

Landscape

Scotland's landscape is one of its most iconic assets. It is essential for our health and well-being and thus requires careful management.



Summary

Scotland is renowned for its distinctive and diverse range of landscapes. These have evolved over many years as a consequence of natural and cultural forces and continue to evolve today. Highlands and lowlands, urban and coastal; together they create the backdrop against which we live our lives. Landscapes contribute positively to our well-being and to the economic performance of the country. However, we risk damaging our landscapes and losing what we value about them unless more attention is paid to managing change.

Introduction

Landscape is all around us - from the rugged mountain-tops of the Skye Cuillin to the most degraded areas of our towns and cities. Many are special places; others more mundane, while some are degraded by past use. Landscapes are subject to change over time; some modifications are welcome and others less so. Responses to these changes can be very personal, reflecting the memories and associations evoked by the place. Our understanding and appreciation of landscape are strongly influenced by these human responses and emotional connections.

So what is a landscape? The [European Landscape Convention](#) defines it as an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors. This Convention provides a definition of landscape that includes the physical elements of the environment surrounding us, be they natural (such as lochs, rivers, woodlands, mountains and hills) or cultural (such as buildings and the pattern of land use). But it is our experience and perception of the land and sea that turns these physical elements into landscape.

The Scottish Government has described the diversity of Scotland's landscapes as a [national treasure](#), and states that the aim should be to build environmental capital and pass well-managed, high-quality landscapes on to future generations. Concern for the landscape is therefore part of wider efforts to deliver a more sustainable future and its better care is an important contributor to the social and economic well-being of the nation. There are many reasons why [landscape is important](#) to us:

- the quality of our surroundings can make us healthier by encouraging physical activity and promoting recovery from physical and mental stresses;
- attractive, accessible landscapes, including [green spaces](#) in urban environments make a significant contribution to people's quality of life and community well-being;
- for the vast majority of visitors (both UK and international), our fine scenery is the main reason for choosing [Scotland as a holiday destination](#). Around 66% rated it as very important and 24% as important in influencing their decision to visit. It is estimated that [tourism based on enjoyment of Scotland's landscapes](#) is worth £420 million per year to our economy;
- landscape is an important part of Scotland's image. It helps to promote Scotland as a desirable location, attracting inward investment and supporting branding of significant Scottish products;
- landscape provides intangible qualities such as beauty, tranquillity, enjoyment and wildness. These qualities are important whether people seek them directly or feel the contentment of just knowing that they exist;
- landscape provides a living history of Scotland's past, an inspiration for its art and culture, and a subject for scientific study.

Description of landscape



[Landscape Character Assessment](#) is the standard system for describing, classifying and mapping landscape. It helps explain what makes one landscape different from another and illustrates the diversity of our landscapes. A complementary process of [historic land use assessment](#) has also been developed by Historic Scotland and the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

Scotland's diverse landscapes consist of dramatic mountains and glens, forests and moorlands and a highly indented coastline fragmented into a diverse range of islands that enrich our northern and western shores. There are also rolling lowlands, fertile straths, broad estuaries and settlements. In some areas, human activity and development has created a land use pattern, which is largely related to the underlying natural wealth of coal, building materials and a gentler topography. Nationally, a number of influences on the character of landscape can be determined. These factors have combined to make a lasting physical and architectural mark on the landscape.

Physical elements

Key physical elements include the importance of natural landforms and rock, their scale and colour; the indivisibility between topography and infrastructure, rugged topography and remoteness. The way we perceive these key elements is influenced by the light and weather. They play a distinctive role in the illumination of land and water. This is a special feature of Scotland's northerly geographical location and its oceanic weather.

Built heritage and settlement

Early human settlements are integral to the agricultural landscape of the lowlands and the sporting estates of the uplands. The nature and historical associations of these settlements, castles and houses vary across the country. The far Northern and Western Isles boast the earliest habitations, such as at Skara Brae in Orkney, while Pictish remnants characterise the north-east and Angus. Early Christian associations are strongest in the south and west.

Evidence of centuries of skirmishing with southern neighbours is provided by fortified remains, such as Roxburgh Castle and Smailhome Tower, in the Borders.

