

## **Wild Land: alternative insights into Scotland's unpeopled places**

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Introductory note by Community Land Scotland (CLS): Dr Elizabeth Ritchie gave a well received short presentation to the 2016 CLS Conference in Stornoway on this subject. CLS subsequently invited Dr Ritchie to expand on her thoughts in what is now this paper. CLS is grateful to Dr Ritchie for undertaking to write this paper as a contribution to stimulating discussion on important landscape questions relevant to Scottish policy making.

In 2014 Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) produced a 'Wild Land Map'. Despite the title, the map actually records places *perceived* as wild. It portrays a cultural idea. To create it SNH followed a process of open consultation through which large parts of Scotland were marked out as possessing qualities of wildness: perceived naturalness; rugged or challenging terrain; remoteness from public mechanised access; and visible lack of built development and other modern artefacts. The map now has a place in formal Scottish Planning Policy, approved by Ministers, and guides planning and development control policy. The Planning Policy provides this definition: 'Wild land character is displayed in some of Scotland's remoter upland, mountain and coastal areas, which are very sensitive to any form of intrusive human activity and have little or no capacity to accept new development. Plans should identify and safeguard the character of areas of wild land'. Although the Scottish government has said this is not an official designation, during planning consultations some have objected on the basis that developments are proposed within, or even within view of, mapped areas. In debates over land reform, renewable energy, deer management, resource extraction and re-wilding, these places are increasingly claimed to be, objectively and unproblematically, wild. This is not the case historically or ecologically, and nor is wildness the only valid perception of these places. Rather the Highlands and Islands, including 'wild land areas', have a long, ongoing, history of being highly managed by humans. The idea that any part of the Highlands and Islands is wild comes from a perception of the whole region, so this paper deals at times with the whole, not just the areas around which boundaries were drawn in 2014. The intention is not to argue against any restrictions on development, particularly that which is large-scale or externally owned. Instead it argues that a more sophisticated and historically-informed view on how these areas came to be will, first, enable decisions which benefit both the land and the people and, second, help policy makers better understand the often divergent emotions such places engender.

