Landscape character Assessment

Overview and experience of application

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THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

- The landscape is "… an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors".

- "Europe's countryside, and the people who live in it, are a highly valued and varied asset for the whole population of the continent: the largest part of rural Europe is covered by agricultural land and forests, which have a strong influence on the character of European landscapes;"

THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

- "It is our duty to understand, protect and enhance this heritage; at present, in many parts of Europe, the rural heritage is being rapidly eroded and even destroyed by social or technological changes, modern agriculture, urban growth, neglect and other forces"

- The European Landscape Convention requires signatories to protect and manage the cultural landscape, which means conserving and keeping up the characteristic features as justified by its heritage value.

THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION

With the active participation of the interested parties, as stipulated in Article 5.*c,* and with a view to improving knowledge of its landscapes, each Party undertakes:

a)i   to identify its own landscapes throughout its territory;

ii   to analyse their characteristics and the forces and pressures transforming them;

iii   to take note of changes;

b)   to assess the landscapes thus identified, taking into account the particular values assigned to them by the interested parties and the population concerned.

ASSESSING THE LANDSCAPE

- Understanding the landscape, the processes that formed it and the pressures for change is an important step before landscape planning or design, especially at a large scale.

- It includes more than a geographical understanding – the visual and experiential aspects must be included.
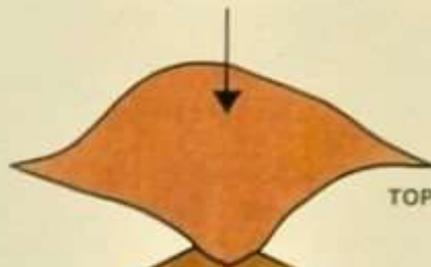
LANDSCAPE
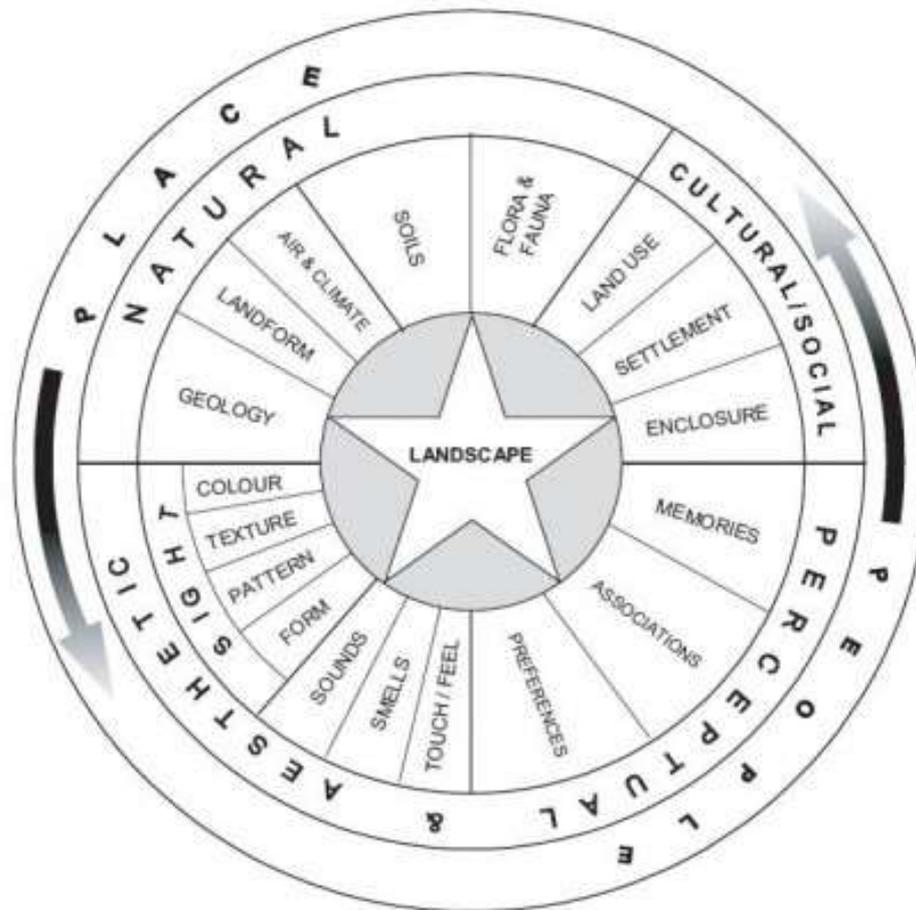
THE LANDSCAPE IS DYNAMIC

- Any landscape has developed over time as the result of different processes interacting with each other.