Settlement patterns often reflect physical and land use constraints, although more recent development increasingly overrides these factors. In the 19th century, many people migrated from more rural areas to settle in rapidly expanding cities developed on estuaries. Glasgow became the 'second city of the Empire', where trading links imported goods and cultural influences from around the world. Scotland's rich [built heritage](#) demonstrates these influences in its ever-changing architectural styles. Every part of Scotland has its own vernacular style that is in part influenced by the availability and nature of the local building stone. These factors all contribute to create a strong sense of place.

Rural character

Large areas of Scotland are rural in character, with extensive areas that are sparsely populated. The field pattern and estate woodlands of the fertile lowlands were laid out during the agricultural revolution. Between 1760 and 1850, a mosaic of fields was created across the fertile lowlands, interspersed by more designed landscapes laid out as the formal settings for the grand country houses. In more upland areas, a new landscape of the sporting estate was created with its distinctive architecture and extensively managed grouse moors and deer forests. In the Outer Hebrides and North-West Highlands, a blanket of wind-blown shell sand smothering the ancient Lewisian rocks after the Ice Age has helped to create a unique cultural and agricultural landscape of the crofting townships and [machair](#).

Cultural and natural associations

Scotland has a strong sense of the past within its landscape. This is found most strongly where ancient monuments dominate the landscape, or where castles and great houses with planned grounds are located to best advantage within 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, where limited human intervention leaves slight features still visible.

The diverse geology of Scotland also provides an abundance of natural features. These range from individual hills, such as the relict volcanoes which create the 'Laws' of the Lothians, to mountain ranges, dramatic coastal stacks and arches and high waterfalls. Natural features are themselves often further emphasised in the landscape by the siting of defensive structures or monuments, such as Edinburgh and Stirling castles.

Transitional landscapes

Transitional landscapes occur where hills and mountains meet lowland cultivated plains, or where the land meets the sea. A good example of transitional landscapes is the land on either side of the Highland Boundary Fault. It is characterised by the variety, pattern and colour of the vegetation associated with the low-lying cultivated straths, combined with the relief and enclosure of long glens more typical of the landscapes further north.

Similar transitional landscape character can be found along the margins of the Southern Uplands, and around the coast, where the exposed, often treeless, landscapes contain pockets of richer agricultural land.

Pressures affecting landscape



Scotland's landscapes will continue to evolve and change in response to natural processes and demands made by society. Natural processes, such as coastal erosion and landslips, can happen at an imperceptibly slow rate. However, these processes can also operate on a rather more immediate timescale and can occasionally be catastrophic in their effects. These, along with seasonal change, dramatic weather conditions and the changing quality of light, contribute to the overall diversity of landscape character.

In contrast, change induced by human activity can be less readily accepted. Public opinion polling by SNH suggests that at present [only a third of the population view changes to their local landscape positively](#). Less than one half believe they are well informed about proposed changes or have an opportunity to influence them.

There are three broad types of human-induced change that influence landscape character:

- changes related to **land use**, such as the continued expansion of forestry, reduction in extensive grazing and decline in agricultural incomes;
- changes brought about by incremental and ongoing **development**. These include housing, expansion of towns and villages, quarrying and widening of roads and new built structures, such as wind turbines, hydro schemes and telecommunications masts;
- changes in people's perception and experience of landscape, brought about, for example, by a greater familiarity of landscapes abroad, faster journey times, increased access and higher expectations in relation to recreation and visitor experience.

Some of the key changes in land use and development that have shaped and continue to affect the landscape are:

- **economic efficiency:** use of land and other natural resources has intensified. The agricultural industry, encouraged at first by the drive towards self-sufficiency in foodstuffs in the post-war years, and more recently by the need to compete in a global market, has encouraged the move towards maximising yields and cheaper food production. This has prompted a move towards mixed monoculture in agriculture, where only the most profitable and productive crops are grown;
- **land use policy:** commercial forestry expanded rapidly in post-war Scotland, focused mainly in marginal upland areas. In the 1980s, adverse natural heritage impacts of the rapid expansion of largely coniferous forest led to a reappraisal of the role of forestry and now a more diverse range of native woodland and forestry is supported;
- **changing economic base:** the demise of heavy industry, reclamation of derelict industrial land, expansion of the road network and the rapid growth of suburban housing development all reflect Scotland's changing economic fortunes and social fabric. The main employment opportunities have shifted from manufacturing and heavy industry to new service-based providers, many of which are now sited in retail and business parks located around the fringes of settlements. In rural areas, new landscape elements have been introduced by upgrading of roads, development of hydro schemes, increasing use of suburban housing styles in the countryside and development of the fish farming industry;
- **climate change:** since the end of the 20th century, the direct and indirect impacts of climate change on Scotland's landscape have become noticeable, particularly in terms of the drive towards onshore renewables. This will continue, both onshore and in the marine environment, with single turbines and large windfarms now significant features in many landscapes. In addition, the target for increasing forest cover will have a significant impact on many parts of Scotland.

