

The Monadhliath National Wildlife Refugium â?? by Ron Greer

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## The edge of the Monadhliath from Creag Dubh

Our current "national" parks in Scotland are little more than a fiasco. I detest even using that term to describe what the last Labour administration delivered and what the subsequent SNP administration still supports, as what they have given us are not real national parks, but a farrago masquerading as a façade that is parodying a mirage.

When I have discussed the status of our so-called national parks with professionals engaged in running real ones in Alaska, Oregon, Sweden, Canada, and Ireland they either feel very sorry for us or just burst out laughing. Not that they are uncritical of their own set ups, far from it, but not one of them would ever endorse the product of lazy and incomplete political thinking and indeed perverse political actions, that the then Scottish Executive had the brass neck to call a National Park and that the SNP has the gall and hypocrisy not to address.

It's difficult to know where to start, such is the enormity of the failure to embrace the true potential and good will that once existed. As good a place as any, is the basic concept behind the very name. A National Park should actually be what it says "on the tin"; an area of the country owned by the nation as a whole and professionally administered by a State ministry or other department, directly responsible to elected officials. These officials would hopefully have expertise in the subject area and certainly be well on top of their portfolios. This is normality in most other countries and indeed is what the famous Monty Python would have called "the bleedin obvious". Sadly, our current batch of politicians seem to be incapable or unwilling to embrace the bleedin obvious. What we actually have, is an area of land owned by a mixture of Quango's, NGO's and the usual quasi-feudal sectional private interests, into which mix has been thrown, not a professional National Parks Service, but a so-called "Authority" of diverse, indeed prismatic provenance, ability and, no doubt, agenda. It is a volatile mix likely to implode in an underwhelming conflagration of prevaricating compromises and sheer mucus-secreting, bureaucratic incompetence. The resulting mess will of course have to be dealt with at the taxpayer's expense. This mess, metaphorically and literally, as exemplified by the current controversy over camping access and litter deposition in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, is spreading out in front of our eyes.

Not only does the current set up fail to meet the basic fundamental requirement, but then goes on to fall down in other primary areas, such as the point of singularity of the NP existence and its boundaries. Actually worrying about such examples as whether or not Blair Atholl should have been in the Cairngorm Park at its inception, is like worrying about having head lice while a grizzly bear is chewing your leg off, or like a passenger on the Titanic moaning about lumps of ice blocking the WC. The parks are supposed to balance the needs of economic and social development with conservation of natural resources, with any dubiety to be resolved in favour of the last. Financial support mechanisms specific to achieving this aim are in place. Does this then mean that, one millimetre outside of the park boundary, this will not or cannot happen? Indeed "compensatory" fiscal mechanisms will be used

to counterbalance or offset any disadvantages of not being in an NP, or being in a corridor- effect area. So if the same aims are to be funded from the same purse, both inside and outside the NP boundaries, what then is the point of having a NP in the first place!? Are we actually saying that true sustainability is only going to be attempted within the NP boundary and the rest of Scotland can continue to burn the â??national furnitureâ?? in order to boil the â??national kettleâ???

The core area of the Cairngorm Park is of course the mountains of the same name and why? Well, itâ??s because this is the largest area of boreo-Arctic montane zone outside of Fennoscandia and supposedly the last great wilderness in Europe (I can hear Lapponia laughing as I write). The Cairngorm area is now also one of the largest (so-called) national parks in Europe. So we have then the â??last great wildernessâ?? combined with one of the largest NPs in Europe. So what are we going to do about the lack of bears, wolves, beavers, elk, wild boar, wild cattle, the surplus of deer, non-native sheep, excessive muirburn and persecution of birds of prey? Thatâ??s just for starters of course, because we still have the â??wasteland ripe for developmentâ?? attitude prevalent in the mind of local sectional interests and external commercial building interests. The recent plan for 1500 new houses will just be the tip of the iceberg. That character MacChuckemup in the 7:84 Companyâ??s satire really does exist in spirit.

Then we have, in addition to this, the old chestnut of the landed estates with their quasi-feudal/Victorian/Edwardian agenda and of course, now, we also have the conservation Quangoâ??s with their own corporate aims, backed up with direct ownership of land. A â??nightmareâ?? is not sufficiently pejorative to cover the issues raised. In my personal experience of over 35 years of study trips in the Northern Hemisphere I do not know of any other country where the above mess would be tolerated and even the complicated matrix of relationships between the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service and the various State and Federal wildlife and fisheries agencies in the USA, pales to insignificance by comparison.

