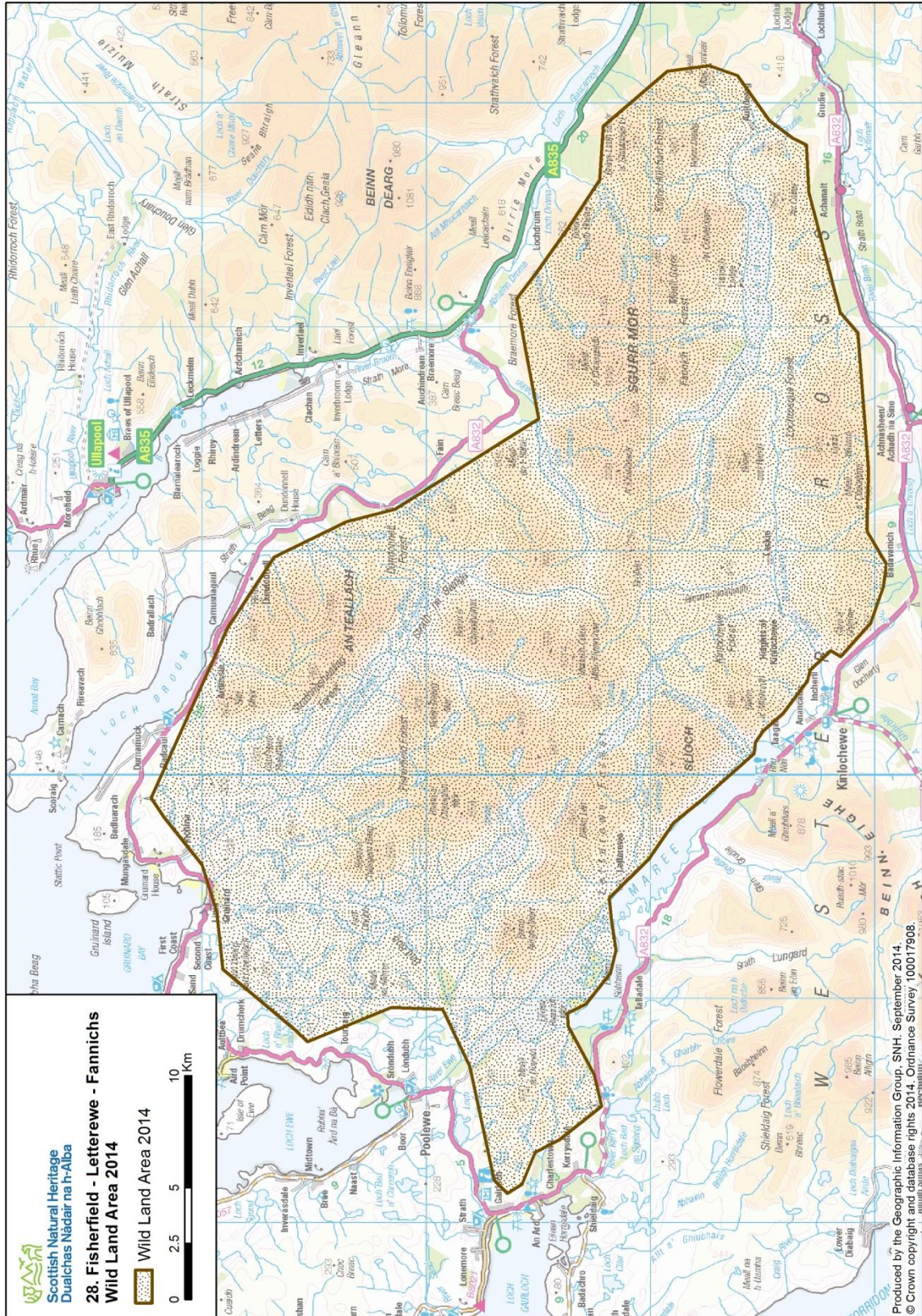


Fisherfield – Letterewe – Fannichs Wild Land Area



Context

One of four WLAs in Wester Ross, and one of the most extensive nationally, it extends over 804 km² between Poolewe and Gruinard in the north west and the Fannich mountains in the south east. One of the most extensive WLAs, flanked by main roads on all sides, it is relatively distant from large population centres.

The area is broadly oval in shape, with cnocan in the north west, sweeping peatland in the north east, and a range of high rugged mountains and lochs extending over the remainder. This variety reflects the underlying geology, with the high mountains formed of Torridonian Sandstone that rise above a hard and rocky platform of Lewisian Gneiss and metamorphic Moine schists. These rocks were eroded and shaped further during glaciation and by later fluvial activity.

Land within the WLA is used mainly for deer stalking, fishing and grazing, with some hydro-electric generation in the south east. It is largely uninhabited, although there are a few isolated estate lodges within some of the glens, and some forestry around the margins.

