

**ACTION FOR LANDSCAPE IN SCOTLAND:
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Introduction

Many people see landscape as a separate and distinctive issue from other environmental attributes. Our starting point in Scotland is to recognise landscape as an important and intrinsic element of the whole natural heritage and to approach the natural heritage in an integrated manner. In particular, we see an important link between landscape quality and the diversity and health of habitats, to the extent that where landscape values are degraded there is a high likelihood that the habitats will also be degraded and the species diversity reduced.

To put such an integrated approach into practice we have developed a systematic way of classifying the elements of Scotland's biogeography: its landforms, topography, soils, habitats and species together with its landscape character to form a series of Natural Heritage Zones. These zones provide the new framework which we are using to assess the issues and opportunities for the natural heritage, seeking to define a longer-term vision, and identifying our own policy and action priorities and seeking to influence those of partner bodies.

In our work we take the landscape as representing both static and dynamic elements. Much of the cultural inheritance in the landscape reflects patterns of land use and settlement from many generations and we seek ways of protecting it. At the same time we recognise that there are a major forces for change impacting on the present landscape which have to be dealt with.

Defining the diversity of Scotland's landscape

Given that landscape is an intrinsic component of the natural heritage, we need to find ways of defining it which are as objective as possible, applicable to the diversity of landscape across Scotland, and provide a basis on which judgements can be made about those policies and activities which will impact upon it. Over the last five years we have developed a system of Landscape Character Assessment. This enables a more objective definition of areas of distinctive landscape character which have a different sense of place. We have undertaken the assessment on a regional basis with twenty-nine studies covering the whole of the land area. They have been undertaken with participation of key partners, usually local authorities and local enterprise companies.

The process of assessment which we have used was devised collaboratively by the statutory countryside agencies in England, Scotland and Wales. First, the data on key aspects of landscape character at 50,000 scale is combined. Second, a preliminary selection of "character areas" is made, ie areas with distinctive landscape character and with a "different sense of place". Third, a structured field survey is undertaken by a minimum of two surveyors. Fourth, the "character areas" are refined in the light of the field areas.

Over 3,900 Character Areas have been identified in Scotland. These have been grouped into over 360 "landscape types". The output of the 29 studies is being published as individual assessments and we are at present preparing a national overview which will be published within a year.

Identifying forces for change

Armed with the Landscape Character Assessments of character areas and landscape types, we are then in a position to analyse and assess the potential changes to the landscape in consultation with expert groups. We identify possible types and scales of landscape change and thereafter produce guidelines to enable maintenance and enhancement of landscape character. Each of the 29 regional studies contains an assessment of the forces for change and provides guidance on whether particular types of changes, for instance, woodland or agriculture or transport infrastructure, can be accommodated within the landscape and if so in what manner to ensure that it does not undermine the quality and value of the character area or landscape type.

We have had a lot of experience of different types of proposals which could have various effects on the landscape in different parts of Scotland. I shall refer briefly to the most obvious examples which we have been dealing with through casework. A demand for wind energy, the siting of aero-generators as a result of the Scottish Renewables Obligation has been substantial, particularly in those exposed parts of the west of the Scottish mainland and islands where windspeeds are above the minimum levels set in the Obligation. Frequently these developments are in areas which have no intrusive infrastructure. We are experiencing demands for substantial numbers either at one site or at a series of sites in relatively close proximity which could create substantive cumulative impacts on the landscape. Proposals for

extraction of primary materials, particularly rock and minerals, have also arisen especially in areas of highest landscape and scenic quality. Often the scale of the activities proposed is of a different order to anything previously experienced within that landscape. In both the cases of aero-generators and mining proposals we have made objections and Public Enquiries have been held. For all of those for which an outcome has been received the decision by the relevant Minister has been in favour of protecting landscape quality.

Scotland has seen substantial increases in plantation forestry over the post-war period. As a result a great deal of previously open ground has been lost along with substantial areas of significant habitat quality, particularly heather moorland. In some parts of the country, the extent of afforestation has led to debates about whether there is now an unreasonable balance between forestry and other land cover types from a landscape perspective. Changes in agricultural land use have also had a substantial impact upon the landscape. Most significant, although it is less noticeable because it has occurred over a long period of time, is the loss of hedgerows and trees as a result of field boundary removal and field extension. Also crop patterns, particularly the highly subsidised oil seed rape, have transformed the character of the landscape for considerable periods of the year.

