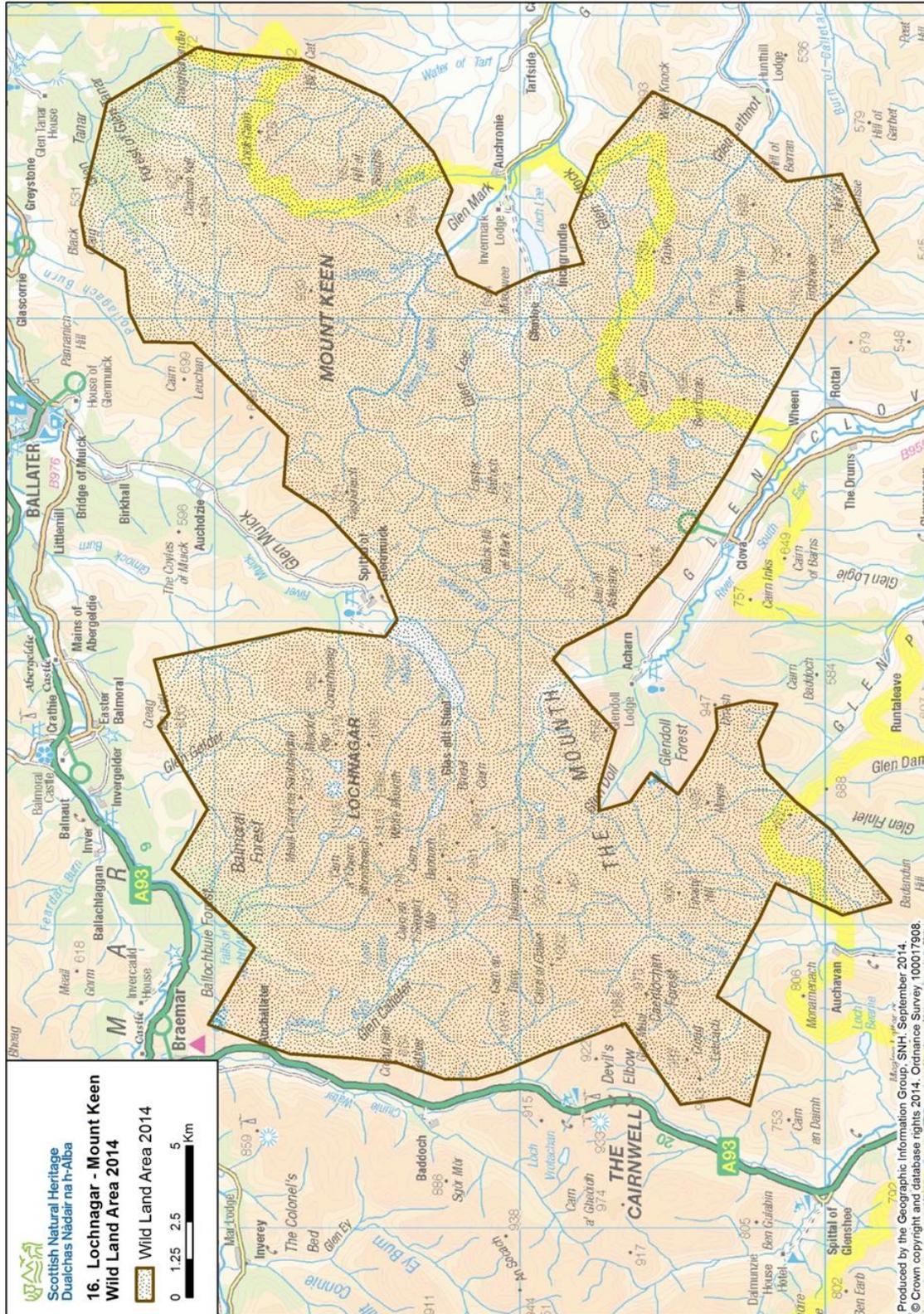


Lochnagar – Mount Keen Wild Land Area



Context

This Wild Land Area (WLA) covers parts of Angus and Aberdeenshire, as well as a small portion of Perth and Kinross, and most of the area lies within the Cairngorms National Park. It forms a butterfly shape centred on Loch Muick and crossed by the Capel Road, with Glens Muick and Clova running north and south from these and Glen Shee bordering the area to the west, and Glen Esk to the east. The whole area extends to 536 km².

The WLA comprises mainly of rolling moorland hills and plateaux that are of high altitude, over about 600m AOD. This altitude is emphasised when the hills and plateaux are snow-covered but, at other times, can be difficult to appreciate because surrounding areas are relatively high as well and there is no sea-level reference. The hills and plateaux appear simple in their landform and vegetation cover, and this combines with openness on their tops to offer elevated views extending into the far distance. These characteristics are influenced strongly by the geology of the area, with the rounded hills and plateaux typically formed of hard, intrusive graniteⁱ which has been eroded by glaciers and rivers, and their tops sculpted by wind and ice.

