

Outdoor recreation issues and the next Scottish Parliament by Dave Morris

Description

I welcome the creation of parkswatchscotland because our National Parks are so important for outdoor recreation and they are not always getting matters right. Every item in this briefing on outdoor recreation issues for the Scottish Parliament elections is relevant to National Parks and some concern them directly.

Briefing by Dave Morris

This is a contribution to the forthcoming elections to the Scottish Parliament on 5 May. It provides a briefing on key issues which are of concern to participants in outdoor recreation. It may help in challenging those who seek election on 5 May to explain what they will do for outdoor recreation if elected. It also provides an indication to the next Scottish Government of ways in which they can enhance the Scottish outdoor recreation experience.

Camping byelaws.

The present Scottish Government made a serious mistake in early 2016 by approving the expansion of camping byelaws to curtail informal camping in areas close to loch shores in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. This will seriously undermine the principles embedded within the rights of public access to our land and water that were secured by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. It opens the door to landowners everywhere to press for the removal of any of our access rights through byelaw establishment and replacing those rights by regulation through permit systems. These camping byelaws, which are due to become operational in 2017, need to be abandoned. Instead a ten year programme of education, improved law enforcement and new camp site provision, both formal and informal, needs to be established, linked to an expanded path network. In support of this a change in forestry budget priorities is needed. It is difficult to understand how in 2015 Forestry Commission Scotland, the largest landowner in the Park through its agency, Forest Enterprise, claimed to have no funds available for camp site development in this national park. Nevertheless, in the Cairngorms National Park in 2014, this same organisation had Â£7.4 million available to purchase a large area of Old Caledonian Pinewood from a private landowner, in a secret deal, when there was no obvious threat to the woodland. In addition to FCS budget alterations in the national parks there is a need for entirely new funding arrangements to support developments such as new paths and camping areas. Such funding could come from infrastructure levies applied to new housing developments or through tourist taxes applied to all accommodation providers in the parks, as found in other European countries. Furthermore, most of the existing litter problems in our parks and elsewhere would disappear if the Scottish Government introduced a nationwide deposit and return system for bottles and other food and drink containers.

Old Caledonian Pinewood.

Our native pinewood remnants, descended by natural regeneration from the native forests established as the last glaciers retreated nearly 10,000 years ago, are under threat. Excessive grazing by red deer or sheep continues to prevent regeneration in many OCP areas. Elsewhere too many landowners are planting too close to the old remnants, creating an artificial character, eroding the natural qualities of the native woodland. In some native pinewoods inappropriate use of large timber harvesting machines is damaging soil and vegetation profiles and causing excessive damage to old trees. These are some of the finest old growth forests left in Europe – elsewhere such mistreatment would not be permitted. Complaints to the European Commission are likely to lead to pressure on the Scottish Government to alter regulatory regimes and financial incentives in Scotland to ensure better compliance with the Habitats and Water Framework Directives and EC guidance on wild land protection.

Management of hunting

Successive governments, both in Holyrood and Westminster, have failed to provide a proper regulatory framework for hunting. This has led to excessive populations of red deer in many areas and the intensification of grouse moor management. Too much control remains in the hands of private landowners – no other country in Europe or North America has such a system where private interests prevail over the wider public interest in the management of our woodlands, moorlands and mountains. The direct result is massive overgrazing and excessive muirburn in too much of our uplands, with consequent soil erosion and vegetation damage, all leading to the possibilities of increased run off and downstream flooding. The indirect consequences include wildlife persecution on grouse moors and the loss of the economic opportunities that are associated with native woodland development. The next Scottish Government needs to legislate to establish a licensing system for all red deer and grouse moor managers so that permission to cull red deer is dependent on meeting targets set by a publicly accountable organisation and raptor persecution results in loss of hunting rights.

Electric fencing

Electrified deer fencing and stock fencing has been spreading across moorland Scotland in recent years, bringing with it massive constraints on public access and risk to those crossing electrified fences. Such fences should be prohibited, except in very restricted circumstances, such as within enclosed fields where horses and cattle need additional constraints.

Hill tracks

The widespread use of all terrain vehicles and the construction of new hill tracks are continuing, with no effective constraints in place. It was a serious error of the present Scottish Government when it failed to take the opportunity to bring such tracks under full planning control, opting instead for a system of prior notification. Landowners and planners say this creates just as much work as a full planning application, but with less clarity and no public scrutiny. This must be rectified in the next Parliament.

