

The Special Qualities of the Assynt-Coigach National Scenic Area

- Spectacular scenery of lone mountains
- Rocky topography of great variety
- Settlements nestled within a wider landscape of mountain peaks, wild moorlands, and rocky seascapes
- Extensive cnochan landscapes
- A coastline of endless drama
- An intricate multitude of lochs and lochans
- A landscape of vast open space and exposure
- Significant tracts of wild land
- Unexpected and extensive tracts of native woodland
- A still, quiet landscape under a constantly changing sky

Special Quality	Further Information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Spectacular scenery of lone mountains</i> 	
<p>This is a land where lone mountains rise dramatically above cnochan, moorland and loch, where rocky hills dominate the scenery and stay long in the memory.</p> <p>The peaks are afforded a platform, a broad stage from which they thrust upwards, often with striking, steep-sided profiles recognisable from many miles away.</p>	<p>The mountain of Suilven (731 m) perhaps most encapsulates the splendour and mystique of Assynt-Coigach. Other mountains areas in Scotland may offer greater elevation and concentration of hills, but few other areas can challenge their grandeur, distinctiveness and impact on the viewer.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Rocky topography of great variety</i> 	
<p>Within the NSA, the lone mountains stand as the hallmark of the area, but there are also bluffs, sweeping moorlands, sea cliffs, lush grassy slopes with rocky outcrops, massive boulder fields and scree slopes, caves and shallow gorges, sink holes, jagged pinnacles and broad, powerful sweeping summits. Colours range from dark solid sandstone to extensive, dominant limestone greys.</p> <p>The landscape presents a stark but harmonious juxtaposition of rocky landscapes of mountain, moorland and coast.</p>	<p>Whilst distinctive by the notable separation of the mountains, the scenery of Assynt-Coigach also offers great variety of topography, colour, water, vegetation cover, land use and recreational potential.</p> <p>There is a distinct transition in landform and elevation from the coastal fringe and peninsulas of low lying crofts. Smooth moorland and cnochan; through lone mountains of the central area; and upwards to the eastern extent of the NSA across the Ben More Assynt massif, stretching from the head of Loch Glendhu south to the Benmore Forest.</p> <p>The wider, open and less steep country of uninhabited rough cnochan and smooth moorland emphasises the remoteness of the mountains, offers a stage from which they are best admired and yet also presents a deceptively tough obstacle to their entry.</p> <p>Rock is a dominant feature of the landscape generally. The</p>

	<p>geological complexities of the area were gradually unravelled in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through extensive study around Inchnadamph, and helped establish the modern understanding of earth sciences.</p>
<p>• <i>Settlements nestled within a wider landscape of mountain peaks, wild moorlands, and rocky seascapes</i></p>	
<p>Concentrations of pasture around small crofting settlements on the coast and inland around Elphin, offer an occasional contrast to the general dominance of mountains, moorland and rock. Here human activity is at its most obvious but still widely scattered and always dwarfed by the wider landscape of wild moor and dramatic peak.</p> <p>Along the coast, the bays are often framed in part by strings of small croft houses on the fringes of inbye land above the seashore. Lobster pots, fishing boats and netting reveal the importance of the sea to the remote crofting and fishing communities.</p>	<p>The low-rising and generally flat cnocan landscape of the peninsulas of Assynt and Coigach screen inland views from the small settlements which perch on the slopes down to the rocky shore or silvery beaches. From the shore the same cottages and crofts can appear perched and standing firm in the face of the prevailing elements.</p> <p>The presence of limestone at Elphin, and Inchnadamph along to Ardvrek, with the resultant richer soils, has encouraged human settlement inland. The Inchnadamph caves indicate settlement of this area since early prehistory, as does the chambered cairn at Ardvrek.</p> <p>Evidence of former settlement in now uninhabited areas is visible in many areas. For example, Loch Assynt with Ardvrek Castle and a church was once a centre of settlement, with former shielings common in suitable areas. Additionally, the Duke of Sutherland built a golf course here in the 19th Century.</p>
<p>• <i>Extensive cnocan landscapes</i></p>	
<p>The cnocan landscape has an unusual character. It is extensive, secretive and mysterious, but its extent is not appreciated until viewed from higher ground or the summits of the lone peaks.</p> <p>The road network is sinuous and rarely conspicuous in the scenery, apart from the striking Kylesku bridge. Small single track roads provide the road user with a very close and intimate experience of their surroundings.</p>	<p>‘Cnoc’ (plural ‘cnocan’) is Gaelic for a hillock. As a geographical term, a cnocan landscape is one of small, rounded, rocky hillocks, as typified when the bedrock is Lewisian gneiss. The term ‘cnocan and lochan’ landscape is often used, as the hollows between the cnocan are often water-filled.</p> <p>The ancient Lewisian gneiss appears deceptively flat, in comparison to its backdrop of high peaks, but it has a coarse, rough surface hiding many hollows and gullies making access difficult, once off the miles of single-track road.</p> <p>Locally, the Coigach area reflects a smoother moorland characteristic but the harshness of the Assynt cnocan is readily viewed from the coastal road and the area behind the settlements of Drumbeg and Clachtoll.</p>
<p>• <i>A coastline of endless drama</i></p>	
<p>The majesty of the mountains, steep, rocky, individual and dramatic, is framed not only by the flats of cnocan, moor and pasture, but also by the sea. At Badcall Bay, and in the south from Coigach to the Summer Isles, the profusion of islands and islets, bays and coves affords a sometimes confused mosaic, blurring the transition from land to sea. Nestled within</p>	<p>From low elevations the islands can sometimes falsely suggest unbroken land far into the sea, or appear as monumental stepping-stones out from the shore.</p>

