

The National Trust for Scotland and our National Parks

Description

The National Trust for Scotland, which owns two important properties in our National Parks, Ben Lomond and Mar Lodge, was in the news again last week because of its latest financial crisis ([Herald "NTS faces death by 1000 cuts"](#)). The script is wearily familiar: the need to re-organise to make ends meet and cut expenditure; modernise to attract new members and increase visitors to properties; and of course a net loss of jobs. This is the third time this has happened in the last ten years and each time the NTS claims what they are proposing will solve the issues as Simon Skinner, their current Chief Executive, did last week <http://www.nts.org.uk/Charity/Transforming-the-National-Trust-for-Scotland/Overview/>

I have my doubts. When Kate Mavor, the previous Chief Executive, departed in April 2015 after 6 years the Herald carried an interview with her http://www.heraldscotland.com/life_style/homes_interiors_gardens/13211104.What_next_for_the_National_Trust_for_Scotland which makes interesting reading 15 months later:

"making the trust pay is exactly what she has done in her six years"

Is it fair to say that the trust was on the brink of ruin? "It was heading that way," she says. "It was like putting on a huge brake to stop it careering over the edge of the cliff and because we did that, that stopped it happening. It would have gone over the edge."

So what evidence is there to suggest that another re-organisation is any more likely to solve NTS' problems than the last one? I am not sure there is any. What one can say for certain though is in each previous re-organisation the NTS has lost excellent staff and, inevitably during any re-organisation the whole focus of management is on what jobs they will get in the new structure rather than doing what needs to be done. You can almost guarantee that this will put back any timetable for the renovation of Derry Lodge by at least two years <https://parkswatchscotland.co.uk/2016/06/02/derry-lodge-wild-land/> but then those who promote re-organisation, a very British disease, never consider the adverse consequences, only the alleged benefits.

The real problem is not being discussed openly but was hinted at by Simon Skinner the new Chief Executive in the Herald: "Mr Skinner has revealed that despite an overall rise in the popularity of Scotland's tourist attractions, visits to Trust properties have declined by 250,000 in the past decade as many potential customers view it as "castle-owning elitists"". Now, I don't think Simon Skinner is right that its perceptions of the NTS which is actually the biggest issue, its that people are excluded from NTS. This is partly because as a result of the financial crash and austerity people simply don't have

enough money in their pockets to visit NTS properties. To become a single member is £48 and the one-off entry fee to see the “state of the art” Culloden visitor centre is £11 for non-members. Hence, the crash in visitor numbers over the last ten years.

The cost of joining NTS points to the fundamental issue. NTS is a private membership organisation which was set up by members of Scotland’s elite to act as custodians for much of Scotland’s heritage. On the one hand the consequence of this has been that much of Scotland’s population has never had access to its cultural heritage (and NTS manages far more than just the former homes of the great and the good). On the other hand, it has meant that the funding of its countryside properties like Ben Lomond and Mar Lodge, which are open to all, is dependent on NTS’ income from membership and legacies and that is not sufficient to keep NTS going. With a huge backlog in building funding, there is never enough money to invest in its countryside properties including Ben Lomond and Mar Lodge or those such as Glen Coe which should be part of a National Park. When a specific crisis happens, like the flooding on Deeside in December which caused something like £100k of damage to paths on the Mar Lodge estate, staff are left to run appeals to raise the necessary funds.

One solution would be for NTS to ask its members to pay more. The problem though is that doing so would probably prompt many members (like myself) to leave and in the past the very rich in Scotland, while very happy to leave large properties to NTS, have not shown much willingness to contribute to revenue costs. With the rich now siphoning money off to tax havens as a matter of course I cannot see that changing. The consequence is that NTS as a membership organisation is in constant crisis.

I believe the solution is that the assets that are held by NTS should be treated as national assets and not those of a private organisation. There is a citizenship argument for this, people should have a right to be able to access the country’s heritage. This is recognised with our museums and art galleries where admission is normally free. There is also a tourism argument. We know that our museums are a major attraction to visitors and that large entry fees are a deterrent (unless they are for somewhere like Edinburgh castle). Yet NTS continues to think that if only it makes its built properties attractive enough somehow they will pay. Meanwhile the Scottish Government is ignoring the potential boost that opening up these properties might give to tourism, particularly in rural areas. Its time that we started to talk about how NTS could become an open and accessible custodian of Scotland’s assets and what government funding might be needed to do this instead of constant attempts to re-structure to make ends meet.

There is a precedent for this within NTS and that is its countryside properties. Percy Unna, whose gifts enabled NTS to purchase Glencoe, Kintail, Torridon, Goat Fell and Ben Lawers – all prime areas for National Park status – did so on the basis there should be unrestricted access to the public. So, on the one hand NTS runs properties that are exclusive, on the other hand property that is open to all. There has always been some tension though between these two sides of NTS, which has manifested itself in the way it has managed its countryside properties. An example is Ben Lomond in the Loch

Lomond and Trossachs National Park. On the one hand NTS as an organisation did not protest strongly about the camping bye laws on east Loch Lomond (which extended to cover its property at Rowardennan below Ben Lomond) or about the LLTNPA's proposed permit system. Both are totally contrary to the Unna principles that there should be unrestricted public access to its properties. On the other hand NTS staff two years ago offered the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority land at Rowardennan for a campsite (an offer which as far as I am aware the LLTNPA has done nothing to progress).

Unfortunately though, while there are and have always have been some very good people working for NTS, the overall balance of power – as hinted at by Simon Skinner in his reference to castle owning elites – is still held by those who think that the private way is the only way of doing things and to whom “social inclusion” is a foreign concept. I am fearful therefore that the latest round of cuts will inevitably impact adversely on the countryside properties – the proposed distribution of resources between buildings and countryside in the new structure is far from clear – and on Ben Lomond and Mar Lodge in particular.

I believe our two National Park Authorities could play a role in developing alternative ways of managing NTS properties. Indeed this could be part of their new Partnership Plans, about to be issued for consultation, which will set out what our National Parks propose to do over the next five years. This needs to start by proper look with NTS about what funds are actually required to manage these properties effectively, including nature conservation/re-wilding, recreational infrastructure (footpath maintenance, renovation Derry Lodge, provision of campsites) and dealing with the impacts of unforeseen events such as the flooding on Deeside this year. There could then be a national conversation about whether we should treat these properties as national assets – there is a precedent for this as in 1995 Ben Lomond was designated as a “National Memorial Park” – or whether they should remain entirely in the custodianship of NTS. My own view is that I don't believe NTS will ever be able to deliver its aspirations on its own and the current model is broken beyond repair..

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