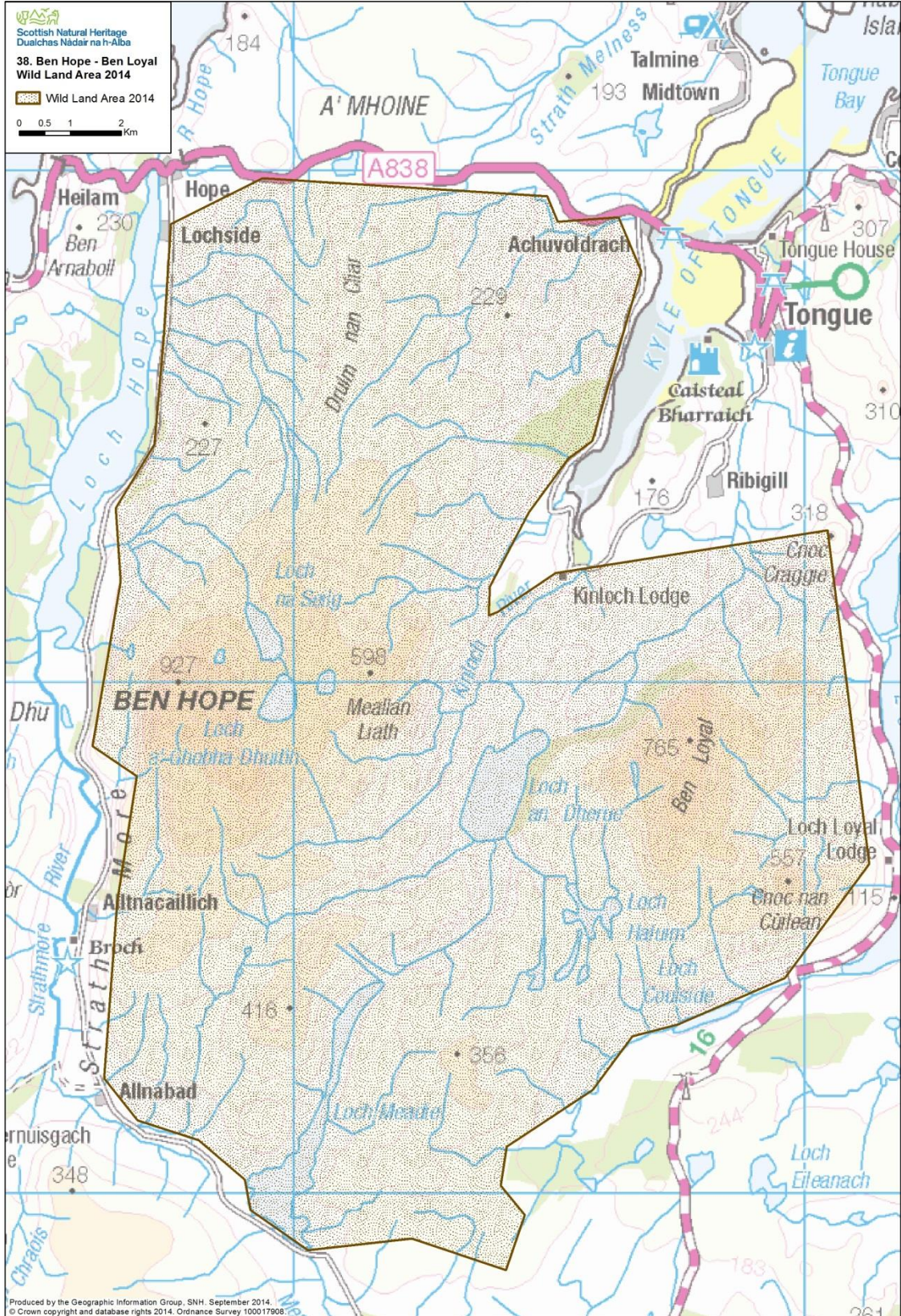


Ben Hope – Ben Loyal Wild Land Area



Context

This Wild Land Area (WLA) extends 220 km² across north Sutherland, from the Kyle of Tongue in the north to Loch Meadie in the south, and between the distinctive and prominent mountains of Ben Hope in the west and Ben Loyal in the east. One of a cluster of seven WLAs in the north west of Scotland (and one of the most northerly), flanked by the main north coast route to the north and lesser roads to the east, south and west, it is relatively distant from large population centres.