It is also very easy to criticise, but much harder to offer a constructive way forward. The first step is to take the correct strategic political decisions that are based on the courage of the political convictions and, above all, upon the dedication to see them through. The WWF, the John Muir Trust, the RSPB, the SLE and other NGOâ??s are not political parties that will ever answer to an electorate. SNH, SEPA are not, *per se*, the Government. All of them need to realise that they are not the democratically elected Executive, but servants of it and assistants to it. This will put us in a much better position to deal with the institutional arrogance of the present colonial-style Civil Service, the Quangocrats and the oligarchs of the NGOs. At the same time, we have to come up with an alternative end point so that people can see where (and indeed why) we are heading and that we can then put to the electorate, for their permission to implement. Then, chastened or enheartened by the *vox populi*, we can progress to clearing up the present mire of confused priorities, agendas and protocols.

Much of the problem lies in defining physical and intellectual perimeters and parameters that can be secured for the chosen intrinsic aims of any designated areas of land. The very fact that we initially argued about the possible inclusion of Highland Perthshire in the Cairngorms NP and the kind of housing development mentioned above, is a clear indication that neither the perimeters, or the intrinsic aims, are secured, or in harmony. To get the ball rolling, I put forward the following points, below, for general discussion, on the issues above, that could then lead on to new policy definition.

We should designate Scotland into three main strategic zones which could subsume/rationalise existing land and urban designations.

**a:** Sustainable Rural Cultural Landscape (i.e. All non-urban & non-industrial land in Scotland) - SRCL

**b:** Sustainable Urban/Industrial Cultural Landscape - SUICL

**c:** National Wildlife Refugia - NWR

For the purposes of the present discussion on this forum the first two categories will not be discussed for the moment, though the first does not necessarily exclude elements of wildness

NWR get rid of many of the problems currently inherent in the present national park concept and structure. Here, there will be much less dubiety, because we can establish a perimeter within which there will be a totally different set of aims from all existing designations and even from what will be happening in the SRCL area. This will derive from these refugia being for wildlife only (from soil microbes right through to higher non-human animals): no new human settlements, no new adopted roads (and possibly de-adoption in some cases) or other site-specific infrastructure, no industrial development, no low flying, no sport hunting or fishing, no commercial forestry or agriculture, no use of exotic plants and animals (including sheep); no universal right to roam, no public vehicular access and indeed access to be by permit only. There will be **no evictions** of existing human residents, but there will be voluntary resettlement financial packages and compensatory measures will be available for those wishing to stay on, but where their traditional, land use, outwith of the immediate curtilage of their homes, will be terminated. These NWR will be State-owned and managed (as per known international analogues) and in addition to being refugia for extant wildlife, they will also be possible sites of reintroduction of species made extinct by post-glacial human activity.

They will be areas where the re-wilding so detested by sporting-estate apologists, will take place, where we can honour our legal obligations to the IUCN protocols and where we can make a huge national and even more importantly, an international statement about Scotland accepting its responsibilities to the biodiversity of our planet. A place where we can put our money where our mouths

are and stop cajoling and castigating people in Africa and Asia about sacrificing potential farmland to preserve tigers, elephants and Mountain gorillas. Will it be controversial? Will it raise an almighty "stooshie" as we say in the vernacular? Damned right it will! Do we have the guts for it and if not why not?

Two sites come to mind in respect of initial candidates for such a NWR, the greater Monadhliath and Glen Affric. The Monadhliath are especially attractive for a variety of reasons:

- They contain only four Munros attractive to hillwalkers, none especially spectacular in nature
- They do not have a large internal human settlement, or major industrial/tourist infrastructure.
- They have a wide range of topographic, bio-climatic and bio-geographical attributes highly desirable for a Wildlife Refugium.
- They have a large geographical extent (circa 700 square miles) offering an extensive potential range area for large mammalian herbivores and mammalian/avian carnivores, thus overcoming the limitations of scale inherent in otherwise highly laudable and admirable re-wilding projects in the UK.
- They have, via the pentangle of the A9, A82, A86, B851 and B862 roads, a clearly defined perimeter with established fence lines and traditional stone walls, behind which, a new major bespoke fence could be erected, without the intrusion causing so much antipathy as at Alladale.
- Symbolically they were according to tradition the place where the last wolf in Scotland was killed in 1743AD

To this we might add that they already include the Craig Meagaidh NNR with all the lessons gained ready to be applied at the larger landscape scale.

This will not be a commercial enterprise and there will be no specific ecotourism function major tourist visitor centre, standard commercial forestry, or any form of agrarian or pastoral agriculture. Its scale in the Scottish/UK sense will be integral to its nature and we should not underestimate the scale of the investment in cash, effort and commitment this will require, but such a project would be significant in an international context and could attract inward investment from global agencies. If fruition arrives, I would like to see it named in honour of Dick Balharry.

## Category

1. National Parks

## Tags

1. vision for National Parks

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