Many people view the WLA from just outside its edges, particularly along the A835 along the south shores of Loch Glascarnoch, and the A832 which runs between Achnasheen, Gairloch, Poolewe, Gruinard, Little Loch Broom and Dundonnell. Visibility into the interior is limited from these routes due to the screening effect of the intervening landform, but striking views are nonetheless gained when looking up some of the side glens and/or across open lochs, for example towards Slioch from the A832 or An Teallach from the A835 and A832.

Within the WLA are 18 Munros and nine Corbetts that attract hillwalkers and climbers, and the interior is relatively popular with those seeking wild land qualities, including staying at the remote Shenavall bothy and traversing the area. Some access the area alone, whilst others take part in group activities, such as the organised 'Great Wilderness Challenge'ⁱ held annually.

The landscape and scenic qualities of the WLA are recognised by the inclusion of its western half within the Wester Ross National Scenic Area and a large proportion of its eastern half within the Fannichs, Beinn Dearg and Glencalvie Special Landscape Area. The NSA descriptionⁱⁱⁱⁱ notes '*...much of the mountain landscape is renowned for being wild and remote, with a natural vegetation cover and few, if any, buildings or structures*'.

The WLA is located near to other areas of wild land so that, where intervening human elements are screened, it appears to extend uninterrupted into these and vice versa. This relationship is particularly close with the Flowerdale – Shildaig – Torridon WLA (27) to the south west, with which it frames Loch Maree in-between.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **An awe-inspiring range of colossal, steep, rocky and rugged mountains interlinked around deep and arresting corries, glens and lochs**

This WLA contains high, angular and *rugged* mountains that are *awe-inspiring* in their vertical scale and striking features, such as jagged peaks, towering cliffs and rock pinnacles. They indicate a strong influence of glaciation and fluvial activity, for example with colossal U-shaped glens, pyramidal peaks, moraine and rock slides, as well as cascading rivers and waterfalls, which all contribute to a strong *sense of naturalness*. This is also reinforced by a high degree of exposed rock that creates a ‘raw’ image, including boulder-strewn slopes and massive rock slabs.



Most of the mountains are high, steep, open, and *physically challenging* to ascend or traverse, with a resulting perception of *high risk* and exposure, although some are slightly lower and more rounded. The mountain ranges vary in their extent; the Letterewe and Fisherfield mountains collectively cover a very large area, whilst the Fannichs form a more concentrated group. The large size of the WLA means that lengthy access is required to reach the *remote* interior; and, once reached, this seems *extensive* and there is a strong *sense of sanctuary* and *solitude*.

It is sometimes difficult to see the full profile of the different mountains, as one screens another or they are obscured by intervening spurs or footslopes; but where separated or adjacent to open space – either across a loch or glen floor - the *arresting* qualities of these can be appreciated more easily.

Within the mountain ranges, there are a number of deep glens and corries whose framed views and steep sides seem *arresting* and imposing, for example Gleann Bianasdail and Gleann na Muice.



Many of these also seem *arresting* in their large scale and simple glaciated forms, for example with towering cliffs, hanging valleys and moraine, which combine with dynamic rivers and waterfalls to contribute to the *sense of naturalness*. The steep slopes around these features often seem impenetrable and, in combination with increasing *remoteness* along their length, contribute to a strong *sense of sanctuary*. Nonetheless, many of the key routes through the WLA pass along the glens and up into corries and over bealachs.

Estate or crofting activity and management within the WLA tends to be focused within the glens or around the loch shores, resulting in a range of *human artefacts and evidence of contemporary land use*. In some places, these elements are isolated and low-key and thus their effects are localised; however, in other locations, elements are extensive or numerous, resulting in cumulative effects, so that the *sense of remoteness* and *sanctuary* is diminished. These elements tend to be particularly prominent where extending onto elevated ground and/or seen contrasting in colour or form to their surroundings.

From elevated viewpoints, where adjacent glens containing human elements are screened, the area can seem to extend uninterrupted into neighbouring wild land areas, so it seems more extensive. This is experienced in some places crossing towards Beinn Eighe and Shieldaig Forest (WLA 27) in the south west and towards Beinn Dearg (WLA 29) in the north west.

- **A very large mountain interior with a strong sense of remoteness and sanctuary that attracts intrepid visitors**

The western half of the WLA includes a remarkably large *remote* interior in which there are very few *human artefacts* or *evidence of contemporary land use*. This area is notable for its absence of vehicle tracks, with most access being via a number of discrete stalkers' paths. These factors result in a prevailing *sense of sanctuary* across the interior. Its attraction to those seeking wild land qualities, that are well-publicised, means the *sense of solitude* may be diminished slightly at times due to people being seen frequently walking along the most popular routes. Nonetheless, the very large size of the WLA interior means that strong qualities of *solitude* can always be easily experienced in other locations away from the main paths.