Just as significant in the wilder and more remote parts of the Scottish uplands has been the development of improving tracks usually for sport shooting purposes and the placement of masts for transmission to mobile phones. These create an intrusive element which has both a physical repercussion and induces a predominantly negative emotional reaction in visitors there.

Defining policies to safeguard landscape quality and character

Many of the forces for change which I have identified will be recognisable in Ireland. Most of the effort in Scottish Natural Heritage has been in dealing with casework seeking, as a minimum, to moderate the intrusive effects of these changes on the character of the landscape, and where they are likely to have a significant detrimental impact to seek to argue against their implementation. In the round, the forces for change identified create a variety of impacts: a single artefact in an otherwise apparently undisturbed landscape, significant intrusions in wild and remote country, irretrievable impacts on the character of the landscape and quality of people's experience of it, and the cumulative impact of change over a period of time.

Taking together the different forces for change, and their varied impact on the landscape, points out the need for more strategic approaches to protecting landscape character and quality rather than relying on responses to casework. This is where the national and regional and landscape character assessments are beginning to prove of value. We are now able to identify the degree of sensitivity to change of different character areas and landscape types so that we can play a more proactive role in advising other decision-making bodies, particularly local authorities with respect to their town and country planning functions. However, the most significant issue is that many new activities could not have been predicted and therefore developing strategies and contingency plans to deal with them has not always proved possible.

Analysis of the driving forces for the types of changes which are occurring points up a much more complex situation and one in which statutory natural heritage agencies have difficulty in influencing. A series of driving forces can be identified. Market demand for non-renewable and renewable products, for example, remains extremely high: aggregates and timber respectively being classic examples. Decisions taken about the lack of suitability for these activities in other parts of the United Kingdom and indeed other parts of Europe results in greater pressures elsewhere. This is certainly the case in Scotland with respect to demands for coastal superquarries and for extensive plantations of soft wood timber. A more strategic approach is required and is now becoming accepted as the right approach. A forestry strategy for Scotland, alongside similar strategies for England and Wales, is now being prepared and will provide opportunities for determining the nature and scale of future forestry development. Likewise, a more strategic international approach to aggregates supply and demand, as put forward by the IUCN UK Committee through its investigation into aggregates markets, will hopefully begin to have an effect throughout Europe.

More locally, financial pressures on those who own land, with consequential reduction in manning levels, means that maintenance of appropriate grazing regimes has not been successful despite the very considerable input of financial resources under the Commons Agriculture Policy livestock regime. Similarly, the need for a single hand to control large areas of ground has resulted in demands for more tracks and the use of vehicles rather than foot. Our view is that fundamental changes are required to the Common Agricultural Policy to ensure that environmental stewardship is a core activity alongside food production and maintenance of the social fabric of the rural communities. In this way, the environment would become a core element of the CAP rather than a bolt-on extra at the margin as it is at the moment through agri-environmental schemes. There are some opportunities under the Agenda 2000 proposals for moving forward but we consider that these are far from adequate and we seek a more fundamental reform.

In a similar vein, financial support regimes generally, but most particularly those for forestry, agriculture and industrial development, rarely take adequate account of the environmental carrying capacity of an area. From a landscape perspective, the extent to which particular areas can absorb changes in land use and absorb built structures is highly variable. While there has been welcome improvement in Central Government guidance in Scotland on these issues, until we have fully integrated and multi-objective financial assistance schemes which take landscape and other environmental factors fully into account, little progress can be made.

Perhaps the most fundamental of all of the driving forces is the policies which determine the nature, scale and location of activity. Despite pleas over a long period of time for a more integrated approach to the way we deliver a public policy with respect to the land and therefore the landscape, progress is still painfully slow. Approaches like Scottish Natural Heritage's Natural Heritage Zones, the Countryside Commission's Character Zones and English Nature's Natural Areas, are the mechanism which statutory use to argue from a practical perspective how more integrated approaches to wildlife and landscape safeguarding can be achieved in practice.

