

National Parks and tourist taxes

Description

Cameron McNeish has some interesting comments to make on National Parks and the political priorities for the new Scottish Government in the latest Walkhighland newsletter <http://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/news/political-priorities/0014950/> In it he states he believes the reason the SNP did not commit to more National Parks was lack of cash – or to put it another way because of current UK Government policies of austerity that arise from neo-liberal economic thinking.

Raising more money in taxation is the main alternative to austerity and while the Scottish Parliament can do relatively little to raise taxes at the national level, one thing it could do if there was the political will would be to encourage the introduction of tourist taxes. A campaign for a tourist tax in Edinburgh is now gaining momentum. An eloquent case for this was made by Rosemary Goring in the Herald yesterday http://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/14525115.Why_it_is_time_to_say_Yes_to_a_tourist_tax/ but why not also for the countryside?

Our existing National Parks would be a good place to start. The issues faced by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park in particular are not dissimilar to Edinburgh – litter, eyesores, congestion – and as Rosemary Goring says are both practical matters and about aesthetics. A tourist tax would enable improvements in visitor management such as public toilet provision, litter collection etc. A quick look at the statistics indicates that between 2009-11 on average foreign visitors spent 2.4m bed nights in the LLTNP. An average charge of £1 a night bed tax would raise a lot of money from people who otherwise make no direct contribution to the National Parks (the VAT they pay on hotel nights etc goes to the UK Government).

Such money I believe should not be used to replace central Government funding but as additional monies to invest in rural areas. The best way to ensure this happens is not to add any money raised to the National Park's or Local Authority budgets but to devolve it to local communities, as on the continent. In Europe there are many examples of where local communities get to decide where to spend monies raised in their area in a way that benefits both local residents and visitors. This would empower local communities against the centralising trends in Government in Scotland.

While such a model could be replicated across rural Scotland the National Parks would be an ideal place to start as they have the infrastructure to support the roll out of such a tax. There are already some initiatives in our two National Parks which raise money from businesses on a voluntary basis and

my suggestion is this should be developed into a tourist tax. The tax would be on the tourists not the business and the main cost to the business would be in accounting for it, a small price to pay for increased local investment which can only benefit them. In my view such a tax should also be proportional rather than flat rate, so people staying in expensive hotels pay more than people camping.

Category

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