

Camping permits, incompetence and big brother

Description



The Firkin A camping permit area as it looked on Thursday 2nd March – would any right minded camper try and camp in this area in this condition? Would it even be possible?



The signs are much smaller than appeared in this mock-up presented to the Board in December

On Thursday, I went climbing near Glen Coe and on the way up and back down the A82 checked out a few things about the west Loch Lomond camping management zone. I almost missed the sign announcing the start of the zone, just before Luss, despite looking out for it. A large proportion of drivers will miss it, let alone – yet another piece of road clutter – and for those who do manage to read it what does “camping management zone” mean?

There’s certainly no information to tell you about the byelaws when you arrive at Firkin Point, one of the Park’s permit areas just south of Tarbert, which came into operation on 1st March. I had thought one of the few sensible decisions made by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Board since the Your Park consultation has been to open up use of the car park and toilets at Firkin Point for campervans and campers. Up till now the facilities have been locked for much of the year. Its not the sort of place I, or I suspect most people, would go for for a weekend but fine for an overnight stop being off the main road.



I was surprised to see the sign saying the gates will be locked each night is still up and the clock still points to 4.30pm. How I wondered do campers get in and out? I discovered when I returned that night to check that the gates weren't locked – its just no-one had bothered to change the sign.

In the car parking area there were no obvious signs about the camping byelaws or telling you where you are “allowed” to camp or park your motorhomes. The first sign I saw was beyond the car parking area and a very pretty sign it is too. It points to three areas where you might camp and shows that all the car park spaces are included in the “motorhome” permit area.



The sign clearly says you will be committing an offence if you fail to comply with the camping management byelaws but, apart from saying you need a permit to camp in the marked areas, fails

completely to explain what the byelaws cover. So, if you are cycling along the cycle path here, you might just think “stuff that” I will just cycle on a bit further to where I don’t need a permit to camp! Or what is there to tell you that if you collect some dead wood from around the permit area you will be committing a criminal offence?

While the camping in the park logo implies that motorhomes might need a permit here, there is nothing to say that this is ONLY required if you are sleeping overnight in a motorhome. So, pull in here in the day in a campervan and you might wrongly think you have to leave, because you don’t have a permit. Alternatively, you might go to the trouble of trying to apply for a permit on-line, and then if you realise permits appear to be just for overnight stays, ringing the National Park number to make doubly sure.

A further issue for campervans/motorhomes is that according to the Park Board paper (see chart below) there were just four places for campervans here when there are over twenty parking spaces. What is the rationale for this?

Taken together what a disastrous message for Scottish tourism. The LLTNPA has undertaken no assessment of the likely impact of the camping byelaws on tourism (I’ve asked).

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Zone B is sloping – the photo is deceptive – as you can see if you compare the height of the two benches

The sign for Firkin permit zone B below the car park. Each of the camping permit areas at Firkin have been called zones and have their own sign in the Park livery, essential apparently so that Rangers can be employed ensuring you are camping in the area you have booked. No wonder the signage costed so much. The Park has apparently allocated two tents to this site but only the corner in the far centre right is flat enough to sleep comfortably in a tent.



Firkin A “zone” is a much larger area which at present seems to allow for three permits. Though the Park is taking bookings, i.e money from the public, it is in a totally unsuitable state for camping (see top

