Draft Seascape Character Assessment
Of County Donegal

2015
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1. Introduction

Donegal has a distinctive, spectacular and diverse coastline of some 1,134km, most of it fronts directly onto the Atlantic Ocean. The indented coast is the longest in Ireland and boasts a heterogeneous character comprising of cliffs, sheltered bays, caves, open coastal views and headlands. The coastal landscape and seascape is synonymous with the character and identity of the County, and inherent in the complex history of the County.

Seascape is a crucial element in any maritime location in relation to a sense of identity and culture. It reflects the relationship between people and place and is a product of the interaction between our natural and cultural components of our environment (Natural England 2012). It has played an important part in the history and development of Donegal as a landing port for the first settlers, as a food source for its people, for transport and communications, for defence, for commercial fishing, enterprise and export, in some cases of its population amongst a wealth of others. More recently, the coast and the sea have been the focus for tourism and leisure providing a significant asset as a recreational resource and associated considerable development pressure. Donegal’s dynamic coastline has continuously changed physically, in its use and capacity over time and this change is destined to proceed with global warming, sea levels rising and new and evolving technologies.

1.1 Objectives of Seascape Character Assessment

1. To promote seascapes as a key resource within the marine and coastal environment.
2. To identify their character and special qualities.
3. To identify unique areas of specific importance.
4. To provide a base layer of information to feed into and inform a comprehensive and robust Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) of the County and coincide with the Settlement character Assessment of County Donegal.
5. Establish an understanding of how a place is experienced, perceived and valued by people

2.0 Methodology

The SCA was carried out following best practice guidance in the form of the Interreg funded document entitled ‘Maritime Ireland/Wales, Guide to Best Practice in Seascape Assessment, March 2001’ prepared on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales and University College Dublin, and ‘An approach to Seascape Character Assessment’, Natural England 2012. The Seascape Character Assessment is an independent assessment in its own right carried out as a
parallel process to the Landscape Character Assessment and the Settlement character assessment and was somewhat informed by the Historic Landscape Characterisation process, whilst aligning to the National Landscape Strategy or Ireland 2015-2025.

2.1 Components of a seascape

Similar to a Landscape Character Assessment, a Seascape Character Assessment describes and characterises all of the individual attributes and features that combined inform the seascape of the coastal landform and adjoining marine area.

Natural England describes seascape as:

“Seascape, like landscape, reflects the relationship between people and place and the part it plays in forming the setting to our everyday lives. It is a product of the interaction of the natural and cultural components of our environment, and how they are understood and experienced by people.”

And The European landscape Convention (ELC), defines seascape as:

“A ‘seascape’ is an area of sea, coastline and land, as perceived by people, whose character results from the actions and interactions of land and sea, by natural and/or human factors.”

The figure below extracted from ‘An approach to Seascape Character Assessment’, Natural England 2012 illustrates the individual components that together make up a seascape.

2.2 Seascape Character Assessment process

Figure 1: Seascape Character Assessment process
**Figure 1.1: Seascape Character Assessment Process Flowchart**

**SEASCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PROCESS**

**STEP 1** Define Purpose and Scope of the Assessment

Prepare Project Brief and Assessment Methodology

**STEP 2** Desk Study

Define Seascape Character Areas

Review Natural Factors

Review Cultural Associations

Review Historic Factors

Review Social Factors

Analyse Information and Draft Seascape Character Areas

Public Participation and Stakeholder Engagement

**STEP 3** Field Study

Review Desk Study Findings (including Area Boundaries)

Record Aesthetic and Experiential Aspects in the Field

Record Other Observations

Review and Revise Seascape Character Areas

**STEP 4** Classification and Description

Describe Seascape Character Areas

Identify Key Characteristics

Map Seascape Character Areas and Landscape Character Types within
2.3 Seascape Character Assessment Process Step 1

2.3.1 Scope

A scoping document was prepared in summer 2013 that set out the content, procedure, scale and level of detail of the Seascape Character Assessment, as detailed in the extract from the scoping document copied below:

“A Seascape Character Assessment of County Donegal shall be carried out that shall consider the entire coast and inlets. A Historic Landscape Assessment (HLC), and a Townscape Character Assessment (TCA) are also being carried out as parallel processes, that along with the Seascape Character Assessment shall feed into and inform a comprehensive and robust Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) of the County.

Scope

The Seascape Character Assessment (hereafter referred to as SCA) of County Donegal will cover some 1,134km or 17.1% of the total national coastline and include the Lough inlets for a distance of 15km out to sea and a (provisional) distance of 10 km inland from the shore edge. The SCA shall be carried out in accordance with current best practice based on the Interreg funded document entitled ‘Maritime Ireland/Wales, Guide to Best Practice in Seascape Assessment, March 2001’ prepared on behalf of the Countryside Council for Wales and University College Dublin and ‘An approach to Seascape Character Assessment’, Natural England 2012.