- It is necessary to understand what are or have been these processes and to see how they have influenced different areas to different degrees and in different ways.

CLIMATIC PROCESSES OVER
TIME HAVE MODIFIED

GEOLOGICAL FORMATIONS

WHICH ACCOUNTS FOR CURRENT

TOPOGRAPHY

WHICH HAS DETERMINED

DRAINAGE

WHICH HAS INFLUENCED

DISTRIBUTION OF SOILS

AND ASSOCIATED

PLANTS AND ANIMALS

WHICH HAVE BEEN MODIFIED BY

MAN'S ACTIVITIES

MAIN COMPONENTS

- Main aspects to consider can be grouped as:
- Landform: geology, geomorphology, hydrology, soils;
- Land cover: vegetation patterns, land use
- Settlement: patterns, communication, building types, cultural elements;
- Visual/experiential features

DEVELOPMENT

- Landscape character assessment developed well before the ELC

- Geographers had described landscapes in various ways – often physiographically

- Landscape architects started to consider the visual aspects and later cultural aspects were added.

- The UK was an early leader in this work
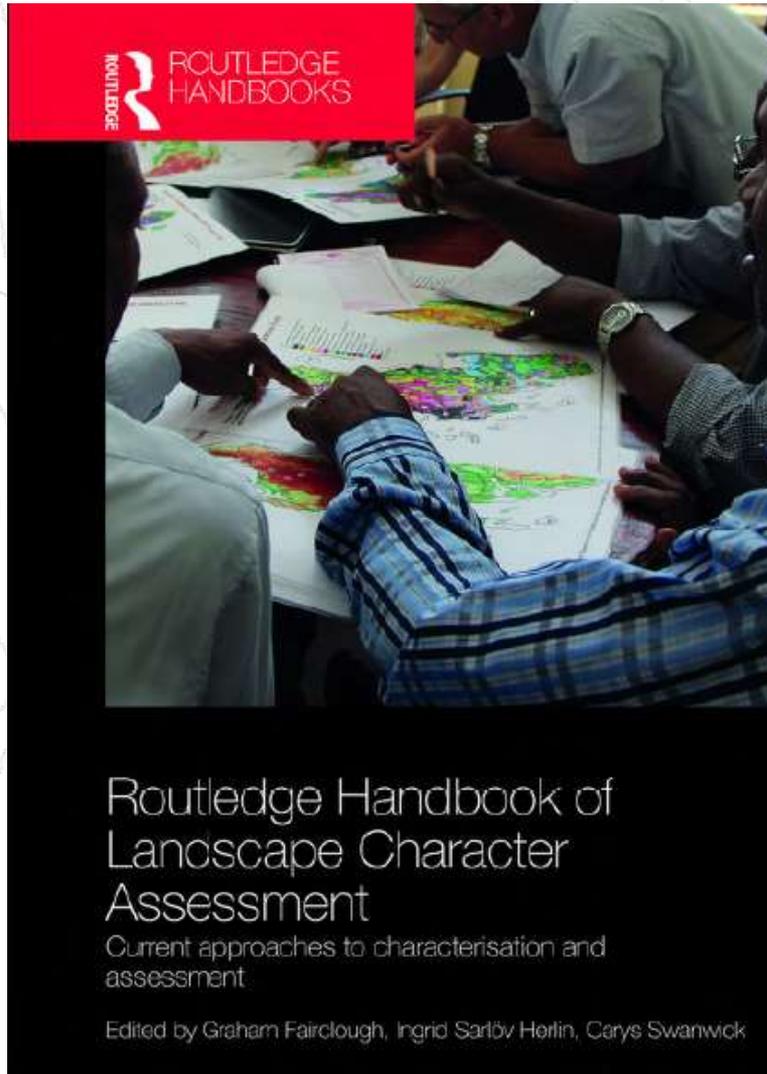
LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

- For three decades this has been the main way of taking landscape into account in wider landscape planning and policy development in numerous countries.