Consequences of a change in landscape



Although landscape change may result in damage to or loss of valued qualities, equally, new types of valued landscape may evolve. Change in landscape character will be rapid where existing land use is now economically unsustainable or where conditions are suitable for new types of development. In such circumstances, opportunities arise for creation of new scenically attractive and economically sustainable landscape characteristics. Biodiversity enhancement measures are often an integral part of these new developments. However, other landscape qualities, such as wildness or tranquillity, are difficult to retain.

The following key issues emerge:

- greater uniformity and loss of regional and local landscape distinctiveness is apparent as a result of greater homogeneity in building form, settlement pattern and land use;
- around towns and cities, development and associated infrastructure can erode the quality of the landscape;
- renewable energy technologies, in particular windfarms, are affecting existing landscape character;
- the extensive rural areas of lowland Scotland may once have appeared to be relatively robust. These are, however, the areas most likely to change as a result of pressures exerted by the agricultural and forestry sectors;
- pressure to diversify farm incomes may lead to an increase in built development and in use of land for leisure activities.

Response by society



Since 2006, the European Landscape Convention has provided a framework for Scotland's approach to managing change in its landscapes. This is the first international treaty to be exclusively concerned with landscape and it promotes protection, planning and management of all landscapes. It places people, from all cultures and communities, at the heart of action for landscape and recognises that they share an interest in, and responsibility for, its well-being.

In addition, there are a number of mechanisms in place that have the potential to influence landscape change:

Town and country planning

The planning system has always had a role in directing development and influencing the design of the built environment. Town and country planning is the responsibility of local authorities, guided by national advice set out in the National Planning Framework, Scottish Planning Policy and Planning Advice Notes (PANs). Landscape character is an increasingly important part of this decision-making process and guidance on the siting and design of individual types of development frequently aims to maintain and enhance it.

Certain types of development, such as those associated with agriculture and forestry management, have general permitted development status and are subject to special arrangements. A [marine planning](#) system is being developed to provide a mechanism for greater consideration of landscape issues in the coastal and marine environment.

There is an emerging emphasis on techniques such as [placemaking](#), designed to help engage local communities in decision-making that affects them. This also helps with the design mitigations that can substantially improve new development. There are opportunities to develop more distinctive, robust and accessible landscape settings for cities and towns and to ensure that future development takes a sustainable approach, both in terms of the design of development and the management of natural resources. There is also an opportunity to create industrial landscapes with a local sense of identity.

Agriculture

Changes in agriculture have been led primarily by national and international economic policies, with little local involvement. Historically, the payment support system for agriculture had a direct influence on the types of crops grown, the amount of food produced and hence the pattern of land use in our landscapes. More recently, landscape character has been a consideration in the allocation of funding within the [Scottish Rural Development Programme](#), but has been a less potent consideration in farm conservation plans than other conservation interest.

Forestry

Landscape objectives have increasingly been taken into account, both in relation to new planting and the felling and restructuring of existing forests. Guidance by the Forestry Commission on the [landscape design](#) and [management of forests](#) is now well established.

Protected areas

Scotland has two types of protected areas with a specific landscape focus – National Scenic Areas and National Parks. These cover almost 20% of Scotland's land area. Although focused on other aspects of natural or cultural heritage designations, other protected areas such as regional parks, National Nature Reserves and World Heritage Sites can also contribute to landscape objectives. Local authorities can also designate special landscape areas within their development plans and these help guide the location, siting and design of new development.

A critical factor in the planning and management of Scotland's landscapes is awareness and positive engagement from the many stakeholders involved, including land managers, developers, local authorities, public agencies and government departments. Individuals, communities and non-government organisations also have key input. To help focus attention on the actions we can all take to ensure Scotland's landscapes are passed on to future generations in the best possible condition, [Scotland's Landscape Charter](#) has been developed.