The SCA will involve the study and characterisation of the ‘seascape’, consisting of:

- Views from land to sea
- Views from sea to land
- Views along the coastline
- The effect on landscape of the conjunction of sea and land

The SCA shall be carried out as a parallel and reiterative process alongside the LCA, HLC and TCA, and shall be incorporated into the final published LCA.

Public consultation on the SCA shall occur within the wider LCA as a result of subsuming the SCA into the LCA.

Content and procedure

The SCA shall consist of a detailed assessment of the coastline in sectors subdivided from headland to headland; each of these shall be described as a ‘Seascape Unit’. It is intended to have a seaward buffer of 15km and a landward buffer of 10km (provisional) that may change as a result of further more detailed GIS analysis.

The assessment of each unit shall consist of the following stages.

Stage 1: GIS analysis of existing spatial data comprising multiple layers, and running GIS based programs generating viewsheds in order to define ‘seascape units’ and identify significant characteristics, constraints and opportunities of sea and land.
Stage 2: Visual analysis of each seascape unit in a structured manner using survey sheets, referenced maps and photographs.

Stage 3: Definition of the marine, coastal and inter coastal areas and their characteristics.

Stage 4: Consideration of the relationship between, and integration of, the marine and terrestrial areas and hinterland.

Each seascape characterisation unit shall include the following:

- Characterization by physical type
- Characterization by use
- Environmental designations and sensitivities
- Visual and sensory qualities
- Key historic and cultural association
- Forces for change

Scope/scale

The size and scale of Donegal and its Coastline lends itself to a ‘regional’ scale of assessment and in this instance the parameters laid out in the best practice guidelines for regional scale assessment shall be used. The scale shall be sufficient to inform the countywide Landscape Character assessment that may lead onto a requirement for further detailed study as a separate process.”

2.4 Seascape Character Assessment Process Step 2

2.4.1 Desk Study

Using the best practice guidance and methodology, 19 individual seascape units were identified as illustrated on the map below; each seascape unit extends from natural headland to headland, 15km seaward and 3km inland. The nature of the long, varied and indented coastline of Donegal means there is a considerable degree of overlap between seascape units along this coast.
Further GIS analysis of multiple spatial data layers, GIS generated viewshed analysis was carried out to inform and define ‘seascape units’, and in particular the extent of intervisibility between the sea and land and between units. Layers of spatial data were interrogated to help identify significant characteristics and features of the sea and land as well as a literature review to inform the historic, social and cultural elements of the units.

As part of the wider Landscape Character Assessment process, Landscape character types were identified throughout the county; these are the physical attributes that make up the landmass of the county, they are generic in nature and not specific to an area and so are present throughout the county, so for example coastal agriculture could be present in Inishowen and also in Donegal Bay but these are in entirely different seascape units and Landscape Character Areas. The map below illustrates the landscape character types that occur within the area of the Seascape Character Assessment.
The coastal edge is a fundamental and defining feature of each seascape unit; it reflects the geology and coastal hydrological processes of the unit that in turn have informed the ecology and history of settlement of that area, and in turn the land use, maritime use, settlement pattern and built, social and cultural heritage of each area. The map below illustrates the coastal edge of the county that has been subdivided into 10 coastal types.
Seascape is defined by Natural England in its position statement on All Landscapes Matter (2010) as: “An area of sea, coastline and land, as perceived by people, whose character results from the actions and interactions of land with sea, by natural and/or human factors”.

The diagram below illustrates the many physical, marine, ecological, physical, social and cultural elements that contribute to the defining of a seascape character area.
2.4.2 Public participation

Public Participation on the SCA occurred as part of the wider LCA public consultation process during a three month period in January 2014. The LCA process was advertised in local press, on the council’s website and on Facebook and Twitter. A letter and information leaflet, Figure 1.5 below, were sent out to over 400 community groups throughout the County outlining the LCA (and including SCA) process, detailing drop-in events and explaining how to make a submission and become involved in the LCA (and including SCA) process. Similarly, a letter and information leaflet was sent out to all public libraries, primary schools and secondary schools in the County in order to target a younger age cohort in the consultation process. Targeted notification on the LCA was also sent out to all neighbouring Local Authorities. An interactive mapping tool was developed encouraging digital submissions that were localised to a geographical point and to which submissions and photographs could be attached, and all methods of submission including digital submissions were encouraged and welcomed, screenshot of this is illustrated in Figure 1.6 below.

