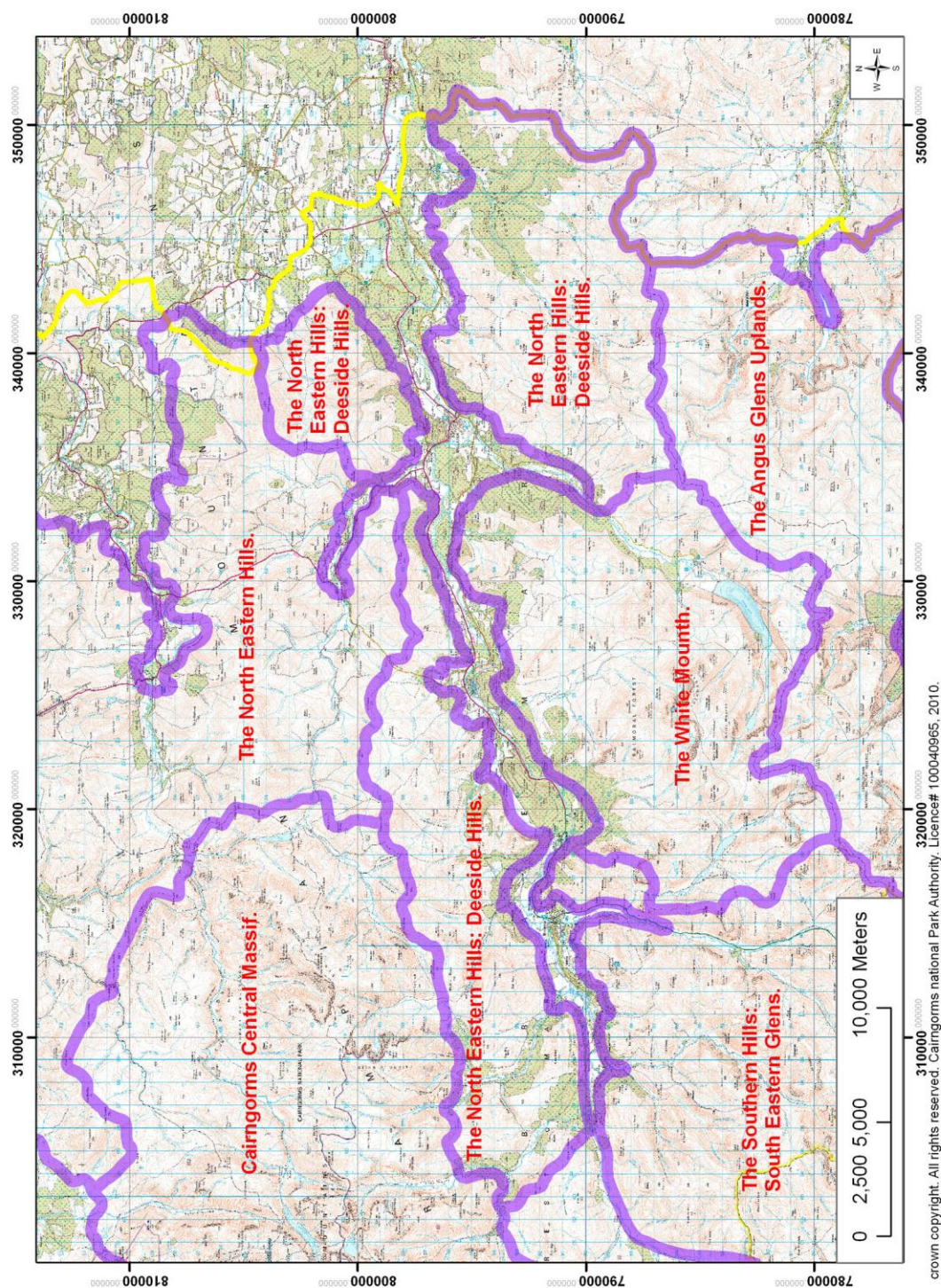


1.1



1.1.1 *Landscape Character*

A 'sub set' of the North Eastern Hills, these hills extend along the southern edge of the main Cairngorms massif forming the northern edge to Deeside and its southern edge east of Ballater

These smooth sided hills are generally around 600m to 700m in height form generally flat-topped ridges which frame a series of valleys which drain into the Dee

The steep hill sides are divided by deep glens incised by watercourses, often with multiple tributaries, carved between smooth sided, drier ridges.

Some of the ridges have been truncated by ice moving along the valley in the last glaciation, which has also reshaped some of the hills into large, rounded, roches moutonnées, and in places, the ridge lines are cut through by meltwater channels, visible as notches on the skylines

The hills are dominated by humus-iron podzols, and support heather and blaeberry dwarf shrub heath on the lower slopes rising to more montane habitat including sedge, rush and moss heath on the upper slopes and summits

The hills are frequently managed as grouse moorland, where heather has been burnt in long, broadly rectilinear patches

Conifer woodland, often extensive, extends up onto the lower flanks of the hills and frame the mouths of the glens along Deeside, often hiding evidence of earlier landuse

Extensive areas of regenerating Scots Pine and semi-natural woodland are found in these glens, often extending well into the interior along the river valleys

Beyond the wooded areas, settlement is very sparse, limited to occasional estate lodges and small, isolated farms with some traces of pre-improvement settlement towards the west end of the area, around Feardur burn and along the lower, south facing slopes of the Dee

A few isolated shieling grounds are situated by watercourses that flow down the slopes along the north side of the Dee

Vehicle tracks wind along the base of the main glens, allowing access into the massif to the north

A more extensive network of access routes generally – although not always – follow the valleys of tributaries to these main glens

1.1.2 *Landscape experience*

There is a sense of openness experienced from the upper slopes and ridges which contrasts with the enclosure of the glens and river valleys

The upland hill forms are bold, rounded and formidable, creating a sense of solidity and 'bulk' in the landscape which dominates over the human interventions

Views from these hills focus on Deeside or towards Lochnagar and the White Mounth to the south, and north into the interior of the Cairngorm massif

Extensive planted and regenerating Scots pine reinforces enclosure, and where more semi-natural in habit, naturalness, at the mouths of the glens

This character area is often secluded and can be relatively remote, particularly as the hill ranges and narrow valleys extend north towards the mountainous Cairngorm massif, or south to meet the head of the Angus Glens

Remoteness is limited, however, by the popularity of some of the glens, which are very accessible, and the presence of hill tracks and planted woodland

1.1.3 *Relationship to adjacent character areas*

This hill group forms a 'transition area' between the higher and more remote interior of the Cairngorms central massif, the Angus Glens and the White Mounth and the managed woodlands, policies and farmland of Deeside. It also forms the visual backdrop and containment to the Deeside character areas.

1.1.4 *Assessment of distinctiveness*

The presence of large areas of regenerating native woodland and Scots Pine, which continues to expand along the rivers and glens is a particular feature which contrasts with the broad, open sweep of the hills. Where the woodland is more open and semi-natural in character, it reinforces a sense of naturalness.



The Smooth sided hills clothed by conifer woodland where they join the main Deeside valley



Heather/blaeberry heath in the foreground, with woodland extending along the valley floors, and the higher hills of the cairngorms massif in the background



Looking south over the Deeside Hills towards Braemar, the pattern of heather burning clearly evident (photograph courtesy of Dr AM Hall)