

Park champions?

Description



The Beaully Denny – aside from the visual impact of the powerlines, is ground “restoration” like that in the foreground acceptable, let alone in a National Park?

The entire edition of Out of Doors on Saturday was devoted to National Parks, in the USA and Scotland <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b087tgv4#play>. This gave critical coverage of our National Parks, in which the presenters Euan McIlraith and Mark Stephen were, in their inimitable style, raising questions about what National Parks should be for. This is to be welcomed. There are interviews with Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Chief Executive, Gordon Watson, at 7mins 50 secs, a discussion on east Loch Lomond from 1 hour, 5 mins and 50 secs and an interview with Grant Moir, Cairngorms National Park Authority Chief Executive, at 23 minutes.

The photo above is to illustrate the excellent question to Grant Moir by Mark Stephen who observed that in travelling up the A9 corridor on entering the Cairngorms National Park you “are hit” with pylons and asked whether this gave the wrong message? While Grant explained the CNPA had adopted a policy of no large wind turbines in the National Park, and that national priorities had overridden the objections of the CNPA to the Beaulieu Denny powerlines, he said nothing about whether the CNPA was happy with the quality of the work. The standards of ground restoration in the Drumochter appear all to similar to those in Glen Bruar ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)). A question for another programme maybe?

Our National Parks in context

The programme raised questions about what is perhaps the primary reason why our National Parks struggle so much at present, landownership. The contrast was made between Scotland, where much of the land in our National Parks is privately owned, and other countries where most land in National Parks is in public ownership. The programme did point out that in the USA rights of access are very different to Scotland and therefore part of the need there for public ownership is to enable public access. It also described the very interesting case of Point Reyes National Park in California, where in order to save land from development, it was purchased from farmers and then leased back to them. While suggesting this might be a model for Scotland, it did not explore the implications – too “political” for the BBC – indeed while a comment on Facebook that our National Parks are managed for landowners was read out it was accompanied by the comment “oh that’s rather political”.

Why not though nationalise all the hunting rights in our National Parks and then only lease back hunting rights to owners who were prepared to meet targets for deer culling and change the way grouse moors are managed? The programme also gave lots of other ideas that could be considered for our National Parks such as the way the US parks manage “visitor density”. Instead of making it up as they go along, as is happening in the LLTNPA, they could be learning from abroad. Neither interview with our National Park Chief Executives gave any suggestion that this was on their radar. If we want proper National Parks they need to be far less insular.

The usual parkspeak

Gordon Watson has got away with misleading statements to the media ever since he became LLTNPA Chief Executive and repeatedly claimed that the east Loch Lomond byelaws were responsible for an 81% reduction of irresponsible there when the police statistics were for a wider area. In a recent interview on Good Morning Scotland he claimed that the Loch Chon campsite was all about providing facilities for lochside camping when its quite clear that the campsite has been specifically designed to stop people camping by the lochshores ([see here](#)). The best example on Out of Doors was his statement that the “measures we are taking are purely about heavily used areas”. How then Mr Watson can you explain why you extended the camping byelaws to areas which are not so heavily used, as shown by the maps that were presented to the secret Board Meetings in September and

October 2013 ([see here](#)) or why the LLTNPA are now building a large campsite at Loch Chon, where currently very few people camp? Gordon Watson also ducked a number of key questions including why the LLTNPA is trying to get FCS to raise its camping prices at Salloch from £5 to match the £7 it wants to charge to pay for its development at Loch Chon.

“No National Park is anything without the people who visit them” (Mark Stephen)

While the presenters did not pick up on the detail of Gordon Watson’s claims – another was *“it has to be realised that access can be damaging to the local environment and communities”* (where is the evidence for this?) – what they did very effectively was to describe what its like on east Loch Lomond nowadays:

“We drove up from Drymen, just about every space where conceivably you could park, had a sign saying “no parking””.

“You know you are in a National Park by the number of signs saying no”

They then effectively mocked the current rules for managing visitors at Salloch where they pointed out there are NO signs everywhere, no parking, no camping, no alcohol, no fires right next to signs that say but you can camp here, you can have a fire if you pay etc. They point out this is “very draconian”. Its worth a listen. Then, when Mark Stephen put to Gordon Watson there are lots of no signs, after first trying to dispute this he came up with the extraordinary statement that *“some signs are put up by landowners that shouldn’t be there”*. And whose job is it to ensure that there are signs that shouldn’t be there are taken down – the National Park Authority?! I enjoyed some of Gordon Watson’s other comments too, on wear and tear caused by visitors, including there is a “lot of human waste, however much you dig it in”. Gordon Watson keeps repeating this stuff when it appear to have been his decision to stop the programme of toilet installation planned for the Five Lochs Area. The mockery of the presenters was completely justified.

Knowing the LLTNPA I suspect what they will now do is submit a complaint to the BBC – I learned recently that when the Guardian ran a piece by Patrick Barkham against the byelaws the Park’s bloated media team submitted a complaint – so I hope readers interested in the byelaws will listen to the programme and let the BBC know what you think. You can also, if you believe any of Gordon Watson’s statements are misleading, submit a formal complaint to the LLTNPA.

A couple of other things that struck me from the programme

- The first clip with Gordon Watson was about what National Parks are for. His answer was primarily visitor management and then he referred to development and promoting tourism related businesses. What is interesting is that conservation was not mentioned. I think that is an accurate reflection of where the LLTNPA is – conservation, which is supposed to take precedence over other National Park aims, is only considered in relation to visitor impacts which are minor compared say to all the hydro tracks that have been created in the National Park
- Grant Moir was much better at putting development planning – the question he was asked about – into the wider context of the statutory aims of the National Park. However, what struck me was how accepting of the rules he is so he explained clearly that most housing in the National Park is being delivered by housing developers who have bought up land and that a quarter of this is for affordable housing because “that is the standard”. But hang on Grant, I wanted to say, your own Park plan clearly shows wages in the CNPA are well below the Scottish national average (which is low enough as it is) so how on earth will abiding by this standard address the need for affordable housing in the CNPA?

Category

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