Although the interior is almost entirely uninhabited, there is evidence of past settlement within some of the remote glens and/or adjacent to rivers or lochs - often at bridging points. This includes ruins of old croft buildings and enclosures, although they are still maintained in some places and used for temporary accommodation, for example the MBA bothy at Shenavall. In these locations, the *artefacts* typically appear isolated and low-key and their effects are localised.



- **Wide open lochs that highlight the profile of surrounding mountains and offer a contrast of experience in relation to access, human elements and activity**

The mountain, cnochan and sweeping moorland areas of this WLA include a wide range of lochs and lochans of different scale and elevation that reflect the varied landform. Nonetheless, the horizontal waters of these consistently emphasise the nature of the surrounding landcover and landform, including the vertical scale of mountains, so these appear more *awe-inspiring*. The lochs also increase the sense of openness and exposure, and they act as a physical barrier to walking that increases isolation and *remoteness*, although some can be accessed by boat.



Most of the lochs have irregular shorelines that reinforce the *sense of naturalness*. In contrast, some have been created or are managed for hydro-electric generation, such as Loch Fannich. Associated with these are loch drawdown scars and *human artefacts* such as water intakes, dams, access tracks and pipes that diminish the *sense of awe and naturalness*.

Loch Maree is a very large loch that lies in-between this WLA and the adjacent wild land area to the south west (covering Flowerdale, Shieldaig and Torridon, WLA 27).

Its southern shore is visited by relatively high numbers of people, as it lies adjacent to the A832 and has many parking areas; however its northern shore is accessible only via boat or lengthy paths.



The contrast between Loch Maree's south and north shores in terms of access and visible human influence results in a strong contrast of experience. From the south, outside the WLA, *human artefacts*, *contemporary land use* and activity along the main road affect the local area, but views across the loch appear to be towards very strong wild land qualities;

in reverse, the north side of the loch, within the WLA, possesses strong local attributes of wild land, but its experience is affected by views to human elements to the south, including seeing and hearing moving vehicles. Nonetheless, the experience of the north shore of Loch Maree is influenced strongly by its *remoteness*, the *rugged* and steep slopes that tower above, as well as patches of native woodland and waterfalls that cascade down the mountain slopes and contribute to the *perceived naturalness*.



This WLA includes the Loch Maree islands which possess a strong sense of *naturalness*, highlighted by their irregular shorelines and mature woodland. The isolation of the islands within the loch means they are *remote* and difficult to access, and there is a prevailing sense of solitude. They are visited by some, however, such as canoeists and visitors on locally chartered boats - particularly Isle Maree.



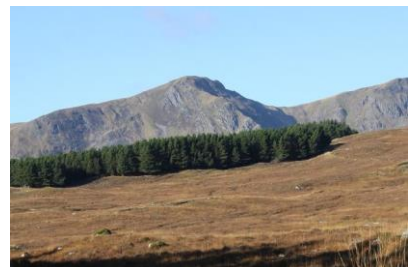
The position of the different islands within Loch Maree affects the *sense of sanctuary* experienced upon them and the influence of *human artefacts and contemporary land use* within views. On and around the southern islands, these attributes are diminished by seeing south across the loch (outside the WLA) to buildings, forest plantations and powerlines, as well as seeing and hearing vehicles travelling along the A832; in contrast, the attributes are stronger on the northern islands and within the channels between these, and include views to the *arresting* cliffs of Creag Tharbh and along the *awe-inspiring* full length of Loch Maree.

- **Extensive open cnocan and sweeping peatland that contrasts to the high mountains, emphasising the arresting qualities of each**

There are some extensive areas of cnocan and sweeping peatland around the north west and north eastern-most margins of the WLA. The juxtaposition of these with adjacent mountains highlights the contrasting landforms of each which appear *arresting*. The mountains also offer elevated views over the lower-lying surroundings to reveal the simplicity of the vegetation and complex pattern of lochans tucked into the landform, contributing to the *sense of naturalness*.



Elevated views also reveal some *human artefacts and evidence of contemporary land use* within the surrounding area, such as tracks, conifer plantations and deer fences (within and outside the WLA). These are often prominent, even where distant, due to the open visibility and because they tend to contrast in line and colour to the simple vegetation backdrop.



Conversely, when within the cnocan and peatland areas themselves, views are more restricted due to local landform screening, and there are some local spaces with a strong *sense of sanctuary*. These areas are consistently *rugged* at a local level and their *access* is restricted by rocky and/or boggy ground conditions and pools.



Endnotes and select references

ⁱ More information available at: <http://www.greatwildernesschallenge.info/index.asp>

ⁱⁱ SNH (2010) *The special qualities of the National Scenic Areas*. SNH Commissioned Report No 374.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Highland Council (2011) *Assessment of Highland Special Landscape Areas*. Inverness, The Highland Council.

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