

The Special Qualities of the Northwest Sutherland National Scenic Area

- A landscape of rock
- The backdrop of distinctive mountains
- A complex cnocan landscape of rock, water and sky
- Intimate mix of sea and land
- Contrast between extensive uninhabited land and localised human settlement
- Extensive tracts of wild land
- Handa's towering sea cliffs

Special Quality	Further information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A landscape of rock</i> 	
<p>This is an uncompromising, open landscape of ancient, hard rock, sparsely clothed with vegetation. Grey and white scree-covered mountains rise steeply above a landscape of rocky cnocans interspersed with numerous lochs and lochans.</p>	<p>In many landscapes the geology provides the underlying template for the other landscape features. In this NSA it is the geology itself that stands out. The importance of the geology has been recognised through the accolade of GeoPark, the NSA being in the middle of a GeoPark that stretches beyond it both north and south.</p> <p>The Moine Thrust passes through the eastern side of the NSA. The mountains of Foinaven and Arkle are composed largely of brittle, white Cambrian quartzite, which readily erodes into scree. The land between the mountains and the sea consists of Lewisian gneiss which has eroded into a cnoc and lochan topography. The gneiss here, at over two billion years old, is amongst the oldest rocks in the world.</p> <p>The harshness of the environment is reflected in the Gaelic name <i>Ceathramh Garb</i>, the Rough Quarter.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The backdrop of distinctive mountains</i> 	
<p>Three distinctive shaped peaks, all with a hard, steep and inaccessible appearance, stand sentinel over the landscape and dominate the views.</p> <p>The lone, cone-shaped peak of Ben Stack contrasts with the whaleback ridge of Arkle and the angular broken ridge of Foinaven. With their tiered crags, they come across as a forbidding fortress to Sutherland's interior.</p>	<p>Foinaven (911m), Arkle (787m) and Ben Stack (721m) rise dramatically from the lower-lying, cnoc and lochan topography.</p> <p>The distinctive peaks of Foinaven and Arkle are coarse, angular, irregular massifs of numerous small summits, dominated by light, grey cliffs, tiered crags, loose screes and gullies. Ben Stack, in contrast, is simpler in structure, appearing as a steep cone when viewed from the seaboard.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>A complex cnocan landscape of rock, water and sky</i> 	
<p>Most of the NSA is a complex landscape of cnoc and lochan, composed of the fundamental elements of water and rock.</p>	<p>Although generally low-lying (below 150-200m), great variety can be observed in the cnocan landscape. However, this variety is based on a repeated pattern of generally rounded cnochs interspersed with lochs or lochans. On the</p>

<p>The low height of the numerous cliffs and hillocks contrasts with the massive vertical scale of the mountains beyond. Ancient glacial erratics of rocks and boulders are common in places, still in place after being dropped by glaciers thousands of years ago.</p> <p>Although this landscape can appear harsh and unforgiving, it also contains areas of intimacy – small crags, lochans, burns and hollows. Woods, however, are rare.</p> <p>Abundant water, whether loch, lochan or burn, fills the hollows. Its ripples and reflections add light and movement to the static, ancient rock that is so prevalent. The waters of Loch Stack provide a reflective foreground to the dramatic slopes and cliffs of Arkle rising up behind.</p> <p>Across this uneven and treeless topography no two horizons are the same, although the sky always a dominant feature. It is an unusual landscape of great fascination.</p>	<p>other hand, the vegetation cover, where it exists, tends to be relatively uniform.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">• <i>Intimate mix of sea and land</i></p>	
<p>The cnocan topography descends slowly into the sea, resulting in a coastline of great complexity and interest – skerries, rocks, islands, cliffs, and bays. Many stretches are only accessible on foot which, combined with the highly indented shoreline, gives the coast a wild, secluded and secretive feel.</p> <p>Loch Laxford, with its heather-clad shores, brings the sea into the heart of this landscape of rock. In places, only the ebb and flow of the tide, exposing the orange fringe of seaweed, is a reminder that it is saltwater at all. The open sea appears far away.</p>	<p>Compared to the Sutherland coast further south where small woods of birch and hazel often fringe the inland coast and soften the landscape, pockets of woodland are rare within this NSA.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">• <i>Contrast between extensive uninhabited land and localised human settlement</i></p>	
<p>Most of the land is uninhabited and uncultivated and, where not bare rock, is clothed with natural vegetation.</p>	<p>The area is sparsely populated with habitation restricted mainly to isolated coastal, crofting settlements with limited inbye land; and with associated jetties, fish farms and</p>

<p>Settlement is rare and, apart from the occasional shooting lodge, is restricted to coastal areas. Human activity is both constrained and dwarfed by the surrounding mountains, rock and moorland.</p>	<p>mussel lines.</p> <p>Elsewhere there are occasional shooting lodges and access tracks, with much of the land comprising sporting estates.</p> <p>Roads and paths are sparse, with mostly single track roads following the uneven and undulating ground of the cnocan landscape.</p>
<p>• Extensive tracts of wild land</p>	
<p>The super-abundance of rock and water makes passage into the interior difficult, and paths are few and far between. This is the domain of the serious hillwalker and sportsman, keen to enjoy a wild and remote landscape where natural forces predominate.</p>	<p>Although the land is used for grazing and shooting, overall the landscape exhibits a wild character, an impression of natural forces being in charge.</p> <p>The interior comprises part of an SNH Search Area for Wild Land.</p>
<p><i>Location-specific quality</i></p>	
<p>• Handa's towering sea cliffs</p>	
<p>The towering, sandstone cliffs and stacks of Handa Island contrast with the broken cnocan coastline found elsewhere.</p> <p>These vertical cliffs provide ideal nesting sites so that during the summer the crags and surrounding seas are teeming with seabirds.</p>	<p>Compared to the surrounding mainland which consists of Lewisian gneiss, Handa is composed of Torridonian sandstone. This rock is horizontally bedded and tends to result in vertical cliffs rather than the lower, more broken cliffs of the mainland.</p>

Selected Bibliography

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

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