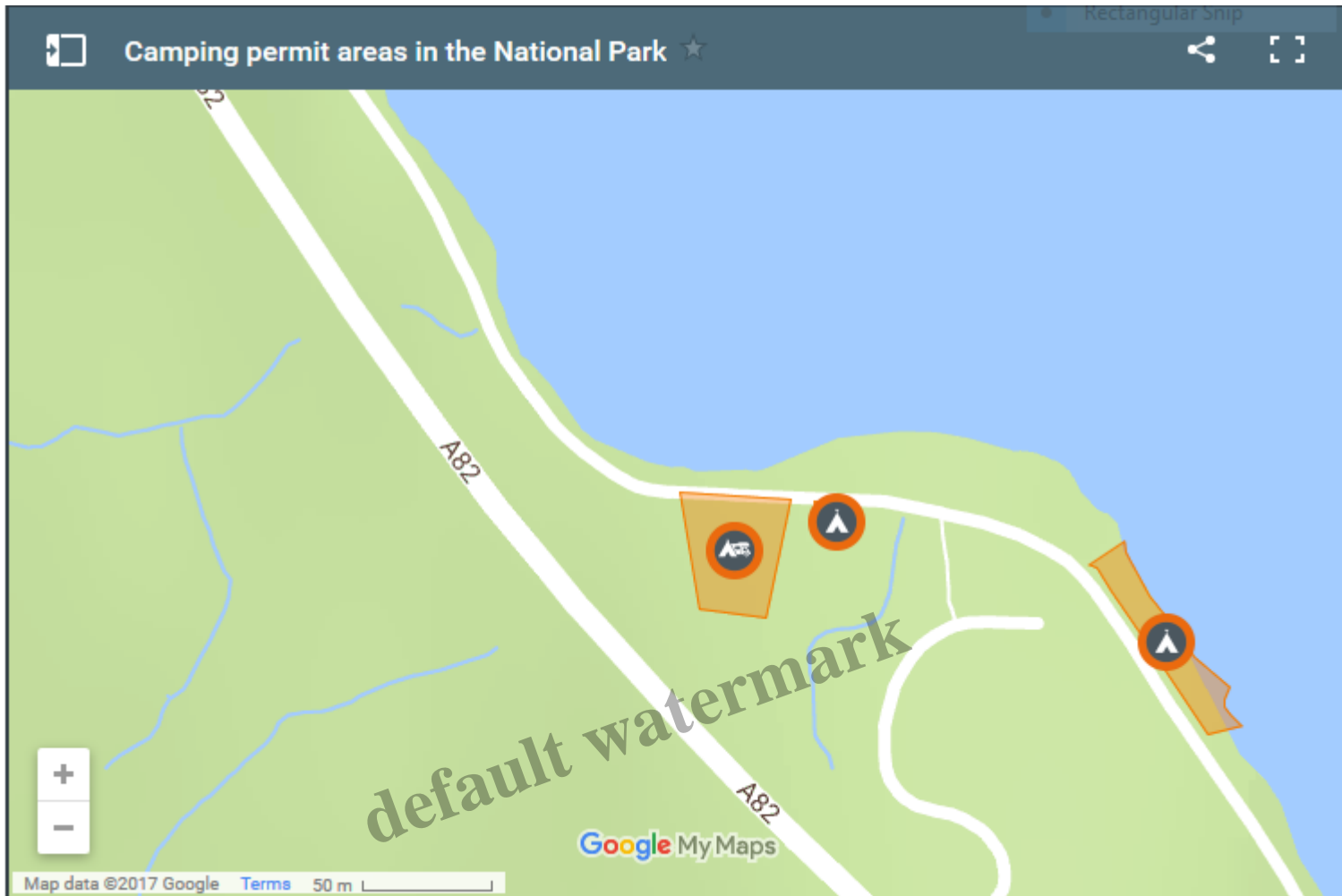
photo and photo below).



A nice path – which was there previously – circumvents zone A but the whole site is overrun with scrub and rush. Who would pay for this? Anyone booking this I think would be justified in seeking full compensation for a wasted journey from the National Park. I wonder whether the Park has considered the liability issues now that it is charging for access? Demand money and you take on new responsibilities and the Park has obviously not undertaken its side of the bargain. It won't take much for the LLTNPA to be forking out far more in compensation claims than they ever receive from permits.



This was the best area I could see for camping in Zone A. Bumpy and sloping. Hopeless. While I am sure the Park could, through managing the vegetation, create places where it was possible to camp on this site they have not bothered. What does this mean for the Park's claim to the Minister that it would have 300 "new" camping places in place by 1st March? A permit place was never a real camping place which would compensate for the loss of a 1000 places in the Park over the last few years anyway, but the Park appears not to have even checked whether it was possible to camp in the ground it had allocated before 1st March.



This google map of Firkin Point from the LLTNPA website has no motorhome symbols on the road coming off the A82 where the Park will allow four campervans/motorhomes to stop. Instead there is a motorhome symbol to the far right. This is one A, the one featured in the photos above!. I can just see vehicles trying to drive uphill through that vegetation! The LLTNPA's communication team clearly does not know what it is doing and equally clearly does not speak to staff implementing the byelaws or vice versa.








I did not visit the permit area on the beach and did not get photos. I wish I had as I am pretty certain it would have been underwater – its described as a narrow beach and the loch is high – more opportunities I think for compensation claims. The permit booking system, which the Park has already spent huge amounts of money on, will now I think have to be amended to provide reports on ground conditions not to say daily reports from Rangers to ensure the information is right. I am not against job creation but this is not I would spend scarce resources.