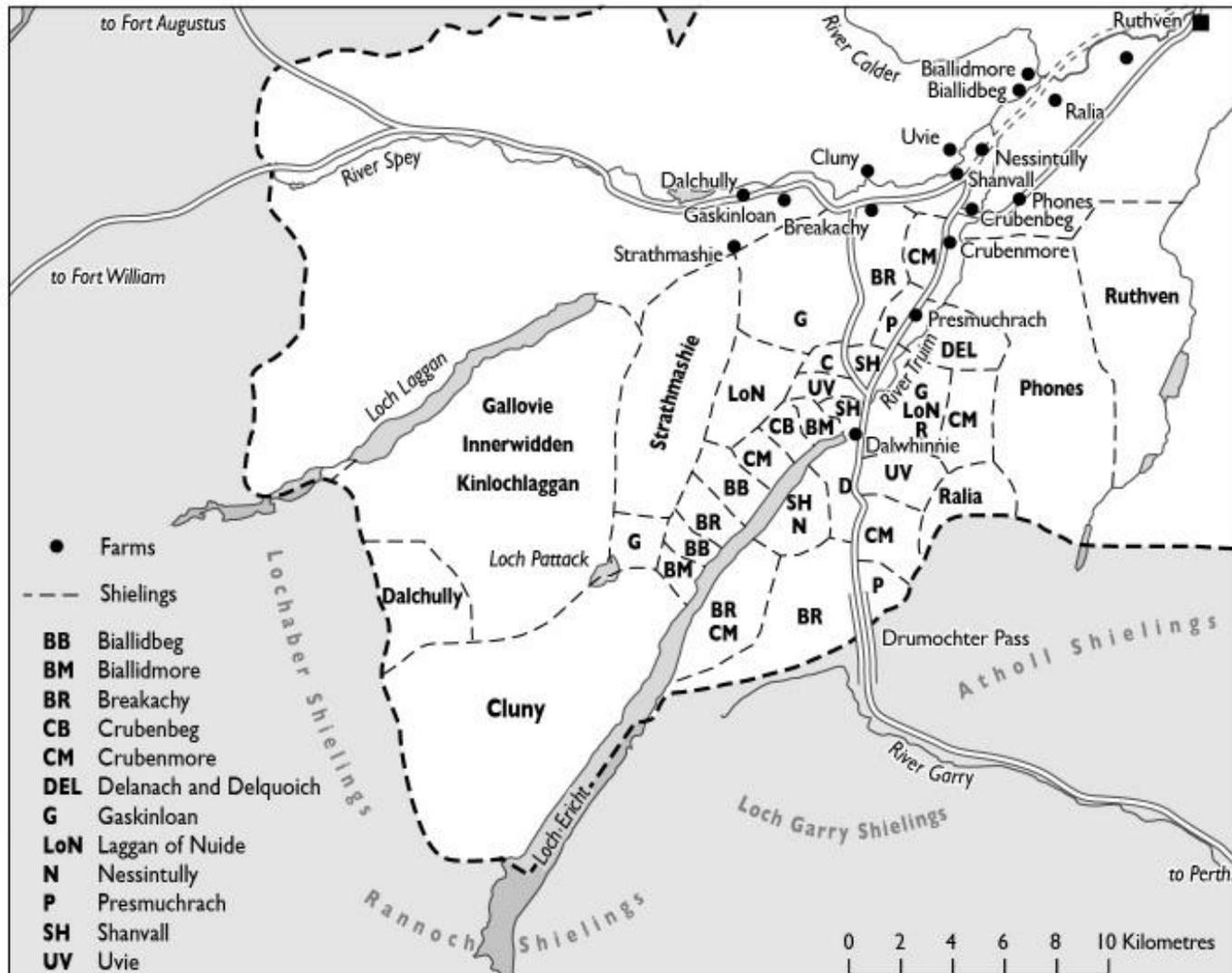
The decision to name parts as 'wild' is merely the latest manifestation of a longstanding set of attitudes that romanticise the Highlands by exaggerating the extent to which the area is untouched by humans. The use of GIS and the criteria chosen by SNH appear objective, but the choice of these comes from a mindset wedded to a particular cultural construct and creates a highly selective view of the region. One characteristic is 'visible lack of built development and other modern artefacts', yet the forty two areas contain

twentieth-century human projects like hydro-electric dams, pylons, estate tracks, commercial forestry plantations, quarries and peat cuttings; let alone evidence of past iron smelting and milling facilities. Another characteristic is 'remoteness from public mechanised access', yet many areas run alongside roads and villages. While it is undeniably useful to record areas perceived as remote, rugged or natural, it would be equally useful to map rural industry, or land use. Mapping arable, common grazing, sheep farms, grouse moor, forestry and deer estates would show that almost all land perceived as wild by many is currently, for better or worse, altered, managed and utilised by humans for commercial purposes. Or why not map where people used to live, and could potentially live again: landscapes abandoned only 150 or 200 years ago after thousands of years of habitation? Rob Gibson, a writer and former MSP in the Highlands, reminds us that areas perceived as wild significantly overlap with 'clearance country'. The idea of mapping what are principally perceptions is an interesting one, so why not map areas perceived by locals as abandoned, or representing dispossession? Surely as valid as perceptions of naturalness, the first criterion of 'wildness'? The long view, the historical perspective, shows people have and continue to live, manufacture, extract, exploit, and steward natural resources, all across the Highlands and Islands, including areas claimed in 2014 to be wild.

