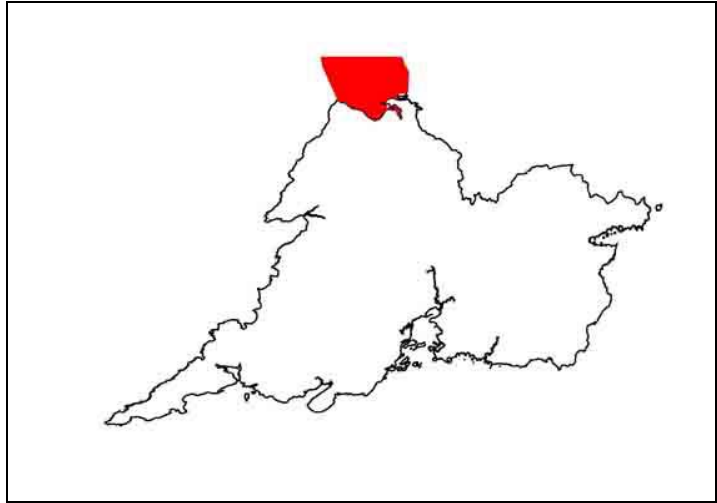


AREA 1: BLACKHEAD BAY



Key Characteristics

- This area consists of estuarine mudflats, with coastal limestone farmland and limestone valleys reaching the coast. Dry limestone valleys drain into these estuaries.
- Islands are a feature e.g. Green Island, Gall Island. These help give the area an enclosed character, together with the eastward facing Cregg Spit.
- Muckinish Point is classified as a visually vulnerable and visually sensitive area in the Clare County Development Plan.
- The Coastline from Aughinish Bay to Loop Head to Clonderalaw Bay is classified as an area of high amenity in the County Development Plan.
- Views are available across to the coast of County Galway.
- The limestone coastal shelf carries the roads and the majority of settlement.

Typical Photograph: Blackhead Lighthouse



Landscape Character types and habitat types

LCTs	HLTs	HLT codes	HT	HT codes
Limestone Upland	Coastal Intertidal	CI	Sea inlets and bays	MW2
Coastal Farmland and Islands	Rough Ground 1	RG1	Estuaries	MW4
	Rough Ground 2	RG2	Wet grassland	GS4
	Rough Ground 3	RG3	Mud shores	LS4
	Enclosed Land 3	EL3	Shingle and gravel Shores	LS1
	Enclosed Land 4	EL4	Sea Caves	LR5
	Ritual and Devotional	DR		

Seascape Character Area Extent

Blackhead Bay SCA comprises the area of Galway Bay between the County Clare border at Aughinish Point, and Black Head at the north-western tip of the county

Geology and Landform

Blackhead Bay is considered the most glaciated area within the Burren, where erratics of Galway granites are found throughout the bay. The best examples of shingle and stony beaches within the SCA are evident east of Finavarra. There are also a number of marine caves, which are a rare habitat in Irish waters. Numerous shallow and intertidal inlets, for example Muckinish, Aughinish and Kinvarra Bays, are found within the SCA.

Coastal Ecology

The SCA comprises extensive mudflats, exposed at low tide and are considered important as feeding grounds for birds. The northern part of the SCA hosts twenty-five breeding pairs of Black Guillemot and up to fifteen Black Throated Divers winter there (listed in Annex I of the EU Birds Directive).

The Blackhead Bay complex also includes habitats that support the rare sea urchin (*Paracentrotus lividus*), foliose red alga (*Phyllophora sicula*) and seagrass beds (*Zostera spp*).

Extensive maerl beds (*Phymatolithon calcareum*) are present off Finavarra Point and in Muckinish Bay. Grey Seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) are present around Ballyvaughan and Kinvarra Bay (listed on Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive). Aughinish Bay, which borders this SCA to the east, is the only area of shallow water in Ireland where beds of Piddock (*Pholas dactylus*) are reported as thriving.

Historical Seascapes and Human Influence

Ballyvaughan, at the head of Blackhead Bay, is the most successful tourist centre in the area. 'Rent an Irish Cottage' thatched cottages (developed since the 1970s) are numerous and have been sensitively designed to fit into the older village.

The limestone coastal shelf is farmed, with many farm buildings visible along the coastline. It is distinctively flat, with the steep limestone slopes of the Burren rising sharply behind it.

Historically, features of prominence include the 1810 Martello Tower at Finavarra (architecture of 'National' significance 20400205NIAH), the lighthouse (20400105NIAH) and the fort on the Black Head (Cathair Duin Irghuis); these form both viewpoints and focal points to the bay.



Finavarra Martello Tower adds focus to the point. Behind are long rectilinear fields (EL3) and rough ground with sinuous boundaries (RG2). It is skirted by the Coastal Intertidal (CI) zone.

Uniquely, this area of sea is entirely overlooked by prominent cairns and tombs which, on clear days, dominate the inner Galway Bay and have been used as navigational aids as well as memorials (e.g. Dobhach Bhrainín and Carn Suí Finn on the Black Head and even inland points like Slaibh Cairn).

The shipwreck inventory maintained by Dúchas (publication pending) includes 'many wrecks off the Clare coast' for this SCA and six within Ballyvaughan Bay. Shipwrecks provide important refuge and nursery habitats for fish and a key resource for the sea-angling industry. Shipwrecks over 100 years old enjoy legal protection and (increasingly popular) scuba dives on them are licensed by the state.

Condition and Sensitivity

The condition of Blackhead Bay is good. The area retains its undeveloped rural feel and there are no obvious detractors. The bay would however be sensitive to change. The surrounding landform prevents wider views and, as a consequence, seascape views are contained within the headlands and are focused upon the bay.

This stretch of coast has experienced significant ribbon development over the past two decades, with roadside development of one-off housing and housing clusters extending along the coast road, east and west from Ballyvaughan.

The rural and tranquil estuarine landscape is of high ecological and landscape value. It could easily be affected by inappropriate development, pollution or climate change.

The views of cairns over 500ft in elevation, from 20km distance – they are only visible in the Blackhead Bay Character Area and are not visible on the seaward side Burren Character Area

Forces for Change

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- Impacts upon the bays due to climatic change, sea level rise, increasing intensity of storms etc
 - Impacts upon water quality due to drainage from settlements and farmland
 - Inappropriately sited coastal development in prominent locations, which would detract from the seascape value of the area within view from the Galway coast
 - Loss of traditional historic landmark features such as the Martello Towers
 - *Paracentrotus lividus* populations which have been shown to be vulnerable to over-fishing
 - Extraction of mearl
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Principles for Seascape Management

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- A tourism and traffic management strategy for the Burren coastline is needed
 - Careful siting and design of new developments away from highly visible locations should be enforced with guidance provided on appropriate styles, boundary treatment and siting operations
 - Promote retention and enhancement of elements such as limestone walls and vernacular buildings along the coastline
 - Linear development along the coastline should be avoided and all other development should be screened appropriately
 - Increased control of fishing and maerl extraction is needed
 - There should be continuous monitoring of water quality in coastal waters
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