Its the facilities on site though which is what caused me to think this might make this an ok place to camp – a small compensation for all the lost camping places. I returned Thursday night to check to see if toilets were open and realised I need not have bothered from this sign on the door. Locked day and night to the end of March. I checked afterwards and if you read the fine print when going to book a permit it does indicate the toilets are closed for a large part of the year and also that there is no water. How does this fit though with the LLTNPA claim that Firkin Point a permit area with services!.

4.1 West Loch Lomond Camping Management Zone 2017

Table 2: West Loch Lomond camping provision 2017

Site	Tents	Motorhomes	Tents or Motorhomes	Total
Permit area				
 Coileasan	8			8
 Tarbet Isle	3		2	5
 Suie field	4			4
 Culag (beach)	4			4
 Tarbet		3		3
Permit area with services				
 Inveruglas	5	2		7
 Firkin Point	15	4		19
TOTAL	39	9	2	50
Existing privately operated campsites in the West Loch Lomond Camping Management Zone also provide a total of 208 pitches.				

Figures presented to the LLTNPA Board. In December the Board did agree Park staff were given delegated authority to vary these so what the figures now allowed at Firkin Point might be is unclear.

For every person coming staying overnight in Firkin Point permit area before the end of March, its quite predictable they will need to have a crap and drink. I would be more worried drinking from the burn near Firkin than most other areas of the National Park yet the LLTNPA has not even fitted an outside tap for people to use. To rub salt into the wound, if you didn't hear him, Gordon Watson, at the end of the Jeremy Vine show on Wednesday defended the permit system because "people want a facility with running water"! (Its at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08fw4cg#play> and well worth listening to for the comprehensive criticism directed at the LLTNPA from 1hr 48mins 40 sec). The Park's Chief Executive has no shame.

The LLTNPA Board paper in December included this statement:

5.11. The permit charge must be affordable. It should also make a contribution towards the costs of managing the permit scheme. Costs include the service provided by the Park to keep locations in good condition.

So what sort of service is the Park providing at Firkin Point and what does the permit area there say about the LLTNPA's current claims to welcome campers?



Just in case you think Firkin Point is an isolated example, here is the sign for the permit area at Inveruglas, just a little further north – the camping area is to the left.



The camping area along the shore. I could not see a single place suitable for camping



The view from the campervan permit area, the camping area just beyond.

What needs to be done?

The LLTNPA leadership has been incompetent and Park is obviously in chaos – despite being given an extra year by the Minister to prepare for the byelaws it clearly isn't prepared and the senior staff team has clearly failed to deliver what it said it would. I am some sympathy with the new convener though, because you cannot deliver the undeliverable and somehow a change of direction needs to be found, which effectively leads to the byelaws being dropped.

Senior Park staff though have already tried to excuse their failure at the December Board paper and prolong the chaos:

The 2017 season provides an opportunity to learn from the experience of running campsites and permit areas within the new Camping Management Zones. Plans set out in the Camping Development Strategy will form the basis of provision for this preliminary season

Its now only a preliminary season, the idea being to allow the LLTNPA to dismiss all evidence of its incompetence and the incoherence of the byelaws as teething problems. They will no doubt during the next six months sort some of them out. This will probably include the state of the proposed camping areas and even improvement of some facilities. I don't think though they will be able to sort out the signage issues. 1000s of people come to the National Park, have no idea what a camping management zone is, won't know when they are leaving and don't know what the offences are. The byelaws are simply unenforceable and that's without the complications of the exemptions for people sleeping overnight campervans on the road network.

The biggest issue of all that is not going to go away is that of civil liberties and big brother. The beauty of access rights is its up to you to choose where to camp, and if a place is underwater, boggy or overgrown you will simply look somewhere else. You are also responsible for your choices. The LLTNPA wants to take away that choice, it thinks it knows best where people can "wild camp". It can't ever do this, not just because conditions vary but also because people who camp responsibly are all different: some like being around others, some want to be far away, some to be on the loch shores, others away from them, some close to a car, some far away. I am confident that in the end this attempt to remove people's rights to decide for themselves how best to enjoy the outdoors will fail because its morally repugnant and completely unnecessary. All the problems associated with irresponsible campers could have already been addressed under the existing criminal law.

How long is it going to take before our politicians wake up and realise that have been misled and agreed to what is a terrible mistake?

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. access rights
2. camping
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Author

nickkempe

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