- It is based on a well-defined process carried out at a range of scales, often a regional scale and below this a local scale.

GUIDANCE
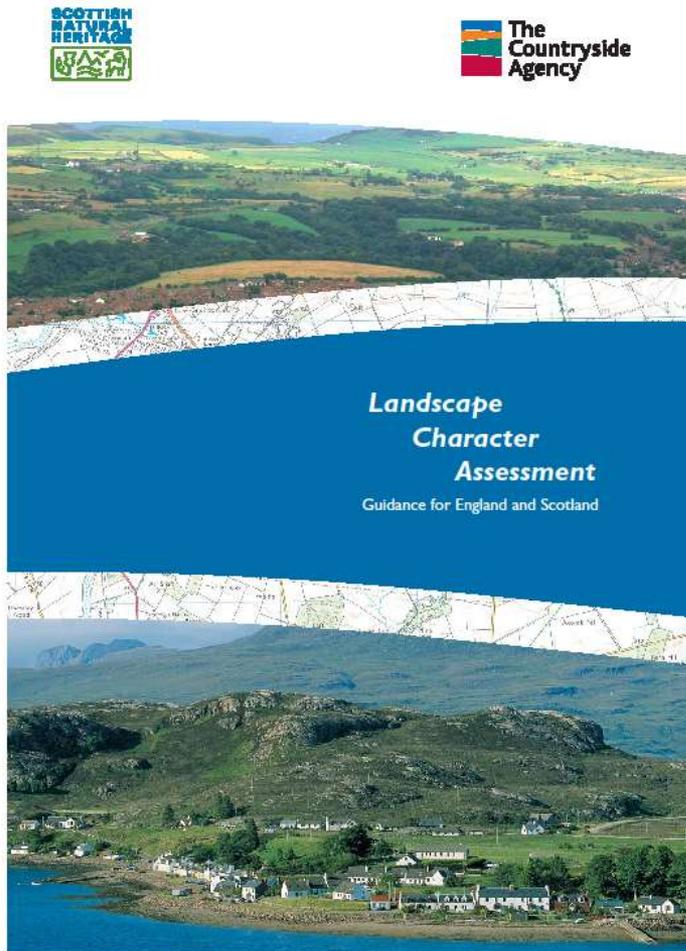
- Guidance from the early 2000s is still relevant and followed in practice
- Manual methods of mapping landscape types is still the way although GIS is used extensively

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOKS

Routledge Handbook of Landscape Character Assessment
Current approaches to characterisation and assessment

Edited by Graham Fairclough, Ingrid Sarlöv Herlin, Carys Swanwick

DEFINITIONS

- **Character**
  A distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another, rather than better or worse.

- **Characteristics**
  Elements, or combinations of elements, which make a particular contribution to distinctive character.

DEFINITIONS

- **Elements**
  Individual components which make up the landscape, such as trees and buildings.

- **Features**
  Particularly prominent or eye-catching elements, like tree clumps, church towers, or wooded skylines.

- **Characterisation**
  The process of identifying areas of similar character, classifying and mapping them and describing their character

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Phase 1: Characterisation

Step 1: Defining the scope. All Landscape Character Assessments need a clearly defined purpose. This will critically influence the scale and level of detail of the assessment.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Step 2: Desk study. This involves review of relevant background reports, other data and mapped information, and use of this information to develop a series of map overlays (can be in GIS) to assist in the identification of areas of common character (usually draft landscape character types and/or areas).