Up glens now only used by hillwalkers or gamekeepers, there used to be houses. Four to twelve of them made a township or *baile*, huddled together with barns, stackyards, gardens, pens and kilns. You can spot them, usually slightly uphill from the best land near the river, and still surrounded by green through centuries of manuring. One near Lix Toll, Killin, had three clusters of about eight buildings, and in Rossal, Sutherland, there were over a dozen dwellings plus outbuildings. Such townships were scattered a mile or two apart, up every strath and glen. The National Map Library has digitised General Roy's map of the 1740s. You can zoom in to where people lived before the deliberate depopulation of inland areas between c.1770 and the 1850s. On the ground, the sinuous mounds of soil for oats, barley and kale, and the dykes built to keep out the livestock, are still visible. This fertile arable, barely used for two hundred years, also produced high quality whisky for export to the south. Farmers, in a crescent from Kintyre through Perthshire, to Banffshire, Ross and Sutherland, produced large quantities sold at premium prices. Highland glens, now empty, were populated, farmed and commercially productive. Many residents of coastal villages and crofting townships, as well as descendants of people who migrated away, know where their families lived prior to their removal. Some can even take you to the ruins of their ancestors' homes, point out the lines of their fields, and tell their stories. For many locals, these places are not wild. Rather, they are deserted; made desolate; no longer productive; no longer supporting a population. But what of the mountains?

'Wild land' mainly consists of the 'rugged, challenging terrain' of mountains. The potential damage to their wild quality is of great concern to those who love the hills as a retreat from modern, stressful, and often, urban life. However these areas too, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, have been utilised and altered by

humans for many centuries. The 'perceived naturalness' of the hills does not mean they actually are natural. Before the clearances Highlanders spent summers high on the hills carefully managing the uplands to raise thousands of black cattle. The remains of their sheiling houses are still visible. The Drumochter summits, today a sparsity of thin heather, were then rough pasture producing cattle for markets at Crieff, Falkirk, Carlisle, and eventually London. Livestock went south in the autumn through every glen, including passes well known to hillwalkers, such as the Lairig Ghru and Jock's Road. What were busy routes are now considered isolated and remote. When the cattle-rearing people were evicted, the mountains continued to be intensively managed for sheep, deer or grouse. However the profits of this were for the few, rather than the many. The different grazing and manuring of these creatures, often reared on an industrial scale and with little thought to replacing the nutrients they took out of the soil, caused ecological degradation. When the notorious factor, Patrick Sellar, took over the newly empty Strathnaver he described the 'great variety of plants' on the high ground. Today the botanist would be hard pressed to find a small percentage of this diversity. Indeed, naturalist Frank Fraser Darling called for this 'devastated landscape' and 'wet desert' to be restored to productivity. The irony for those who feel that more human activity necessarily means a greater threat, is that greater human presence in the past created a more productive and diverse environment than what we are striving to protect today. For whatever purposes people are managing them, mountain areas are not in a state of nature.



*Today the munro-bagging area around Ben Alder feels wild and natural, but this map shows how every part of it was divided up and utilised c. 1800. Each farming township managed the resources of its hinterland to its fullest extent. Image used with permission of David Taylor.*

Recently some commentators have expressed a concern about the 'industrialisation' of mountain regions. Discussing the aesthetics, impact and control of renewable energy businesses is entirely appropriate, but this rhetoric assumes industrial processes are alien to non-urban areas. Before the 'second industrial revolution' of steel and iron concentrated extraction and manufacturing in the Central Belt, the Highlands had its fair share of factories, salt pans, coal and lead mines, brickmaking, and quarrying for marble and slate. A case in point is the wide extent of iron making, including in 'wild land areas'. Bonawe furnace is familiar to those who have holidayed in the Oban area. Archaeologists have also noted two iron-making centres in the Cowal Peninsula, one

near Loch Lomond, four by Loch Eck, twenty-six in the Loch Rannoch area, five near Ben Wyvis, and the one in Letterewe is dated to the 1610s. Glen Docherty's furnace, which the hillwalker passes driving from Achnasheen to Torridon or Slioch, was operational between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries; and again between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is only possible to imagine that parts of the Highlands might be wild by ignoring evidence of hundreds of years of industrial activity. In the nineteenth century a confluence of factors conspired to encourage new industries in the Lowlands. This effectively de-industrialised the Highlands. Natural resources, particularly as people were cleared out of the glens, were turned over to purely pastoral purposes. Notable exceptions were the development of fishing; tweed manufacture in Lewis and Harris; a whale processing plant in Harris; and projects by the Highlands and Islands Development Board. The current lack of manufacturing and industry in the north is actually a historical anomaly. SNH describes 'wild land areas' as 'very sensitive to any form of intrusive human activity', yet some have industrial pasts and all have been closely managed by humans.