<p>low headlands.</p> <p>The meeting of sea and land is sometimes dramatic and abrupt. The Stoer Peninsula, crowned by its whitewashed lighthouse and adorned by its great sea stack, further emphasises remoteness. Here relentless north Atlantic waves and tides meet some of the oldest rocks on earth and the movement and noise this affords is in stark contrast to the quiet stillness of the area's interior.</p> <p>However, the seascapes of Assynt-Coigach are not always fierce or dramatic. On occasion the weather affords still conditions and blue skies which reveal an idyllic coastal refuge of small bays and tight sandy coves, particularly on the Coigach peninsula.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">• <i>An intricate multitude of lochs and lochans</i></p>	
<p>The long, narrow Loch Assynt and the twin sea lochs of Glencoul and Glendhu offer significant expanses of deep water in the shadows of Quinag and Glas Bhenn. The mountains here fall steeply through their moorland skirts to plunge to the water's edge, with little change in character, land use or vegetation along the way.</p> <p>Elsewhere, there is an intricate array of lochs and lochans in the cnocan and moorland interior and coastal fringe. The true extent of this water network is mostly apparent from the elevated vantage points of the lone mountains.</p>	<p>Only the linear, Loch Assynt and the twin sea lochs of Glencoul and Glendhu offer significant expanses of deep water.</p> <p>Extensive tracts of rough and rugged gorse, heather and peat bog contain significant networks of medium and small lochans and burns, with intricate irregular form, interlocking with the low land around them and creating a significant challenge to the cross-country walker.</p> <p>Most lochans suggest a relatively shallow depth surrounded by peatlands, which often show evidence of old peat diggings. Loch Lurgainn, Loch Sionascaig and Loch Veyatie in the heart of Coigach may appear to rival Loch Assynt in terms of their extent, but their shorelines are more complex and small isles more common.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">• <i>A landscape of vast open space and exposure</i></p>	
<p>The juxtaposition of cnocan, sweeping moorland and concentrated pockets of pasture emphasises the extreme openness of Assynt-Coigach.</p> <p>There are few trees and the skies are often expansive, particularly on the coastal fringe.</p>	<p>Although most of the NSA appears open and expansive, there are a few areas with a more enclosed feeling: the heart of the Coigach range around Beinn Mor Coigach, and the hidden steep sided folds of wooded valleys on the B869 Assynt coast road.</p>

• ***Significant tracts of wild land***

Most of the human settlement is concentrated around the coast, with much of the inland being uninhabited and possessing a wild character. Large areas possess no roads or tracks, with access inland only possible on foot.

The absence of modern artefacts, or overt human activity, over much of the landscape emphasises the feelings of openness, remoteness and wildness.

This can be reinforced by the sight of an eagle soaring over some remote cliff, or by the lonely call of a golden plover amongst the moors.

The feeling of remoteness is particularly notable between Inchnadamph and the Elphin area.

The eastern highlands of Ben More Assynt, the high Coigach Massif and the western cnocan fringe, behind the crofting settlements, have a wild land character. They are part of an SNH Wild Land Search Area.

There has been a long history of land use in the area, and areas now uninhabited often show signs of former settlement or shielings.

• ***Unexpected and extensive tracts of native woodland***

Although many parts of the NSA are virtually treeless, the cnocan, especially that of Assynt, can hide the most unexpected and extensive tracts of semi-natural woodland. Here the deep folds in the Lewisian gneiss, which generally run north-west to south-east, afford some shelter and sufficient soils for linear woodlands of birch and willow to flow along the landform.

These stand in welcome relief and stark contrast to the openness and barrenness of the cnocan.

Trees are scarce in the NSA with many eastern parts virtually treeless. Although the term 'forest' is applied to areas such as Inverpolly, Drumrunie and Inchnadamph, these refer to the open deer forest rather than woodland.

• ***A still, quiet landscape under a constantly changing sky***

Assynt-Coigach is a landscape where human movement tends to be minimal, although on the coast small inshore craft slowly working the bays of the peninsula do offer occasional movement. In contrast, the skyscape, governed by the north Atlantic weather systems, provides almost constant change, often characterised by heavy cloud scudding across the landscape, in turn obscuring the higher peaks and providing a more horizontal emphasis to the scene. At other times this movement reveals, sometimes fleetingly, the same peaks.

Often the lack of human activity is apparent rather than real, with, for example, the land being used for deer stalking, angling or sheep grazing.

<p>The extensive waters of the NSA offer a constant, if subtle, sense of movement and change, fuelled by the relentless march of the ocean's weather systems.</p>	
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<p>The absence of significant tree cover in the landscape, as well as the openness, remoteness and rarity of roads, also contribute to this being a very 'still' landscape.</p>	
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Selected Bibliography

RCAHMS 1997. *Achiltibuie: The Archaeology of a Crofting Landscape*. RCAHMS Broadsheet.

Stanton, C. 1998. Caithness and Sutherland Landscape Character Assessment. *Scottish Natural Heritage Review, No.103*.