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# The Parallel Roads of Glen Roy, Scotland: geoconservation history and challenges

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### ABSTRACT

Glen Roy is a classic geosite for ice-dammed lake shorelines, the Parallel Roads, and associated features formed during the Loch Lomond (Younger Dryas) Stade (12.9–11.7 ka). The area played a key part in the development of the glacial theory in the early 19th century and continues today to have outstanding scientific value for understanding the processes and timing of events at the end of the last glaciation. Glen Roy has also been long-appreciated as an awe-inspiring visitor attraction, and is now a flagship site for geotourism within Lochaber Geopark. Statutory geoconservation in Glen Roy, beginning in the second half of the 20th century, was founded on the exceptional scientific value of the area. The history and practice of geoconservation in Glen Roy illustrate the contested values of geoheritage and the evolving approaches adopted. Important lessons include the need for open dialogue and partnership working among the local community, land owners and managers, the statutory conservation agency (Scottish Natural Heritage), Lochaber Geopark and the scientific community.

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*“far the most remarkable area I ever examined . . . I can assure you Glen Roy has astonished me”* (Charles Darwin writing to Charles Lyell after his visit to Glen Roy in 1838; [Darwin, 1887, p. 293](#)).

## 1. Introduction

The Parallel Roads of Glen Roy, and the neighbouring Glen Spean and Glen Gloy, together form one of the most famous geomorphological landscapes in Britain ([Fig. 1](#)). Already by the mid-19th century this ‘remarkable area’ in Lochaber was a magnet for the curious traveller, tourist and professional scientist, caught up in the enthusiasm for exploration, discovery, understanding and explanation of the natural world. This period marked a radical change in valuing the physical landscape as a source of both wonder and evidence of how the world works, rather than something to be explained through a tradition of colourful myths

and legends ([Gordon and Baker, 2016](#)). It also coincided with the development of the glacial theory following the visit of Louis Agassiz to Scotland in 1840, when he recognised that the Parallel Roads were similar to the shorelines of ice-dammed lakes in the Alps ([Gordon, 1995](#)). Today, the landforms and deposits of Glen Roy and adjacent areas continue to have a particular relevance for modern research in Quaternary science relating to the processes and timing of landscape evolution and climate change during the Loch Lomond (Younger Dryas) Stade (12.9–11.7 ka), as demonstrated by the papers in this special issue.

The history of conservation of these landmark landforms ([Fig. 2](#)) has mirrored the development of geoconservation nationally and globally, leading towards greater emphasis today on community-led initiatives and involvement than in the past ([Burek and Prosser, 2008a; Gray, 2013](#)). Conservation management of the Glen Roy landforms now involves an ongoing partnership with the people who live and work in the area to protect and retain the key areas of the designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in favourable condition (i.e. ensuring the visual and physical integrity of the key features and their accessibility). Here in Lochaber, and in the North West Highlands and Shetland, local people have driven the movement for

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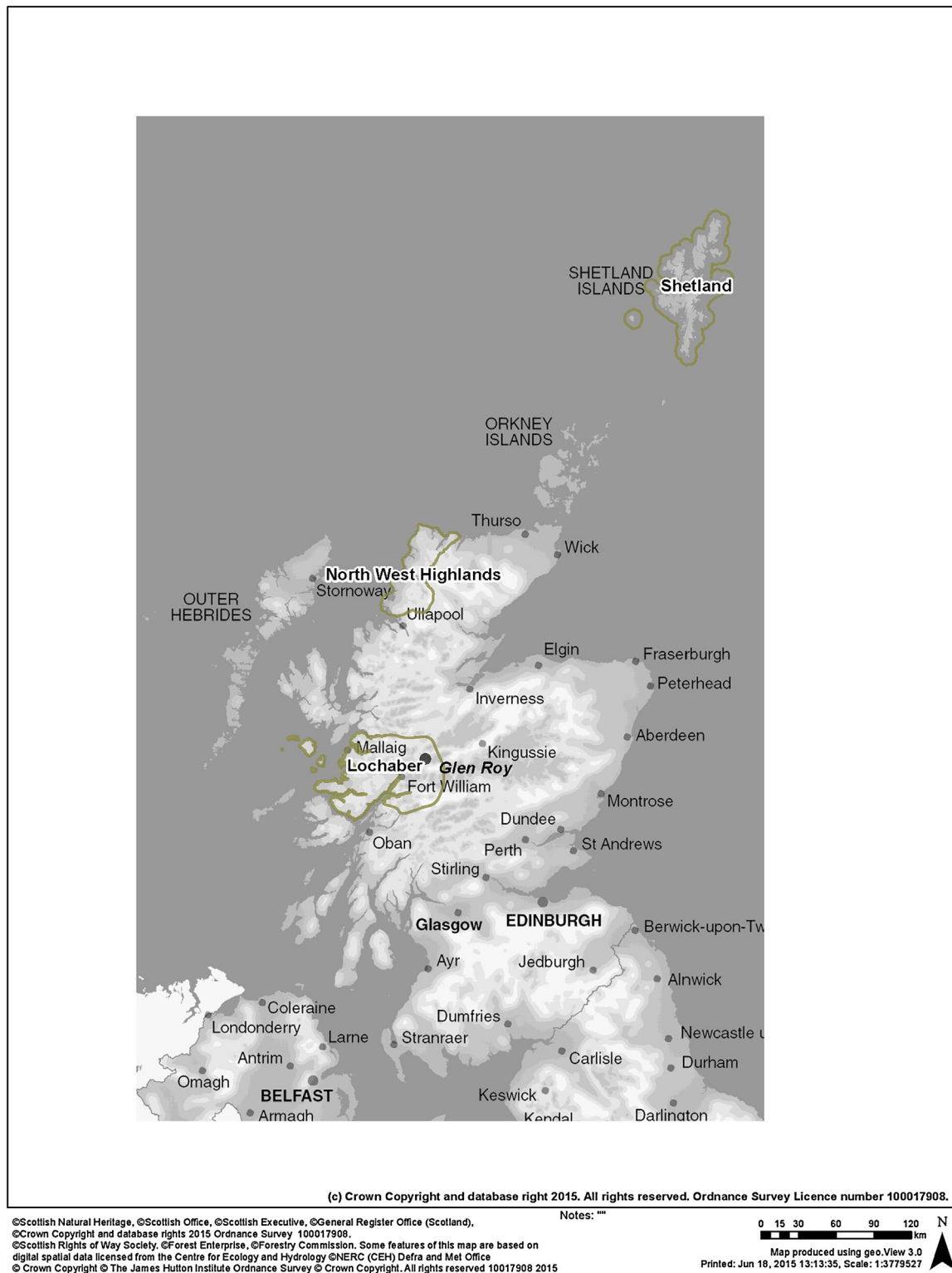


Fig. 1. Location of Glen Roy in Lochaber Geopark, Scotland. The locations of Geopark Shetland and North West Highlands Geopark are also shown.

recognition of their geoh heritage through European and UNESCO Global Geopark status, part of a global trend in community-led geoconservation in the last 20 years (McKeever et al., 2010; Larwood et al., 2013). This paper examines the history and practice of geoconservation in Glen Roy and the surrounding area, how they have reflected changes in the values placed on this special landscape, and the lessons to be learned.

## 2. Geoh heritage and geoconservation: the changing context for valuing Glen Roy

### 2.1. The evolving statutory framework for geoconservation

Geoh heritage comprises those features of geodiversity that have intrinsic, scientific, educational, cultural, aesthetic or ecological

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