Two landmark mountains rise above an extensive area of simple peatland with occasional crags, upland rocky plateaux and lochs. This composition represents an underlying distribution of schists and granulites that were carved by glaciers during the ice age and then further eroded and weathered, in stark contrast to the more resistant granite masses.

Land within the WLA is used mainly for deer stalking and fishing and, except for estate buildings at Kinloch, is uninhabited. Nonetheless, the area contributes significantly to the visual backcloth of some settlements and residences just outside the WLA, including Tongue and within the straths to the west and east of the area.

The WLA is viewed by many people from outside its edges, including from the Kyle of Tongue and over a' Mhòine on the A838, but also when travelling along the A836 between Altnaharra and Tongue, and along the minor road between Altnaharra and Loch Hope – routes popular with cyclists as well as motorists. Within the WLA itself, Ben Hope and Ben Loyal attract the highest number of hillwalkers, partly due to their Munro and Corbett statuses respectively. In addition, some take the historic Moine Pathⁱ that crosses the peatland between Loch Hope and Kinloch (and forms part of the recently promoted Sutherland Trail), whilst others penetrate further into the southern interior, such as to Lochs an Dìthreibh and Meadie, for walking, deer stalking or fishing.

The high scenic value of the WLA is recognised by its northern part being located within the Kyle of Tongue National Scenic Area. The descriptionⁱⁱ for this area states that '*Ben Hope and Ben Loyal, standing isolated above the open moorland, are well known as two of the finest mountains in the north*', and describes how they '*...symbolise the boundary between the populated coast and the wild and generally uninhabited interior*'.

The edges of this WLA are largely flanked by public roads, mostly single track and often screened from within the area itself. To the north, the WLA appears from some locations to extend beyond the A838 and over a' Mhoine to the north coast, while to the west and south it frequently appears to continue into the peatland and hills of the Foinaven – Ben Hee WLA (37). In contrast, to the north east, there is a more gradual transition into marginal crofting and woodland towards the Kyle of Tongue, whilst dense conifer plantations form prominent edge features within the open peatland to the south and east.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A striking, awe inspiring contrast between isolated mountains and open peatland**

This WLA comprises an interior of simple peatland ‘framed’ between the strongly contrasting isolated mountains of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal. The simplicity, openness and horizontal emphasis of the peatland accentuates the steep, rocky and vertical forms of the mountains and vice versa, the superlative nature of each conveying a strong *sense of awe*.



This contrast of form also occurs with neighbouring straths and the Kyle of Tongue that lie outwith the WLA, but from which it is often viewed. In addition, other mountains outside the area contribute to the *arresting* qualities, for example with distant views to Morven (within WLA 36) and the Bens Griam to the south east, Ben Klibreck (within WLA 35) to the south and Foinaven (within WLA 37) to the west.

The peatland and mountains are very open and exposed, which contributes to the *sense of risk*. The combination of this openness and contrasting high, steep hills also offers vantage points that mean most of the peatlands across the WLA can be seen from above. These views reveal the *extensive* nature of the peatland as well as its complex pattern of rock outcrops, lochs and pools that contribute to the *sense of naturalness*. Some elevated views also reveal distant features outside the WLA, including *human artefacts and contemporary land use*, such as the telecom mast above Tongue, some large scale wind turbines, and conifer plantations.



Although the contrast between the mountain and peatland landform is simple at a broad scale, these are both *rugged* and *physically challenging* to access at a local level. This results from very steep slopes and rock faces within the mountains and a prevalence of bogs, peat hags, rock outcrops and rough vegetation across the peatland.

- **Towering, steep rocky mountains that are arresting and attract hill walkers**

The steepness and vertical scale of Ben More and Ben Hope make the mountains imposing and *arresting*. These attributes are experienced from both above and below, and are amplified where combined with distinctive rock features such as pinnacles. As described above, the area is generally *physically challenging* to access, with a resulting *sense of risk*; however these attributes are amplified at high elevation and where steep crags and cliffs occur.



