fences in the south and some military structures dispersed within the northern half of the WLA that include warning signs, buildings, and a long barbed-wire fence.



Endnotes and select references

ⁱ More information is available at <http://www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk/>

ⁱⁱ John Muir Trust (2012) *A guide to Sandwood (Seannabhat)*. Pitlochry, John Muir Trust.

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from leaflet for minibus trip to Cape Wrath. Available at www.capewrath.org.uk.

^{iv} More information is available at <http://capewrathtrailguide.org/>

^v More information is available at http://www.capewrathchallenge.co.uk/The_runs.html

^{vi} The Highland Council (2011) *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council.

Site assessment carried out August 2013