Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba
nature.scot

SNH National Landscape Character Assessment

Landscape Character Type 144

COASTAL CROFTS & SMALL FARMS

Location and Context

The *Coastal Crofts & Small Farms* Landscape Character Type comprises a narrow, settled and farmed fringe around the coast of Caithness and Sutherland. It is largely continuous along the east coast of Sutherland and north-east Caithness, but more intermittent west of Thurso where settlement occupies rare areas of more fertile land at river mouths and along the kyles and sea lochs of north-west Sutherland.

Key Characteristics

- Narrow, settled and farmed coastal fringe with subtle variations in topography, from long stretches of strongly contained coastal shelves and raised beaches, to smaller pockets at river mouths and squeezed between dunes and areas of *Cnocan – Caithness & Sutherland.*
- Pastures and occasional arable fields, most often divided by post and wire fences, with the division of fields marked by crop colour and texture rather than boundaries.
- Low stone walls enclosing fields on the shelf above the *High Cliffs and Sheltered Bays* between Dunbeath and Wick.
- Little woodland within the more exposed east and north Caithness coasts.
- Small woodlands and clumps of trees present at the outlet of more sheltered straths or along the eastern shores of Kyle of Tongue and Loch Eriboll.
- Settlement most concentrated where this Landscape Character Type broadens at the mouths of major rivers along the east coast, where larger farms and crofts are concentrated.
- Small, hunkered-down croft houses and outbuildings loosely clustered or sometimes aligned in a linear fashion on the top of terraces or ridges above the coast or a river floodplain.
- More dispersed settlement pattern on the east coast to the north of Brora.
- Newer housing most evident to the south of Brora with larger modern houses often infilling spaces between older croft houses and contrasting with the size and form of these original buildings.

- A number of settlements, often located at bridging points and at the junction with the straths, many with harbours particularly on the east coast of Sutherland and Caithness.
- Major communications routes on the east coast including the A9, the railway and transmission line aligned along the edge of this landscape.
- A number of historic sites including churches, castles, mills and cemeteries.
- Highly visible landscape, seen from major roads and, on the east Sutherland coast, the railway.
- Complex visual composition of views tending to focus on the detail of houses, field patterns and crops, yet with the wider context of backdrop hills and sea adding diversity.

Landscape Character Description

Landform, Landcover and Settlement

These farmed and crofted coastal landscapes in Caithness and Sutherland have subtle variations in topography.

Along the east coast of Sutherland a narrow margin of land forming a coastal shelf is strongly contained by the steep-sided *Rounded Hills – Caithness & Sutherland* on its inland side and *Sandy Beaches and Dunes* or *High Cliffs and Sheltered Bays* on seaward side. These landscapes have a distinct linear emphasis. A number of very narrow and steep glens intersect this section of coastline and these often carve very deep, often wooded crevices down to the sea.

To the north of Brora the coastal farms and crofts sit on a narrow linear raised beach terrace forming a platform which is strongly contained by steep-sided *Rounded Hills – Caithness & Sutherland*, edged by low dunes along the coast. The gently undulating landscape is farmed with well-managed, walled pastures studded with clumps of gorse on knolls and with rough grassland on steeper banks to the north of Brora. Wider areas exist along the east and north coasts of Caithness where it borders the lower-lying *Sweeping Moorland and Flows.*

The Landscape Character Type is more open and broader in extent around the east and north Caithness coasts where it borders the lower-lying *Sweeping Moorland and Flows.* There is a gradual transition between the two Landscape Character Types. These areas tend to have a particularly open and light character, often accentuated by pale hues of stone and white-rendered buildings and lichen-mottled field walls.

In north-west Sutherland the *Coastal Crofts & Small Farms* comprises much smaller pockets of settlement and small sloping pastures, sometimes tucked between dune-backed beaches, the steep and craggy terrain of the *Rocky Hills and Moorland* or the rough and inhospitable terrain of the *Cnocan – Caithness & Sutherland.* It corresponds with more fertile areas along the shores of the Kyles and Loch Eriboll in north-west Sutherland with an outcrop of limestone at Durness, supporting a larger collection of crofts, small farms and lush green pastures which contrast with the duller hues of surrounding moorland. Areas along the west coast of Sutherland, where it is constrained and fragmented by the *Cnocan – Caithness & Sutherland,* form irregular small fields often wrapping around rocky knolls.

These coastal landscapes predominantly support crofting although occasional small farms are also present. Farmland largely comprises pastures with larger fields being present on alluvial land at the juncture of the *Straths – Caithness & Sutherland* and on flatter coastal shelves along the south-east coast. At mouths of major rivers some larger farms are present on the more fertile soils with crofts often occupying lower hill slopes and terraces or more rolling ground set above the floodplain. The larger settlements tend to be concentrated at the mouths of these rivers on the east coast, such as at Brora and Helmsdale. Crofting strip-fields and an ordered linear pattern of croft houses is a feature in many areas although more random infill of crofts and new housing is also evident. Many of the coastal crofting communities have a strong connection with the sea with small harbours sited in sheltered coves at the foot of cliffs below settlements. Main communication routes and smaller single-track roads link coastal settlement in the north and west of Sutherland.

There is little woodland in areas on exposed east and north Caithness coasts with a greater proportion of rougher pastures dotted with gorse and rush and pockets of heather moorland, particularly close to the transition with the *Sweeping Moorland and Flows*. Small woodlands and clumps of trees are present where the *Coastal Crofts & Small Farms* occur at the outlet of more sheltered straths or along the eastern shores of Kyle of Tongue and Loch Eriboll.

The long history of settlement in these coastal areas is apparent in the range of prehistoric and historic sites. For example, archaeological sites are particularly rich at the transition with the *Sweeping Moorland and Flows* in east Caithness around Loch of the Yarrows and Camster. This includes numerous archaeological sites at the Yarrows Archaeological Trail (such as cairns, brochs, hut circles, standing stones, stone rows, etc), and the Hill o'Many Stanes stone rows at Mid Clyth. There are also numerous churches, castles, mills, cemeteries and other sites represented. These include the Whaligoe curing yard and steps, house and burial ground at Mains of Ulbster in the east. Further west in and around Bettyhill are Fiscary cairns, as well as Farr churchyard cross slab and listed buildings at Bettyhill.

Perception

The various characteristics of this landscape create a complex visual composition, with views tending to focus on the detail of houses, field patterns and crops, yet with the wider context of backdrop hills and sea adding diversity to this landscape. On the north-west Sutherland coast, this farmed and settled landscape is often seen in conjunction with intricate coastal features including sandy beaches, dunes, rocky headlands and islands, contributing to the richly scenic character of these coastal areas.

This is one of 390 Landscape Character Types identified at a scale of 1:50 000 as part of a national programme of Landscape Character Assessment republished in 2019.

The area covered by this Landscape Character Type was originally included in the Caithness and Sutherland LCA (Stanton, C) published 1998; and Caithness and Sutherland Landscape Character Review (Carol Anderson Landscape Associates), published 2015.