Landscape

Our landscapes provide a range of benefits. Our wild upland and coastal landscapes are internationally renowned and inspire people who live here as well as visitors. Not all of our landscape is such high quality, and it all requires careful management.

Summary

Key messages

- Scotland's landscapes make an important contribution to public health and well-being, economic development, biodiversity and the historic environment.
- Tourism based on Scotland's landscapes is estimated to be worth £420 million a year to our economy; around 90% of visitors rated our landscapes as a 'very important' or 'important' influence on their decision to visit.
- Scotland's landscapes are still evolving in response to natural processes and the demands of society. In the last five years, wind-farm development has caused the most significant change to our landscapes. Gradual changes caused by building housing and changes in farming and forestry practice are also occurring, but these are more difficult to monitor.
- Nearly three-quarters of the Scottish public believe our finest landscapes are being well looked after. In contrast, only one-third are positive about changes to their local landscape, and less than half feel well informed about proposed changes or have an opportunity to influence them.
- To avoid damaging our landscape and losing what we value about it, we need to manage change to get the most public benefits. We also need to involve local communities more in these issues.

State and trend

A summarised assessment of the state and trend has not been made for this topic.

Please read the topic for more information; if you have any questions about Scotland's landscape please feel free to contact us using the comment button above.

Overview

Scotland is famous for its distinctive landscapes, especially its mountains, coasts and wild open spaces. Our landscapes are incredibly diverse for a small country – from the urban areas and managed countryside of central and eastern Scotland to the less intensively managed uplands and coasts of Southern Scotland, the Highlands and the Islands.

Scotland's landscapes make a significant contribution to our well-being and the country's economic performance. There are many reasons for this.

- The quality of our surroundings can improve our health by providing a place for us to exercise and to recover from physical and mental stress.
- Attractive, accessible landscapes, including urban greenspace, can make an important contribution to our quality of life.
- Our landscape is a living history of Scotland, and an inspiration for art and culture, contributing to our sense of place and belonging.
- For the vast majority of visitors (from the UK and abroad), our fine scenery is the main reason for choosing Scotland as a holiday destination. Around 66% of visitors rated it as 'very important' and 24% as 'important' in influencing their decision to visit.
- It is estimated that tourism based on Scotland's landscapes is worth £420 million a year to our economy.
- Landscape is an important part of Scotland's image. It helps to promote Scotland as a desirable business location, attracts inward investment and adds value to Scottish brands and products.
- Some of the qualities of the landscape (such as beauty, tranquillity, wildness and history) are important to more people than those who actually visit them. We can feel contentment just by knowing that they exist.

Our landscapes have evolved over thousands of years as a consequence of natural and cultural forces, and they are still changing. Some of these changes are welcome and others less so. Our emotional responses to these changes are important in understanding the public benefits we get from the landscape. Indeed, the European Landscape Convention defines landscape as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and human factors". Landscape includes the physical elements of the environment surrounding us – natural (such as lochs, rivers, woodlands, mountains and hills) as well as cultural (such as buildings, and patterns of past and present land use). But it is our understanding and perception of these elements and their interaction that gives us an understanding of their meaning and value.

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is used in the UK to describe, classify and map landscape. It helps explain what makes one landscape different from another and illustrates how many different landscapes we have. A complementary process of Historic Land-use Assessment (HLA) has also been developed, which provides more insight into the historic aspects of landscape. To increase understanding of the diversity of Scotland's landscapes and the relationship between people and places, a new map of the Landscapes of Scotland has been produced.

State

Landscape character assessment (LCA) has been used to categorise the entire area of Scotland. In total, there are 372 unique types of landscape character, which can be grouped into 53 general types of landscape.