The WLA is largely uninhabited, although it contains some isolated bothies and estate buildings and its character is strongly influenced by estate management practices, particularly for deer and grouse shooting as well as for forestry around some margins.

The area is edged by the A93 main road and Glenshee ski centre to the west, which creates a sharp boundary on this side. In contrast, its north, east and south edges are less pronounced, defined largely by a gradual increase of human artefacts and contemporary land uses extending from adjacent glens, such as buildings, roads and forest plantations. The overall shape and extent of the WLA is typically difficult to appreciate from both within and outside the area because of screening to or from surrounding glens by convex landform slopes. Nonetheless, glimpse views in and out are encountered occasionally; for example where glens extend between the interior and the outside and thereby provide visual corridors, or where the highest tops are seen from a distance, such as the distinctive peak of Lochnagar viewed from north of the River Dee.

This WLA is popular for recreation and a number of Munros, ridges, crags and circular or through-routes attract hillwalkers, climbers, fell-runners, skiers and mountain bikers as well as those who visit the area for shooting and fishing. Most parts are accessed from the surrounding glens where human elements and/or activity influence the experience of approaching, leaving or being on the edge of the WLA.

Landscape and scenic qualities are recognised by most of the WLA being within the Cairngorms National Parkⁱⁱ and its northern part lying within an Area of Landscape Significance (Aberdeenshire Council).

This WLA lies directly east of the Cairngorms WLA (15), separated only by Glens Beag and Clunie. In addition, further to the west, there are other WLAs, including the Monadhliath WLA (20), the Braeroy, Glenshirra and Creag Meagaidh WLA (19) and the Rannoch, Nevis, Mamores and Alder WLA (14). From the elevated interior, from where surrounding glens are screened, this WLA often appears to extend uninterrupted into the other WLAs and, in this way, some of their highest and/or most distinctive peaks contribute directly to its awe-inspiring qualities.

Key attributes and qualities of the wild land area

- **A range of high, rolling hills and plateaux that are arresting in their simplicity and openness, and provide elevated, panoramic views to distant mountain ranges**

This WLA comprises a range of rolling hills and plateaux of simple and similar landcover, landform and elevation which collectively appear *arresting*.



At a broad level, the landform tends to be convex, limiting visibility up and down slopes. This means that, from the hill tops, neighbouring glens are screened and there is a horizontal emphasis of open views directed over successive tiers of ridges and tops extending far into the distance and contributing to a *sense of awe*. These views include hills within other WLAs, including the Cairngorms WLA (15), Monadhliath WLA (20), Braeroy, Glenshirra and Creag Meagaidh WLA (19) and Rannoch, Nevis, Mamores and Alder WLA (14) to the west. As a consequence, these contribute to the perceived *extent* of the wildness attributes from this WLA.

The open, elevated tops are very exposed, often highlighted by surface rock and short, wind-pruned vegetation, which influences the sense of *naturalness* and increases *risk*.

Despite a mixed composition of hills and undulations, the simplicity of the landform and land cover at a broad level means individual peaks do not tend to stand out and it can be difficult to estimate vertical scale or distance within the landscape. This makes navigation challenging upon the hills and plateaux, especially in low cloud, thus increasing *risk*. Nonetheless, there are two landmark peaks that act as exceptions to this typical composition: Lochnagar and Mount Keen.

The rolling nature of the hills and plateaux can make it difficult to appreciate their form and scale, for example seeing a series of hills that rise only 150m above the prevailing topography yet are actually 650-800m AOD. This lack of clarity can limit the *sense of awe* that might otherwise be prompted. It also means that, where the form and scale of the hills and plateaux are easier to appreciate, for example where juxtaposed with lower ground or a loch, their *awe-inspiring* attributes appear greater.



- **Corries and glens carved into the hills and plateaux, including features such as cliffs, waterfalls, rock deposits and lochs, contribute to the perceived awe and naturalness.**

Within the broad composition of smooth, rounded hills and plateaux, there are a number of corries and glens that are often encountered unexpectedly as they are concealed by the surrounding landform slopes. Passing between the tops and the glens or corries, via ascent or descent of steep and *physically challenging* slopes in-between, there is a striking contrast of experience between the different degrees of exposure or shelter and horizontal or vertical emphasis. In addition, the containment of the corries and glens contribute to the *sense of sanctuary*.

The steep side slopes, crags and cliffs of the glens and corries appear *arresting* due to their vertical dimensions, especially when experienced from directly above or below. Furthermore, these features and lochs or lochans highlight the *awe-inspiring* scale of the surrounding hills which is otherwise difficult to perceive. Rock outcrops within the corries and glens, as well as rock deposits and waterfalls, contribute to the perceived *naturalness* of the landscape as well as the *physical challenge* and *risk* if climbed or crossed.