There were a series of 5 structured public ‘drop in’ events throughout the County during February 2014 and attended by members of the LCA team. There were a number of draft maps on display including those listed below in addition to rolling presentations and hand-out maps and documentation. The purpose of the public events was to encourage informed public participation and on the whole these events were well attended and had positive outcomes.

Draft maps on display at the public events were:

- Landscape Character Areas.
- Landscape Character Types.
- Historic Landscape Characterisation.
- Seascape Character Assessment.

Figure 1.6: ‘Have Your Say About Your Landscape’.
The robust and varied methods for encouraging public participation resulted in the receipt of a substantial amount of submissions; 18 public written submissions (30 via email, 16 at organised drop in events), and 203 online submissions via flexi viewer, the online interactive mapping tool. Of all these responses, only 11 were not associated with any particular area.

2.4. 3 Stakeholder Consultation

41 Stakeholders were consulted by letter at the outset of the process in July 2013, requesting input from the earliest stage that would fully inform and help shape the project. The stakeholders were identified based on their specialist knowledge and particular interest in the Donegal landscape and in the LCA process and assistance invited that would provide access to relevant data, guidance, or observations that would enhance the quality of the process and project outputs. 9 of the 41 identified stakeholders responded formally whilst others maintained a more informal consultative role.

On the basis of expressed interest a round table meeting took place on 26th February 2014 with 14 targeted stakeholders comprising a short presentation on the LCA methodology and work to date and detailing the work programme going forward. The stakeholders were then asked to discuss the draft work to date and give a steer as to how the process could be improved upon and an indication of how it should shape up. All elements of the LCA and its process were up for discussion however the LCA team tried to focus the meeting to the regional scale LCA and the draft maps published to date. In particular the 4 areas below were focused on:

- Draft Landscape Character types
- Draft Seascapes Assessment units
- Draft Historic landscape Characterisation
- Draft Landscape Character Areas

A number of issues were raised giving direction to the LCA at the meeting that have been incorporated in the process and 3 written submissions followed.
2.4. 4 Cross border consideration

Donegal’s shares a long international border with Northern Ireland including the shared international marine border along Lough Foyle and the River Foyle. As a result of this, there was re-iterative consultation with Northern Ireland’s Department of the Environment.

2.5 Seascape Character Assessment Process Step 3

2.5.1 Field Study

Site survey work was undertaken during 2014 to verify and inform the draft ‘Seascape Character Areas’. In accordance with best practice guidance, a site survey sheet was prepared to capture information on the seascape (attached in appendix 1). A minimum of three points within each SCA was surveyed to record the following:

- A visual analysis of each seascape unit in a structured manner using survey sheets, referenced maps and photographs.
- Definition of the marine, coastal and inter coastal areas and their characteristics.
- Consideration of the relationship between and integration of the marine and terrestrial areas and their hinterland.

Site survey work was undertaken during late 2013 and early 2014 to verify and inform the Seascape Character Areas. Photographs were taken at certain points to record variations in character and to record typical aspects of the landscape.

For each of the 19 individual Seascape Character Areas identified, the following information is provided within the SCA profiles:

- Landscape Character Types and Landscape Character Areas within the unit.
- Key characteristics
- Key Uses
- Biodiversity
- Cultural Influences
- Visual and sensory qualities

A myriad of seascape features, uses, and activities were identified within each of the defined seascape units, as well as natural and cultural factors. Reflective of the long and varied coastline of Donegal is the diversity of its many uses throughout history to the present day that include military use, recreation, commercial fishing, tourism, shipping, settlement, and farming to name a few, with more recent tourism and leisure uses and some renewable energy uses. All of which have shaped and informed the character of the seascape as well as creating opportunities and presenting pressures on the seascape character.
2.6 Seascape Character Assessment Process Step 4

2.6.1 Classification and description

The seascape of County Donegal is classified and described on an individual basis.

The ‘classification and description’ is the last part in the 4 step methodology set out in section 2.2 of the report. This stage in the process considers the entire seascape of the county in terms of all the layers of data identified and collated during steps 1-3 in the process and via the Landscape Character Assessment and Settlement Character Assessment processes.

The 19 individual Seascape Character Units identified have been described in more detail in section 3.0 of this report. The purpose of this description is to highlight the components and characteristics within each unit as identified in the seascape wheel in section 2.2 of this report that make them unique and contribute to their character. Various data sets and data sources including digital spatial data and written record were interrogated and presented as a narrative within this document to inform the sustainable development of the seascape and coastal area of County Donegal.

Interactive spatial digital mapping of the Draft Seascape Character Assessment is available on Donegal County Councils website www.donegalcoco.ie as part of the wider publication process of the Draft Landscape Character Assessment and Draft Settlement Character Assessment. This enables examination in more detail of the defined Seascape Character Areas and their key spatial components.