Both mountains have steep western faces in contrast to their other sides which are more irregular in form. Ben Hope’s

south eastern limbs form an arc that extends around to the east to contain a series of deep lochs below sheer rock faces. Shielded from the outside, this area around Loch a' Ghobha-Dhuibh has extremely high levels of perceived *naturalness*, *solitude and sanctuary*, with no *human artefacts* or evidence of activity. Ben Loyal also has many irregular distinct tops, including Sgòr Chaonasaid, An Caisteal and Beinn Bheag, and some deep, secluded corries and lochs that possess strong qualities of *naturalness*, *solitude and sanctuary*.



Ben Hope and Ben Loyal are visited by many hillwalkers, attracted to their landmark properties as well as their Munro and Corbett statuses (Ben Hope being the most northerly Munro). There is a *sense of awe and sanctuary* upon the mountain tops and upper slopes on account of their elevation and physical isolation (vertical as much as horizontal), as well as extensive views into the WLA interior in which few human elements are visible. Nonetheless, as the mountains are located near the western and eastern margins of the WLA, some views from the tops extend outwith the area to reveal *human artefacts and contemporary land uses*. High numbers of visitors upon Ben Hope during busy times can also diminish temporarily the perception of *solitude*, although other attributes remain strong.

- **Rugged, rocky knolls, crags and plateaux conveying a strong sense of naturalness**

In addition to the isolated mountains, the WLA contains rocky knolls and crags, for example Carn a Mhadaidh and Creag an Achaidh Mhòir, as well as elevated rocky plateaux such as Creag nan Ealachan. These features are very *rugged* in character and appear random in pattern and form which, in combination with exposed rock and surrounding lochans and native vegetation, contributes to a strong *sense of naturalness*. The features also tend to be *remote*, *difficult to access* and *physically challenging* to ascend. This means they do not tend to be visited by many people and the areas containing them possess a strong *sense of sanctuary and solitude*.



- **Extensive, exposed peatland and lochs that are awe-inspiring in their simplicity and openness**

Open peatland slopes extend across the WLA in-between the isolated mountains and rocky knolls and crags, and include numerous lochs, but few *human artefacts or evidence of contemporary land use*. Within these areas, there is a strong sense of space and exposure, together with simplicity of landcover and landform at the broad scale that contributes to a *sense of awe*. The simplicity of the landscape also means it is difficult to perceive scale and distance, so the area often seems more *extensive* than warranted by its actual size.



- **Native woodland highlighting landscape features and contributing cumulatively to the sense of naturalness**

Patches of native woodland occur throughout this WLA and the surrounding area, cumulatively influencing the *perceived naturalness* of the area. Although these woodlands only occupy within a small proportion of the area, their prominence and effects are amplified by the openness of the surrounding landscape and by being associated with distinctive landscape features such as rocky crags and cliffs, loch edges, rivers and waterfalls.



Within some areas, the presence of fences indicate human intervention in grazing regimes, diminishing the *sense of naturalness*, as well as the fence appearing as a *human artefact*.

- **An interior possessing strong qualities of sanctuary and solitude, away from the mountain foci near the WLA margins**

The most prominent landscape foci within this WLA occur in the west and east, so less attention is directed to the interior in-between. In combination with limited access and few visitors, this means this area possesses a strong sense of *sanctuary*. Difficult access over the peatland that is *physically challenging* amplifies this attribute, as does the subtle landform undulations that result in local screening so you can ‘lose yourself’ within the landscape.

In contrast to these prevailing attributes, the private estate track from Kinloch to Loch Meadie, together with branch routes either side, aid access and appear as obvious *human artefacts* within the interior. These are particularly prominent from higher elevations, whilst the activity and noise of vehicles along the routes may temporarily diminish the *sense of sanctuary*.

Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Information available at <http://www.heritagepaths.co.uk/pathdetails.php?path=27>

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

Site assessment carried out July and August 2013