The reason we see this landscape as empty and therefore, for some, 'unspoiled' is not only because of historical amnesia, but because what we see is guided by our expectations. For two centuries our culture has constructed the Highlands as wild: its hills, lochs and waterfalls an evocation of the natural. Aspects of a place which do not fit these ideas are often filtered out or cause us upset, even outrage. When they ventured north, eighteenth-century tourists anticipated barbarism, both topographically and culturally. Their comments on 'horrid mountains' are quite different from their nineteenth-century counterparts who revelled in the beauty of the same locations. What their culture told them to expect, they saw. Painters like Landseer firmly situated the Highlands in the aesthetic of Romanticism. With the exception of ruined castles or picturesque cattle, artists excised human structures and activities from their paintings. This continues to shape our way of seeing. The stunning calendar images of Colin Prior and others are carefully framed to exclude evidence of the people who live, work and play in the region, reinforcing our idea that this is how the Highlands is and should be. Wild, unpeopled. Is it not possible to see the place instead as worked, populated, economically productive, and yet beautiful? Attributing wildness to certain areas is only one construction of what land represents to people. It emphasises the psychological needs of visitors who come to enjoy the walking, the fishing, the physical challenges, the solitude. It prioritises the use of land for the mental and emotional restoration that these activities bring. Particularly given the history of the region, overshadowed by the removal of the population from these very areas, other constructions are equally legitimate. Other constructions lament its current condition, its lack of use, and its cultural degradation.

Historically Highlanders have not been trusted or permitted to manage their own resources. This has sometimes been due to exploitation; sometimes due to assumptions that they are incapable; and sometimes because their presence, let alone their knowledge and capability, has been ignored. Contemporary discussions predicated on

the notion that significant parts of the Highlands are wild ignore the existence of the people who know the place most intimately. It is people embedded in local communities who are best placed to initiate developments, and to weigh the benefits and disadvantages of those proposed by others. They can evaluate the aesthetic, environmental and tourism impact of proposals, and are also equipped to consider the wider economic, political, social and cultural implications of plans. The ability to successfully juggle these various demands has been effectively demonstrated by community-run estates such as those in Eigg, Gigha and Galson.

The Highlands and Islands have been promoted across the world, often by Highlanders themselves, as 'unspoilt', 'empty', 'pristine' and 'wild'. Indeed, in its current form, this landscape has deep meaning for many Scots, visitors, and for those who have made homes there. However these feelings, and the policies of influential organisations, are based on a view of the land circumscribed by the present. When the concept of 'wild land' is evoked, it is vital to bear in mind three issues. First, that natural-looking landscapes are actually managed, and always have been. Second, that the region as a location for industry, manufacturing and commercial enterprise is no recent development. And, third, that the idea of 'wild land' is only one cultural construction: one which potentially prioritises the perception of outdoors and nature enthusiasts over the needs of locals. There is a psychological and cultural need for 'wild' places in Scotland, so this attribute is rightly valued. But there are equally important needs for Highlanders to build up fragile local economies, and to have control over how that is done. This is not about giving carte blanche to unrestrained development but about moving towards a more informed understanding of these areas so more useful debates can be had about what policies best serve the land itself, and what policies best serve the people who live, play and work there. Recognising that the region is not unchanging, is not natural and unspoilt by human interference, and recognising that wildness is only one construction of Scotland's uplands is crucial in order to develop policies which consider the multiple needs of the multiple groups who feel so passionately about the rural north.

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