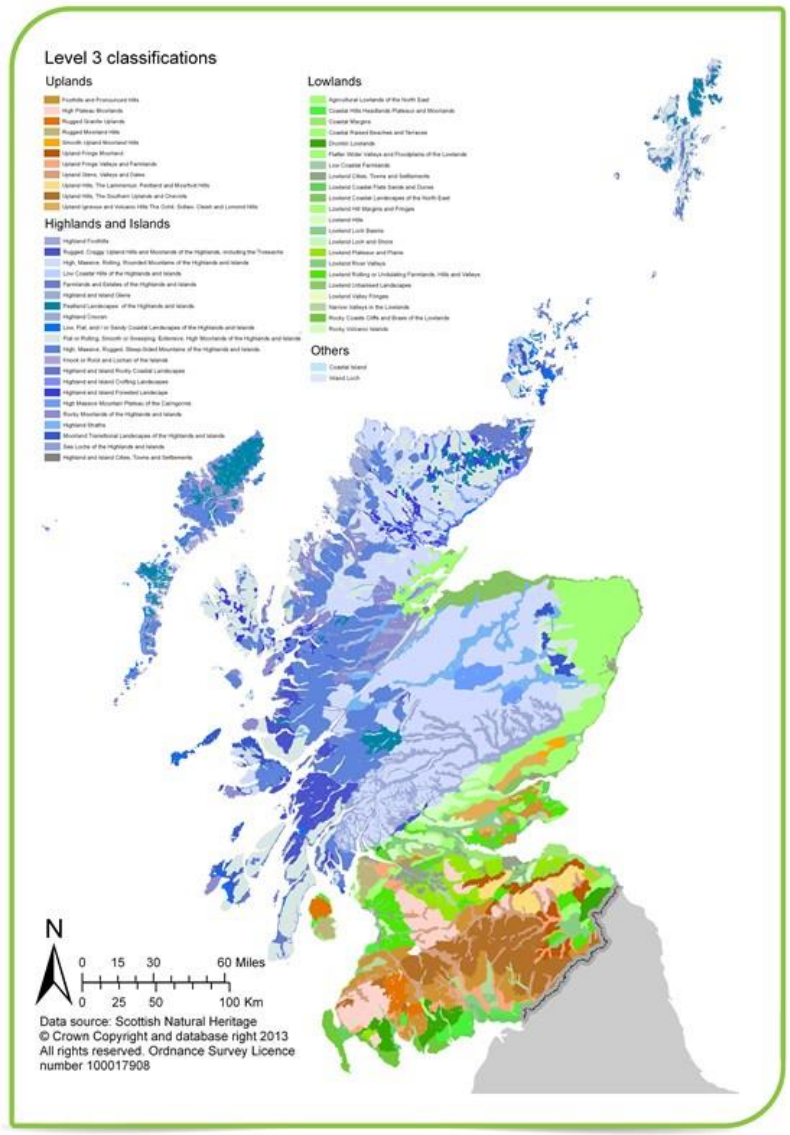

Figure 1: Landscape types in Scotland

Using the national assessment of Scotland's landscapes, the main elements of Scotland's landscapes include the following.

Built heritage and settlements

The visible remains of early human settlements are an inseparable part of the lowland and upland landscapes. The form and historical associations of these settlements, castles and monuments vary across the country. The far northern and Western Isles boast the earliest surviving habitations, such as at Skara Brae in Orkney. The Antonine Wall, a World Heritage Site, is a landscape-scale reminder of the Roman period, two millennia ago. Early Christian associations are strongest in the south and west, including Iona and Whithorn, while evidence of centuries of skirmishing with England is visible in the fortified Peel towers, such as Hermitage and Smailholm, in the Borders.

Early settlement patterns often reflect physical boundaries and constraints on land use, while development from the industrial age onwards increasingly imposed itself on the landscape. In the 18th and19th centuries many people migrated from rural areas to the rapidly expanding industrial cities and towns connected by canals, rail and shipping links, prompting rapid urban expansion. Glasgow became the 'second city of the Empire', where entrepreneurs imported goods and cultural influences from around the world. Scotland's rich built heritage displays these influences in its ever-changing architectural style. Every part of Scotland has its own vernacular style, which is partly influenced by the availability and nature of the local building materials. All these things create a strong sense of place.

Rural character

Ninety-four percent of Scotland is classified as rural. Between the mid-18th and late 19th centuries, a mosaic of fields was created across the fertile lowlands, interspersed by gardens and designed landscapes laid out as the formal settings for grand country houses. In the uplands a new landscape of sporting estates was created, with its distinctive architecture and extensively managed grouse moors and deer forests. In some parts of the Outer Hebrides and North-West Highlands, wind-blown shell sand has helped to create the unique cultural and agricultural landscape of the machair and its crofting townships.