Defining areas for special protection

I am sure that most would agree that all of the landscape is important. Nevertheless, I am sure that most would also recognise that there are areas of special natural beauty and amenity, both for the general public and for the expert. There are many national systems for protecting landscapes but most have a common theme of seeking to influence and moderate change so that it will have a minimum impact on the quality and value of landscapes which are regarded as part of a nation's assets.

In Scotland we have a series of forty National Scenic Areas covering some 13% of the land area and do embrace, albeit without statutory force, adjacent sea areas. These Areas are selected in order to "..... identify scenery which best combines those features which are frequently regarded as beautiful. On the whole, this means that richly diverse landscapes which combine prominent landforms, coastline, sea- and fresh-water lochs, rivers, woodlands and moorlands, with some added mixture of cultivated land, are generally the most prized." Inevitably, given these selection criteria, the majority of areas designated are in the more rugged and more mountainous parts of the country with very little representation in the lowlands or the coast of eastern Scotland.

The Government has asked Scottish Natural Heritage to review the position and, in particular to advise on a new statutory basis for national landscape protection, to redefine the purposes for such protection and to identify how a more representative selection of the nation's landscape resource can be protected. We are about to publish a consultation paper and by the time the conference occurs we should be at an advanced stage in preparing our advice to Government.

A number of fundamental issues arise as part of our review. First, is the question of how one defines landscape. Do we take a traditional view and rely on popular perceptions of scenery or do we seek a more objective approach. The advent of Landscape Character Assessment would allow us to take a more objective approach but, nevertheless, we are persuaded that to ensure that there is wide appreciation and ownership of what is nationally important landscape, then we should take as our main criteria a popular definition of scenic beauty. Second, we need to decide whether we accept the more traditional "accolade" approach to identifying those areas of national scenic importance or do we seek a more objective and representative approach. If we take the latter then, given Scotland's scenic diversity, we will inevitably end up with landscapes of variable quality, some of unsurpassed beauty which are clearly of national, if not international, significance and others which are unlikely to achieve that level of significance. However, taking an accolade approach, as in the past, has resorted in a skewed distribution of the prime national landscape areas. Our resolution so far, therefore, is a half-way house in which we propose to identify the main representative landscapes of Scotland, relying upon the classification nationally arising from the Landscape Character Assessments, but recognising that some of the landscapes are not of national significance and so to omit those areas from further consideration. The outcome which we propose is for a more representative series of National Scenic Areas, chosen on a slightly more objective basis, with a wider coverage and a new purpose.

Our current view is that NSAs should 'represent the best of Scotland's scenery and are areas of land and water whose natural beauty and amenity are of such outstanding quality that they should be safeguarded and enhanced as part of the natural heritage'. They are areas 'where the aim is to manage change arising from development and land-use decisions, so as to accord with the primary purpose, while making provision for the social and economic needs of the area'.

We also recognise that there are areas of landscape character and quality which are of regional/local significance. In Scotland we do not have a systematic approach to this, although planning documents covering most of the country do have reference to Areas of Great Landscape Value. Our proposals are that there should be one level of landscape designation to cover locally and regionally significant landscapes.

Conclusions

From our consideration of landscape classification and assessment, the forces for change and the treatment of special landscape areas, I derive six conclusions. First, countries need a systematic and reasonably objective approach to the inventory and assessment of landscape character. Second, landscape should not be seen as a separate element of the natural heritage but links made with other aspects to allow an integrated approach to be developed. Third, strategies for coping with activities which will have a detrimental impact on landscape should be prepared. Fourth, policies should be defined in the context of landscape character at the local level, focusing particularly on the ability of different character areas and landscape types to cope with changes. Fifth, it is absolutely essential that statutory agencies with landscape responsibilities seek to influence the major driving forces by arguing for environmental factors, including landscape character, to be an intrinsic part of policies and financial assistance regimes and the decision-making processes in relation to them. Sixth, areas for special protection for their landscape quality should be defined and implemented at both the National and Regional/Local levels.