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Step 3: Field survey. Field data is collected in a rigorous way to test and refine the draft landscape character types/areas, to inform written descriptions of their character, to identify aesthetic and perceptual qualities which are unlikely to be evident from desk information, and to identify the current condition of landscape elements.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Step 4: Classification and description. This step then refines and finalises the output of the characterisation process by classifying the landscape into landscape character types and/or areas and mapping their extent, followed by preparation of clear descriptions of their character. These descriptions will often recognise 'forces for change', such as key development pressures and trends in land management.

Phase 2: Making judgements

Step 5: Deciding the approach to judgements. Further work is usually needed to decide on the approach to making the judgements that will be needed to meet the objectives of the assessment. This will require thought to be given to the overall approach, the criteria to be used and the information needed to support the judgements to be made.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Step 6: Making judgements. The main approaches to making judgements within the landscape assessment process are:
- landscape strategies;
- landscape guidelines;
- attaching status to landscapes;
- landscape capacity.

ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE CHARACTER PROGRAMME: NATIONAL LEVEL

- The initial approach to this was to try to be as objective as possible and to use computerised methods.

- Later a manual method, combining maps at regional scale was developed.

- Local authorities carry out more detailed analyses which start with the regional units.

NATURAL ENGLAND

Corporate report
National Character Area profiles

Published 30 September 2014

Contents

Use the links below to view each National Character Area (NCA) profile.

## NCAs in north east England

COUNTY-LEVEL ASSESSMENTS

- The next level down from the National Character Assessment is the county-level
- This nests the local LCA types/units in the NCA units, perhaps with adjustments of the main boundaries.
- Thus there is a hierarchical approach in England

Online system – searchable database for the whole county

SCOTTISH LANDSCAPE CHARACTER PROGRAMME

- This programme took place in the 1990s. Different contractors undertook the work which was then combined into a single GIS database and map.

- Reports for each section can be downloaded from the internet and give detailed descriptions of landscape character units.

Online system – searchable database for the whole country
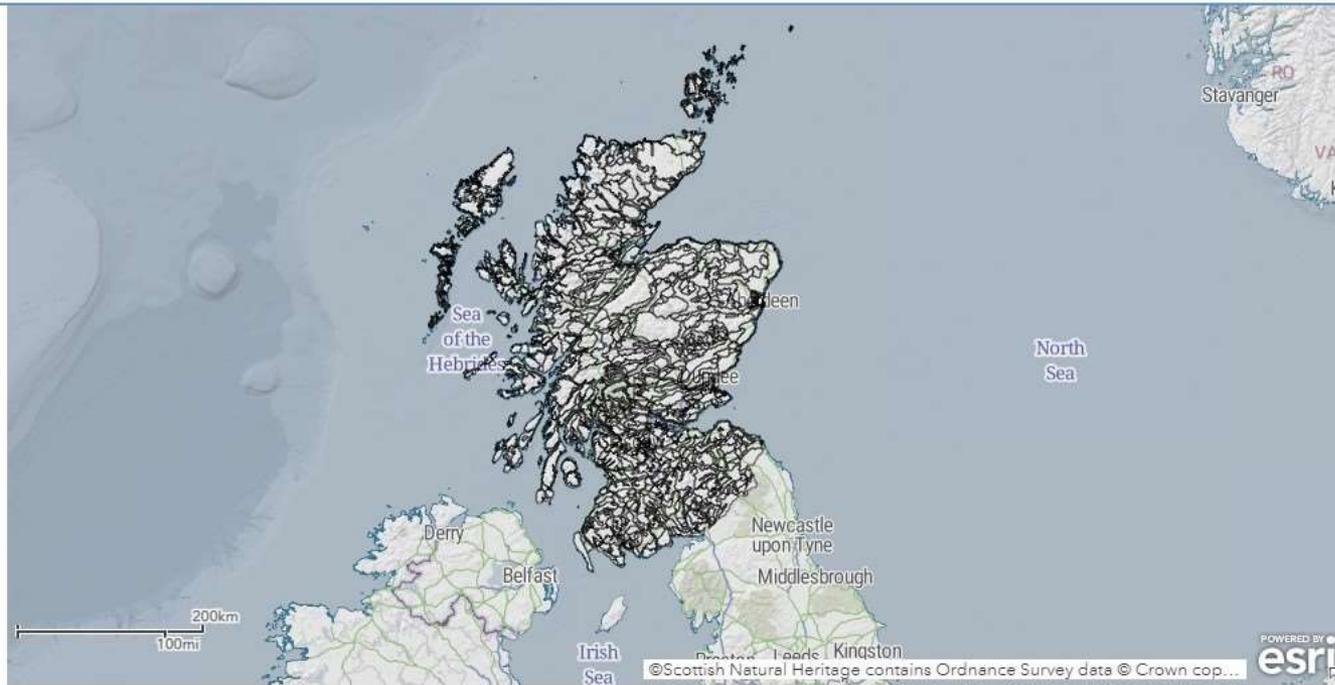
FRANCE