A common feature of Scotland's rural landscapes is the distinct transitions in character that occur where the hills and mountains meet cultivated lowlands, and where the land meets the sea. A good example of transitional landscapes is the land on either side of the Highland Boundary Fault or along the margins of the Southern Uplands, and around the coast, where the exposed, often treeless, landscapes contain pockets of richer agricultural land.

Cultural and natural associations

There is a strong sense of Scotland's past within its landscape. This is strongest where ancient monuments dominate the landscape, or where castles and great houses with planned grounds form part of a view. However, it is also evident in the traces of cultivation and habitation found high on hillsides, or in now unpopulated glens and coastlines. Many of the extensive industrial landscapes of the lowlands have now been lost, as derelict areas have been regenerated.

Scotland's varied geology provides an abundance of natural features – from individual hills, such as the volcanic features of the Lothians, to mountain ranges, dramatic coastal stacks and arches, and high waterfalls. Natural features are often emphasised by nearby defensive structures or monuments, such as Edinburgh and Stirling castles.

Large areas of semi-natural landscapes in Scotland, particularly in the north and west, show few signs of human influence. These areas include mountains and moorland, stretches of undeveloped coast and large areas of peat bog. A relative wildness map has recently been produced covering the whole of Scotland.

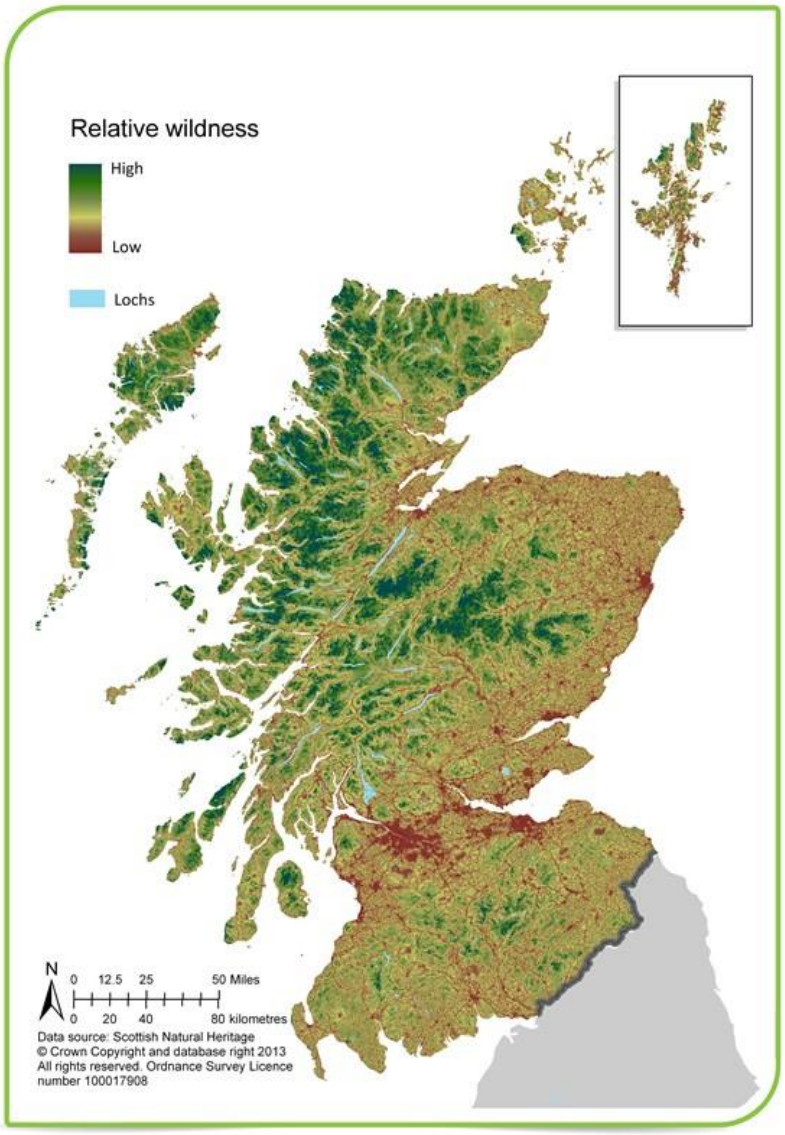

Figure 2: Relative wildness throughout Scotland

Changes in the landscape

Data on landscape change are often poor, incomplete or difficult to interpret. A landscape monitoring framework is currently being established to provide a more thorough and systematic approach to this topic.

A review of the LCA programme suggests that landscape change has not resulted in any types of landscape character being lost or significantly changed. Nevertheless, important changes to some of the physical elements of landscapes are resulting in the following trends.

1. Regional and local landscapes are becoming less distinct as a result of more similarity in building form, settlement patterns and agricultural practices;
2. The distinctive landscape settings of many towns and cities is being lost as a result of settlement expansion and associated infrastructure, such as roads and railways;
3. The development of renewable energy technology, in particular wind farms, is affecting the extensive views and strong natural character of many of Scotland's rural landscapes.

At present, the best evidence we have is on the last of these trends. Data indicate that the area of Scotland from which it is possible to see one or more types of built development increased to 70% in 2010, which is an increase of 1% since 2009 (and 5% since 2008). The largest change in visual influence comes from wind farms; with the area of Scotland within which a wind turbine can be seen increasing from 31.6% in 2009 to 35.6% in 2010. All of the other components showed either no change or a change of less than 1%. As more wind farms are built or proposed, public opinion surveys suggest that fewer people in Scotland believe the country's wind farms are well located and designed – 52% in the latest polling, as opposed to 75% five years ago.