- **A simple landcover and strong influence of estate management, affecting the perception of naturalness and sanctuary**

The landcover is generally simple across this WLA, comprising mainly heather, grasses and exposed rock. This is due in part to the high altitude and exposure of the hills and plateaux, and increases the prominence of features such as rock outcrops or landslides, contributing to the perceived *naturalness* and *arresting* qualities.

Nonetheless, these attributes are diminished over some large parts of this WLA by *human artefacts* and *evidence of contemporary land use* associated with estate management, particularly muirburn, estate tracks, borrow pits, fences, tree shelters and shooting butts. Furthermore, frequent activity and the sounds of vehicles, machinery or shooting can diminish the *sense of sanctuary*. Although these activities and elements are most common within the more accessible and/or marginal parts of the WLA, where they also have cumulative effects, estate tracks and muirburn can also be seen extending into some interior and upland areas.



- **Long glens that penetrate the hills and plateaux and facilitate access, with some containing hanging valleys and dynamic rivers that influence the sense of naturalness, and some containing woodland and human elements**

The hills and plateaux are penetrated by a range of steep-sided glens. From the glen floors, the surrounding slopes screen views of the hill tops and plateaux above, so the wider *extent* of the WLA is not clearly apparent.

Many of the glens include some *human artefacts and/or evidence of contemporary land use*, such as estate buildings. The effects of these tend to be limited where they appear small in scale and contained within the glen floor, whereas they appear more imposing where large or extensive in scale (cumulatively as well as individually), or extend onto surrounding upland or slopes. Tracks or paths are located within many of the glens which make access through these less *physically challenging* and result in reduced *risk*, although their long lengths mean they retain qualities of *remoteness*.

Most of the glens contain rivers whose dynamic characters contribute to the *sense of naturalness*, particularly where associated with waterfalls and/or old river terraces and channels. Some of these watercourses are difficult to cross at times, meaning that people either target bridging points or, if these do not exist, access is limited and there is greater *remoteness*.

Some of the glens contain hanging valleys, whose large scale, evidence of glaciation and presence of waterfalls appear *arresting* and contribute to the sense of *naturalness*. The abrupt changes in level of these provide good vantage points at their edges as well as creating 'hidden' shelves or corries in which there is a strong experience of prospect-refugeⁱⁱⁱ and sense of *sanctuary and solitude*.



Historic features occur within some of the glens, for example old enclosures and bothies. These may create foci as *human artefacts* and indicate past management, but they tend to have localised effects where appearing isolated and low-key in siting and design.

There are native woodlands and forest plantations within some of the glens. Where woodlands are unfenced and consist of trees of variable age, spacing and species composition, they contribute strongly to the *sense of naturalness*. The limited visibility within the woodlands and screening (visually and audibly) of *human artefacts or contemporary land use* within the wider area can also amplify the sense of *remoteness, sanctuary and solitude*.



Forest plantations within the WLA, particularly those that are of single species or age composition or in which there is frequent forestry activity, indicate *contemporary land use* as well as diminishing the perceived *naturalness* and *sanctuary*. Furthermore, extensive forest plantations beyond the margins of the WLA are prominent from some hills just inside the area (particularly where of incongruous shape, density, colour and texture) and highlight the limited extent of the wild land attributes.

- **A variety of recreation activities occur within the hills, offering different experiences of sanctuary, physical challenge and risk**

Outdoor recreation within this WLA is facilitated by the location of many access points and routes as well as the openness of the hills that are not highly rugged. Recreation activities include shooting, fishing, hillwalking, climbing, fell-running, skiing and mountain-biking. Many of these are focused around the margins of the WLA (both within and outside the boundary), along the glens and their side slopes, and upon the Munro peaks. Where there are high numbers of visitors and/or cumulative effects of associated features, such as estate tracks or muirburn, the attributes of wildness are diminished and the qualities of recreation seem related more strongly to *physical challenge* and/or the landscape's scenic qualities. Nonetheless, within the western interior of the WLA around Tolmount and White Mounth as well as the eastern interior plateau between Glens Lee and Clova, there are areas where walkers can experience hills and plateaux that are *remote, lack human artefacts* and in which there are strong qualities of *solitude and sanctuary*.

The gradual slopes of the hill landforms at a broad level combine with short vegetation to facilitate movement off-path for those that seek open access and a sense of *sanctuary and solitude*, albeit still *physically challenging* and involving *risk*. This open access also contributes to the popularity of the hills for recreation in winter and when snow-covered.

Endnotes and select references

ⁱ Scottish Natural Heritage (2006) *Cairngorms: A landscape fashioned by geology*. Redgorton, Scottish Natural Heritage.

ⁱⁱ Information available at: <http://cairngorms.co.uk/landscape-toolkit/special-landscape-qualities> and http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/375.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Prospect-refuge is a term used in environmental psychology to describe people's preference for places that offer both shelter and open views. For more information, refer to: Appleton, J. (1996) *The experience of Landscape*. Revised ed. Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

WLA site assessment carried out August and September 2016