- A similar approach has been undertaken in France, known as the Atlas Paysage (Landscape Atlas).
- There are entries for each Departement following the system but displayed in different ways.

Online system – searchable database for the whole departement

LATVIA

- As a starting point, there is plenty of geographic information on which to base the assessment
- The three components of landform, landcover/use and settlement are to some extent already available
- The visual/experiential and cultural layers are needed most

Early work as a starting point

- A geophysical landscape classification was done for Latvia, based on landform and land cover together with some special areas, in the 1990s
- This was used as the basis for forest landscape planning guidance at the end of the 1990s.

Latvijas ainavas

FIELD WORK

The field work involves:

- Visiting each area to check that it is different from the others identified in the mapping process and to check boundaries
- To make sketches of typical views of each type
- To describe the visual/experiential aspects and to assess condition and forces for change.

FIELD WORK

- Without field work the true nature of the landscape – as defined in the ELC – cannot be identified and assessed.

- Remember – the word for landscape in Latvian – *ainavas* – is from *ainavs* and therefore about what is seen!

- Normally two surveyors visit each candidate LCA unit, fill in a form for standardised recording and take representative photographs

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Historical maps can be consulted to show if there are long-lasting patterns or elements that remain.

- Archaeological sites may also be included, as may important or unique historical elements which add to character and identity.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

- One of the aims of landscape inventory in the ELC is to incorporate some kind of public involvement

- The process described and documented so far is an expert one

- There is scope to obtain views of the national or local public – especially when applying the assessment.

- Local people could help to identify special features in their landscape, they could help to monitor landscape change, they could celebrate their favourite places.

- This could be done using social media

APPLICATION OF LCA IN LANDSCAPE PLANNING

- Two examples of where LCA is used:
- 1. Strategically
- 2. Assessing impact of a project

STRATEGIC: LANDSCAPE CAPACITY

- One important use of landscape character in landscape planning is to identify the capacity of a given landscape to accept change or development.

- In many places one current concern is wind energy and the capacity of the landscape to absorb large structures.

LANDSCAPE CAPACITY

Landscape character capacity is a measure of the sensitivity of a given landscape to developments which may change its character – the more sensitive a landscape is, the lower its capacity for absorbing particular developments.

EXAMPLE: LANDSCAPE CAPACITY: WIND TURBINES

- Wind turbines are a major development in the UK and they are mainly sited on hill summits and so are highly visible.

- They are also sited in wilder landscapes and so pose an issue for landscape quality and potentially reduce the sense of wildness.

- Strategic studies have been carried out to aid in planning decision-making.

LANDSCAPE CAPACITY: WIND TURBINES

Capacity studies use landscape character in two ways:

1. Relate capacity directly to individual landscape character units

2. Use more sophisticated GIS analysis of key attributes that influence capacity, such as landscape scale, naturalness and landform shape.