Pressures affecting landscape

Scotland's landscapes continue to evolve in response to natural processes and as a result of society's demands.

Natural processes, such as the movement of coastal sand dunes and the erosion of river banks, often happen at such a slow rate that the landscape change only becomes clearly visible over decades. However, these processes can also happen very quickly and change our landscapes dramatically in the space of a few hours; for example, as a result of severe weather.

Climate change

Since the end of the 20th century, the effects of climate change on Scotland's landscape have become noticeable. The policy response to climate change creates additional pressures, particularly in terms of the emphasis on onshore renewables. The national target for increasing forest cover will also have a significant impact on many parts of Scotland.

Recent research has also explored how Scottish landscapes will be affected by the direct impacts of changing temperatures, rainfall, weather events (such as storms and drought) and sea-level change. It is likely that some land will be lost to the sea, that flooding will increase, and that the patterns of natural and semi-natural habitats will change. Higher temperatures may also allow new crops to be grown and extend existing growing seasons. More subtle changes in our climate might also result in landscape change. For example, the spread of destructive pests or pathogens could lead to the loss of plant species from the landscape. The research concluded that the combined effects of these changes are likely to be most noticeable in lowland and coastal areas. These tend to be the more populated parts of Scotland, so the effects of climate change on the landscape are likely to have a disproportionate impact on people. In the uplands, apart from developments such as wind farms, landscape change may be less sudden or obvious.

Development and land use

Two main direct pressures caused by humans will continue to influence the character of the landscape. These are as follows.

1. Land use, and intensification of land use and management

For example, in agriculture there has been a focus on maximising yields and producing food more cheaply. This has prompted a move towards **monoculture,** where only the most profitable and productive crops are grown, at the expense of a more diverse landscape of field types and hedgerows.

Commercial forestry expanded rapidly in post-war Scotland, focused mainly in economically marginal upland areas. Since the 1980s, a more diverse range of native woodland and forestry has been planted.

2. Incremental and ongoing development

The main employment opportunities in Scotland have shifted from manufacturing and heavy industry to new service-based providers, many of which are located in retail and business parks around the fringes of settlements. In rural areas, upgrading roads and developing hydro schemes has altered the landscape, and alterations have also resulted from builders using more similar housing styles across the countryside, and the development of the fish-farming industry. Other development includes:

- infrastructure projects;
- housing;
- expansion of towns and villages;
- quarrying;
- upgrading roads;
- wind farms;
- hydro schemes;
- telecommunications masts.

