

National Parks and cities

Description

In London, what appears to be a very successful campaign is developing to turn it into the world's first National Park city. The proposal won the support of the Labour, Tory, Liberal Democrat and Green candidates for the London Mayor election. Its proponents, from health experts to nature conservationists, architects to geographers, are now trying to win support from local councillors. According to a poll in the London Evening Standard something like 90% of Londoner's agree with the idea.

As the Greater London National Park City admits, the proposal is not for a National Park in the traditional sense. It is not about the countryside, does not fit the criteria of the National Park legislation in England ([see statement from National Parks England](#)) and does not fit any of the international criteria for protected areas. The City of London will still dominate. It is though about further greening of the city. The term "National Park" is being used because it has resonance, the power to convey a message.

Thereby, I believe, lies a danger. That the whole concept of what National Parks should be about is diluted, perhaps even polluted. The risk is the term "National Park" no longer represents ideas about putting the natural environment first but rather becomes associated with attempts to fit nature better around human development. To put it crudely, if the City of London merits the term National Park, what is to prevent us from building a city in the middle of the Cairngorms or over the top of Loch Lomond if the need arises?

The success of the campaign though does tell us something about the importance of nature to people. People want to connect to nature but, because London is so large and difficult to escape from, the only option for many people is to green their own backyard or treasure the pockets of wildness among the skyscrapers. People like David Lindo, who writes for the RSPB magazine about urban birdwatching, illustrate the point well and the London City National Park campaign pages have some fantastic photos of London wildlife.

Cities in Scotland, and indeed the rest of England, also have some wonderful wildlife – the discovery of water voles in the East End of Glasgow comes to mind – but because they are so much smaller, the countryside is much easier to access. If you want to connect to nature, it is much easier – if you have the income – to escape the city. There are of course plenty of green initiatives in Scottish cities, people care just as much as they do in London, but I think our geography reduces the political

pressure to green our urban environment. The middle classes can and do get out – and its often to our two National Parks – areas where the natural environment should come first.

While our geography should make it easier to keep the concept of National Parks separate from Greening the City, I believe we need to consider the relationship between our cities, where most people live, and our National Parks.

To give one example, if you agree with our National Park's current statutory objectives to promote recreational enjoyment and understanding, their connectedness and accessibility to the urban population should be one benchmark of their success. By this measure, at present our National Parks are not doing well, aside from the arterial routes along the A9 and A82 and their railway lines, with large swathes of the inhabited off limits for those who have no car.

Try getting to:

- Ben Lomond from Glasgow – our aspiration should be that everyone from the Glasgow conurbation should experience the view from Ben Lomond once in their lifetime but the only way to get to Rowardennan by public transport is by expensive private waterbus in the summer months
- Braemar from the south – Balmoral is, for better or worse, one of our most famous tourist attractions but even as a tourist, after viewing Holyrood palace, you cannot jump on a bus to Deeside but have to go the long way round to Aberdeen. Blairgowrie to Braemar is 45 minutes or so by car, 5 hours and 30 minutes by bus.

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Lochnagar, an iconic mountain which, like Ben Lomond, is very hard to access without a car

There are many other examples, particularly of dead-end roads that provide the main means of access to some of the core areas of our National Parks. This is a challenge if you are a hillwalker or mountaineer with a green conscience but its also an issue, to use the current political terminology, about social inclusion, equality of access and social justice. Its another very good reason for the new Scottish Parliament to review our National Parks.

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Category

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