SOUTH-WEST ENGLAND

HIGHLAND COUNCIL
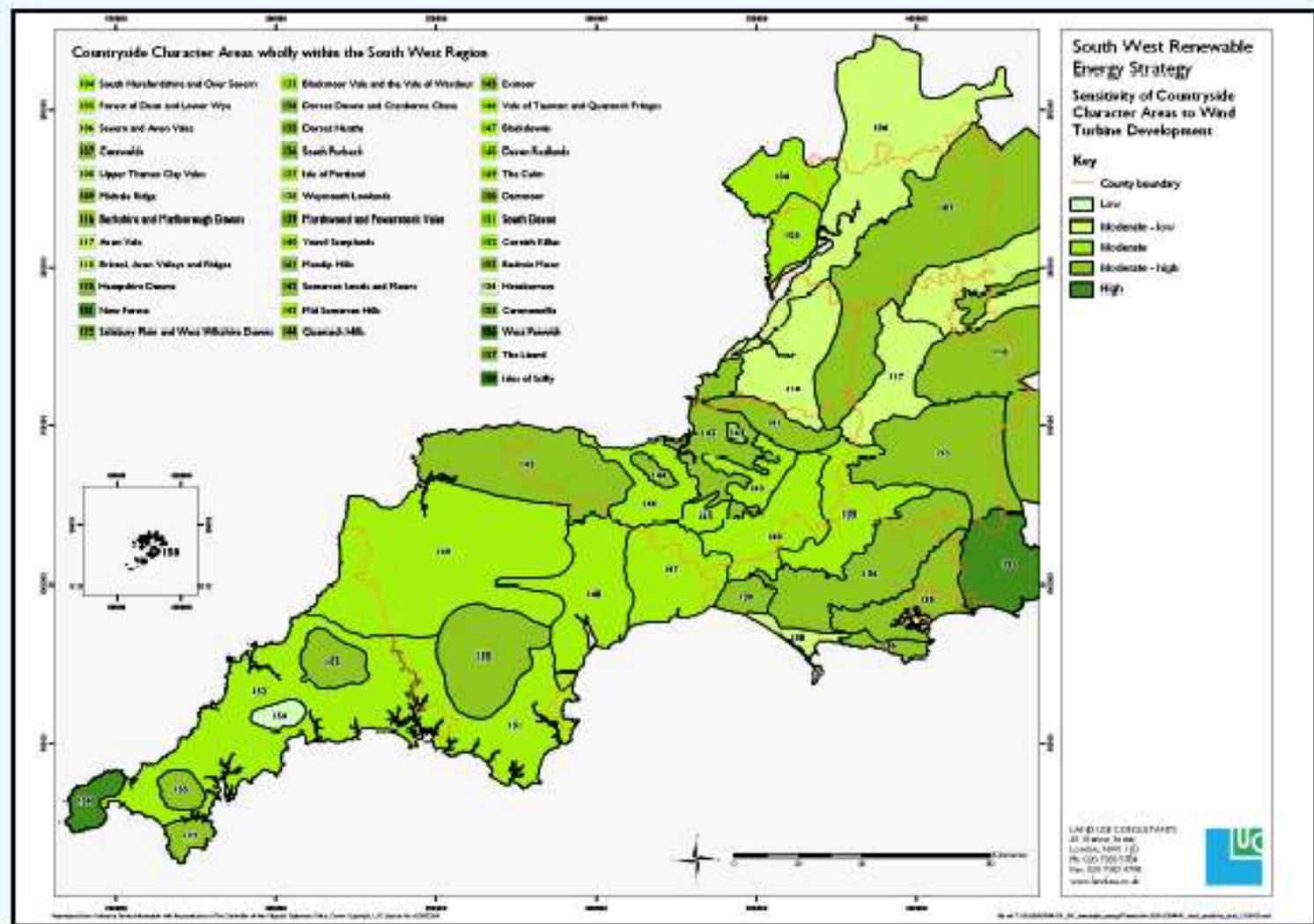
LANDSCAPE IMACT ASSESSMENT

- Within an Environmental Impact Assessment, a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment is a key part

- Impact on landscape resources includes that on landscape character

WIND TURBINE DEVELOPMENT IN SCOTLAND

FINAL THOUGHTS

- The LCA is a very valuable tool for many aspects of planning
- Landscapes change and so monitoring and updating is needed from time to time – although the examples created in the 1990s have stood the test of time
- In Latvia the homogenising factor of Soviet collectivisation has had a specific impact on landscape character which needs to be recognised.

Questions?

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