The changes to landscape that these pressures cause are perceived by different people in different ways. For many, it can result in the damage to, or loss of, valued qualities. However, others may view changes more positively and place value on the new elements of the landscape. The ranges of factors influencing this response are complex. Despite the opportunities for community involvement in influencing development, public opinion polling suggests that at present only a third of the Scottish population view changes to their local landscape positively.

What is being done

National and local policies and plans highlight the importance of Scotland's landscape and the need to consider it when making decisions about development management and land use. Positive management strategies and projects have been developed to set objectives for landscape and guide investment in its management.

Policies and legislation

The Scottish Government is encouraging more sustainable and better care of Scotland's landscape. Recent policy statements on planning, architecture and place confirm the important role of the landscape in green infrastructure (the network of green spaces), place-making (how buildings and places are made, the quality of their design and of the built environments they help to shape) and biodiversity conservation. The Land Use Strategy and new marine-planning laws give importance to managing landscape change in a positive and sympathetic way. Legislation for national parks and National Scenic Areas was passed by the Scottish Parliament in 2000 and 2006 respectively to strengthen the protection and management of these special areas. The European Landscape Convention, published in 2006, provides a framework for managing change in Scotland's landscapes in a planned way that protects the landscape and involves people and communities.

The Town and Countryside Planning Act was put in place soon after the Second World War and has been frequently amended since, always with landscape as one of the most important environmental considerations within the planning system in Scotland.

Strategic Environmental Assessment and Environmental Impact Assessment now ensure landscape is considered when relevant policies, plans, strategies and projects are developed and approved.

Influencing development and land-use change

Town and country planning

The planning system directs development and influences the design of buildings in rural and urban areas. As a result, most development is regulated by local development-management decisions; although agriculture and forestry operations are regulated in other ways (see below).

Some forms of developments that are closely associated with agriculture and forestry, such as hill tracks, are also considered as "permitted development", which does not need formal planning permission.

Local authorities are responsible for managing development, and are guided by national advice set out in the National Planning Framework, Scottish Planning Policy and Planning Advice Notes (PANs). Planning policy recognises that it is important to consider the character of the landscape when looking at the effect a proposal would have. Landscapes with special qualities, such as designated scenic or recreational areas or areas of wild land, must also be considered.

Agriculture and forestry

Over the last 40 years agricultural activity has been strongly influenced by the European Common Agricultural Policy and its various financial support mechanisms. Since 2000 support has shifted away from production towards environmental protection and enhancement. More recently, the character of the landscape and protected landscapes have been considerations in how funding is prioritised under the Scottish Rural Development Programme.

Since the 1980s the visual quality of landscape has been an important consideration when assessing the environmental effects of proposals for planting new woodlands and restructuring existing forests by felling and replanting. All forestry activities in Scotland must meet the UK Forestry Standard and follow the Forests and Landscape guidelines when applying for project approval and support payments from the Scottish Rural Development Programme.

Where new woodlands and forests are planted is informed by the forestry and woodland strategies drawn up by local authorities in partnership with key stakeholders. These strategies supplement development plans and consider the effects of woodland expansion on the character of the local landscape.

Area-based approaches

Protected areas

Scotland has two main types of areas that are protected because of their landscapes – National Scenic Areas and national parks. These cover almost 20% of Scotland's land area and have special protection in planning policy. National park authorities have to prepare plans that include objectives for how they will positively manage the landscapes, and a similar approach is being taken in the National Scenic Areas in Dumfries and Galloway.

The following map shows the locations of the National Scenic Areas in Scotland.

