

The con at Loch Chon and the proposed Trossachs West Camping Management zone

Description

On Friday I took advantage of the only good day forecast for the holiday weekend to visit Loch Chon (dog loch) before going for a walk over Beinn a Choin (Ben of the dogs). Most of the road between Aberfoyle and Inversnaid, covering Loch Ard, Loch Chon and Loch Arklet is part of the proposed Trossachs West camping management zone and is owned by Forestry Commission Scotland. Loch Chon is the one place in the National Park where the LLTNPA has announced plans for a new campsite since the Your Park consultation and I wanted to take a closer look.

The proposed Trossachs West camping management zone is hard to access except by car. There is no bus between Aberfoyle and Inversnaid and its a long drive from Glasgow. Even on a sunny holiday Friday there was very little traffic which reminded me how little visited this area is. Driving along the shore of Loch Ard, where the road hugs the shore, there are very few places where is physically possible.



Most of the Loch Ard shoreline looks like this



The flat headland opposite Ledard House, on the shores of Loch Ard, at the start of the southern path to Ben Venue

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When I got home I checked the Park's Ranger Patrol records, which I obtained through a Freedom of Information request. In 2015 tents were only recorded on four occasions along Loch Ard in the whole of 2015, twice on the Kinlochard Community Field. So not only is the terrain alongside Loch Ard mostly unsuitable for camping, as anyone can see, but very few people camp there anyway.

Ranger Patrol records show a similar position for Loch Arklet, above Inversnaid, where tents were recorded on only a handful of occasions in 2015.

The patrol records show Loch Chon is easily the most popular of the three lochs in the proposed west Trossachs camping lochs for camping. This is hardly surprising as it has fewer houses and more flat areas than Loch Ard and is far less bleak than Loch Arklet. We saw two groups "camping" there.



Camping at south end of Loch Chon



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We went over and spoke to the first, a group of people from Glasgow who had originated from Hongkong and had come out for a day for a picnic. They had a large lump of meat they had just placed on a spit over an open fire and it looked as though they were planning for a great feast in the outdoors while the children played. They told me they had been here several times before. They had not heard that the proposed byelaws would make it an offence for them to light a fire or erect a tent without permission from the Park and the response from one, that they would take to the hills, met with laughter. I think it might have tickled Rob Roy too.

There was evidence in the area of some of the things the Park says justify banning camping.



Chopped tree south Loch Chon



Remains of fire Loch Chon

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Tent blown onto island Loch Chon

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I guess some people might see the chopping of the tree as a justification for banning access completely. I think the Park need to think about why people might chop a tree down. It might be mindless vandalism, a criminal offence already, and something that won't stop just because there is a campsite in the vicinity. Or it might have been because someone wanted to light a fire (although there was no sign of the tree having been burned).



FCS felling Loch Chon

If the latter there is an easy solution. Transport some of the trimmings from the tree felling on the north side of the Loch to the areas where people camp. In other parts of the Park landowners have sold wood for fires to people fishing. And, if FCS is concerned about fires, put in a few barbecue pits. Problem more or less solved.

Not many people camp at Loch Chon though, so there is not that much pressure. The maximum number of tents recorded in 2015, from six different sites spread over approximately 5 kms, was 22 and on only two other days were more than 10 tents recorded. So why did the Park, in its news release welcoming the byelaws <http://www.thisisyourpark.org.uk/approval/>, announce that it was proposing to create a 30 place campsite at Loch Chon with the Forestry Commission? I have asked the Park for the basis of their decision through FOI, but they have so far refused, claiming an exemption on the grounds that it is commercially confidential. The answer I believe is that having claimed throughout the Your Park consultation that it aimed to create 300 new camping places the Park had to announce something to save face. Loch Chon was the only proposal for a campsite it had on the table and to make it sound good the Park decided to say 30 places would be created. No matter that there is no demand for anything like this number or that the west Trossachs camping management zone must be the lowest priority for new campsites in the National Park.

What is even more shocking though is that the Loch Chon campsite will consume ALL the resources the Park has available for new campsites next year, £245k out of £505k in the 2016/17 budget approved by the LLTNPA Board in March [Agenda Item 10 DRAFT – Appendix 1 Draft Budget 2016-17](#) (the rest of the budget is to be spent on things like signage). This contradicts the statement in the Park's Press release that "Similar sites will be created across the four management zones". How, if there is no money allocated?

According to the figures for 2015/16 which were included in the Draft Budget for comparison purposes, the Loch Chon campsite will have already consumed £100k by 31st March. There was no sign of any works having started on the 25th March but maybe the Park has purchased some toilets which are now ready to install?. Given that you can buy a block of composting toilets with disabled access for under £10k that still leaves a lot of money to be accounted for. In a time when public resources are being so savagely cut, it is completely incomprehensible how the Park Authority has decided to spend £345k on developing one camping facility at Loch Chon on ground owned by another public authority, Forestry Commission Scotland. The money could be spent in far better ways and in far more camping facilities.

The Park's own data for the proposed west Trossachs Camping Management zone, which is backed up with what I have observed, contradicts its Chief Executive's claim that the Park is being swamped by campers. It also demonstrates that the Environment Minister's claim that the camping byelaws cover "four hot spot" areas where controls are needed because of a *combination of a high volume of campers with environmental damage* is complete nonsense [Govt Press release](#)

So, why have camping byelaws been proposed for the lochs between Aberfoyle and Inversnaid?

The answer I believe lies in the fact that almost all this land in the west Trossachs Camping Zone is owned by Forestry Commission Scotland and they wish to remove roadside camping from access rights across Scotland <http://www.robedwards.com/2015/11/fury-over-proposal-to-ban-camping-by-roads.html>. I will post more evidence about this in due course but its striking that Loch Arklet was not included in the original area camping management zone but only added after the Your Park consultation. The only explanation I can see for this – the Park Ranger patrol records contain no evidence of any significant use let alone problems – is that FCS asked for it to be included. It appears that LLTNPA is so in thrall to FCS staff that they did what they bid, including paying for a campsite, no doubt to FCS specifications, on FCS land.

The FCS have I think though shot themselves in the foot. At present they are trying to promote the



along the old military road along Loch Arklet.

I ran along a section of this on Friday, its a great path (and

all credit to FCS for the work that went into it) but is sadly underused. It should be promoted for backpacking both as part of the Great Trossachs Trail to Callander and following the path network by Loch Chon to Aberfoyle. Some campsites along the way would help – and Loch Chon is a good place for one – but backpackers need the freedom to be able to stop as needed, a freedom that is available under access rights but which FCS and the Park wish to remove.

What I would like to happen is that FCS staff drop their blinkered opposition to camping near roads, that the LLTNPA spends its limited resources far more wisely and the Minister for the Environment wakes up and admits she has been presented with duff evidence and an even duffer plan.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Camping bye laws
2. Forestry Commission Scotland
3. Freedom of Information
4. LLTNPA
5. Minister Environment
6. Tourism

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