Windfarms

The UK Government decision to cut the subsidy for wind turbine development has been a welcome measure that has helped to curtail the proliferation of industrial scale windfarms in much of upland Scotland. Further constraints on such developments are needed, along with increased incentives to promote less energy use in the home, workplace and vehicle. The future for large scale wind turbines lies offshore.

Paths, trails and physical activity

In recent years the Scottish Government made substantial progress in the development of better paths and trails and the promotion of physical activity, partly as legacy benefits from the 2012 Olympic and 2014 Commonwealth Games. These achievements must be built on by the next Scottish Government, recognising not only the health and environmental benefits of improved walking and cycling routes, but also the economic value brought to all parts of the country through new trail construction work and its role in providing a key part of the infrastructure that underpins Scottish tourism. To achieve this there needs to be a national target to increase path expenditure relative to road expenditure on an annual incremental basis.

Field margins

The Common Agricultural Policy continues to deliver very little environmental benefit. Too much of the subsidy provided to lowland farmland is devoted to delivering increased production, leaving a biological desert across much of our land. Much more effort is needed by the next Scottish Government, in partnership with others, to drive CAP reforms in the direction where the majority of public money paid to farmers and crofters is to deliver public benefit not production profit. One of the most effective means of achieving this would be through expanded field margin management schemes to deliver biodiversity, public access and pollution control benefits on all farms. Securing funding for such margin schemes should be a key objective of Scottish Government rural policy in future CAP negotiations.

National Parks

The last two SNP Governments, in post since 2007, have achieved very little in the development of Scotland's national park system, apart from the southern extension of the Cairngorms Park to Blair Atholl. They have allowed the governance of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park to degenerate to a level not usually seen in other public bodies. Manifesto promises on developing the national parks system have come to nothing. In the next Parliament lessons need to be learnt from the establishment of the first two parks, including their current failings, so that the associated environmental and economic benefits that the parks are capable of can also be brought to other areas of Scotland which are worthy of national parks status. A priority should be the establishment of a national park on Harris in the Western Isles, where the economic case for providing a tourism boost here through national park designation outweighs any other location in Scotland.

Wild land protection

A major achievement of the Scottish Government has been the establishment of a wild land mapping programme by Scottish Natural Heritage which has classified all parts of Scotland according to degrees of wildness. This was in part a response to a European Parliament resolution in 2009 which called on all governments to do more to protect wild land and wilderness values. By building wild land evaluation into land use decisions Scotland is now at the forefront of European efforts to protect these values. This should be recognised by the next Scottish Government and further progress made to extend wild land understanding and to incorporate rewilding principles into government policy.

Government agency reorganisation

The structure of Scottish Government departments that deal with environmental and outdoor recreational interests has remained fairly static for many years. There is a case for refreshing the present system and dealing with some endemic problems embedded within the present structure. A priority should be the splitting up of Forestry Commission Scotland so that its land ownership and management functions, as carried out by Forest Enterprise, are clearly separated from the regulatory and grant aid functions of the FCS. A better arrangement might be to combine these functions with the parallel regulatory and grant aid functions of Scottish Natural Heritage. Indeed a case can be made for combining all these functions plus SNH's habitat protection roles with similar functions for the water environment carried out by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. This would create a single body better equipped to deal with the challenges of wildlife and habitat management, including woodland and peatland development, in a world where the impacts of changing climates and needs of outdoor recreation require a much more integrated approach by rural agencies. In parallel to this is the need to strengthen understanding and provision for outdoor recreation so that, at the highest levels of government, there is clear recognition of the role of outdoor recreation in delivering health, environmental and economic benefits. At present the promotion of outdoor recreation falls between too many stools, being a part of SNH and FCS functions, as well as those of sportscotland and visitscotland. Learning from other parts of the world, a better arrangement might be to bring these functions together into, for example, a department or agency for outdoor recreation and sport. This would give outdoor recreation the profile and resource priority that it needs in order to play an enhanced role in the lives of every one of our citizens as well as all visitors to Scotland.

(Dave Morris is former Director of Ramblers Scotland and is an adviser to the UIAA)

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