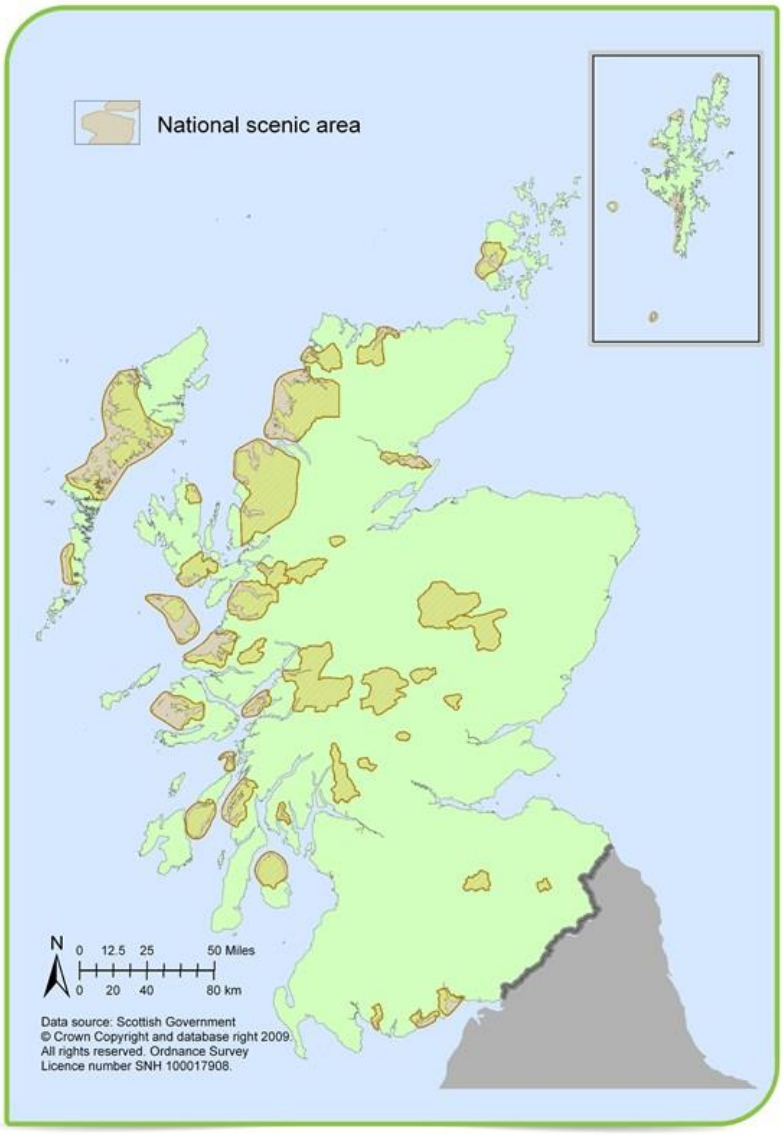

Figure 3: National Scenic Areas in Scotland

Other protected areas, such as regional parks, National Nature Reserves, Conservation Areas and World Heritage Sites, also contribute to landscape protection and management, even though their main focus is on other aspects of natural or cultural heritage. Local authorities can also designate special landscape areas within their development plans, and these help guide where new development is constructed and how it is designed.

Landscape projects and initiatives

Scotland's Landscape Charter helps ensure Scotland's landscapes are passed on to future generations in the best possible condition. The charter aims to increase awareness of the benefits that landscape can provide. It also sets out actions for communities, developers, land managers and the public sector to look after our landscape

Over 10 landscape partnerships funded by the Heritage Lottery have been established in Scotland in recent years, and there are other initiatives, such as the Galloway and Ayrshire Biosphere Reserve and the Central Scotland Green Network. These projects all take action to enhance landscapes and the benefits they provide for people and nature.

Involving people in considering landscape change

A critical factor in planning and managing Scotland's landscapes is the awareness and involvement of land managers, developers, local authorities, public agencies, and government departments. Individuals, communities and non-governmental organisations are also very important. Landscape strategies for specific areas are one way of achieving this, although these are largely restricted to the national parks and the three National Scenic Areas in Dumfries and Galloway.

The regional land-use pilots in Aberdeenshire and the Borders also provide opportunities to develop objectives that protect landscapes.

More emphasis is being put on place-making techniques that focus on people's needs and the way the components of a place (such as buildings, transport infrastructure or greenspace) come together to meet them. The Talking about Our Place toolkit has been developed to help local communities think about issues specific to their local landscapes and get involved in decision-making that affects them.