

## The Cairngorms National Park Authority Partnership Plan – a step in the right direction but is it enough?

### Description

The Cairngorms National Park Authority Board is meeting on Friday to discuss and approve its new Partnership Plan, the overarching Plan which guides what it will do over the next five years ([see here for the 60 page plan and supporting documents](#)). The LLTNPA's announcement about this can be read ([here](#)). It's positive the Board is devoting a whole meeting to consider the plan – it deserves this. What follows is not a comprehensive evaluation of the Plan but rather an attempt to highlight some key issues for those who aspire to create National Parks in Scotland which are worthy of the name.

### Positive changes in the revised plan

It is clear that the CNPA has listened to criticisms of the draft plan and has made far stronger statements/commitments in certain areas. Among the specific changes which should be welcomed are:

- to eliminate raptor persecution in the National Park (an ongoing issue as recent disappearance of a golden eagle on the North Glenbuchat estate shows ([see here](#)))
- the recognition of the role of moorland management in creating flooding downstream
- the statement that the Park will plan proactively for beavers
- the presumption against new bulldozed tracks in the uplands
- the commitment to join up the path network in the eastern Cairngorms and to create a new long distance walking route, the Deeside Way

There has also been some strengthening of the general statements that underpin what the Partnership Plan should be about, particularly the creation of a section on public interest priorities for land use in the National Park. This includes the role that National Parks can play in combating climate change, reversing loss of biodiversity and landscape scale conservation as well as how the National Park can promote best practice in terms of recreational visitors and empowering local communities.

All this is positive and suggests there are people within the CNPA who have clear aspirations for what the National Park could deliver.

## Weaknesses in the revised plan

While the revised plan is more aspirational than the draft, it still seems to me to fall short of what we should expect from a National Park. Here are some examples:

- In announcing the Partnership Plan the CNPA cited the inclusion of a target of 5000 hectares of woodland restoration in the next five years as showing its conservation intent. 5000 hectares sound a lot until you consider that the total area of the Cairngorms National Park is 4528 square kilometres or 452,800 hectares – so the target is to increase the amount of land with woodland cover in the National Park by about 1.1% in the next five years. Nothing in that target that remotely threatens to change the way that sporting estates are managed. Indeed it's unclear if grouse moors or stalking estates are going to contribute anything to this target or whether it will be delivered by the NGOs and Forest Enterprise.
- Connected to this, the Plan states that public interest land-use objectives, such as increasing woodland cover, should be delivered in conjunction with private objectives. In effect this means the objectives of sporting estates. If these remain untouched, will anything change as a result of the plan? My reservations are re-inforced by the section on deer management which contains actions like the further development of methodologies for establishing the right level of deer grazing. This type of approach that has been taken for years without any meaningful results. There are no commitments from sporting estates to change what they do.
- These weaknesses derive from an ongoing commitment by the CNPA to using the voluntary approach, and that alone, to achieve its statutory objectives: "All sectors must work together to deliver for the Cairngorms". There is not, as far as I can see, any fallback position in the Partnership Plan which sets out what the CNPA will do if this voluntary approach, once again, fails to work. What is the CNPA going to do if golden eagles are still disappearing in the Cairngorms this time next year? There is no plan B. Worse, in my view, if there is no stick there is absolutely no incentive or reason for private sporting estates to change how they manage the land on a voluntary basis.
- The basic omission in the plan is about how the CNPA will tackle powerful interests in the National Park if they fail to act in the public interest. Land Reform is one way that the power of landed interests could be tackled but, while there are welcome statements in the Plan about empowering local communities, there is nothing to say how land reform might help the CNPA meet its statutory objectives. This is not just about land though – the CNPA rightly recognises low pay is a serious issue for the majority of those working in the National Park, but makes no proposals for how this might be tackled. Instead it wants to see the contribution tourism makes to the economy in the eastern Cairngorms increase – more low paid jobs? When one of the statutory objectives of the National Park is sustainable economic development, it's a major omission when the Park Plan has nothing to say about whether changing the way land is managed could create more and better jobs.
- At least though the CNPA is clear – unlike the LLTNPA whose thinking is far more overtly neo-liberal (they even have a commercialisation strategy) – that public investment is key to the

future of both conservation and the people living in the National Park.

The Plan reads as if the CNPA has identified most of the key issues, its just not worked out yet how to deliver its aspirations.

## Omissions from the Partnership Plan

In my view, in addition to any plan to tackle vested interests, there are two further major omissions from the plan

1. A lack of a vision for wild land and rewilding. While near the start of the Plan there is a map showing wild land in the Cairngorms, the Plan says nothing about how this will be protected or enhanced apart from there being a presumption against new tracks. There is no commitment to restore land that has been trashed by past developments – surely the National Park should be identifying tracks and other developments that impact adversely on wild land landscapes and which we should aspire to have removed? Nor does the Plan explain how the Park’s commitment to new hydro schemes fits with wild land. While re-iterating its opposition to windfarms, on landscape grounds, the CNPA seems to see hydro as unproblematic – there is plenty of evidence that this is just wrong ([see here for example](#)). The lack of vision however goes further than this: is there nowhere in the National Park where the CNPA would like to see natural processes predominate and where nature should be allowed to take its course; what about the re-introduction of species? The beaver is mentioned, but there are no firm plans, while of lynx, which would help reduce numbers of roe deer, there is not a mention. This is an opportunity missed, an opportunity for the National Park to take a lead that would inspire people.
2. What resources are needed. While there is much talk of partnership (and indeed even a statement that partnerships are a way of bringing resources together), there is no systematic attempt to describe what resources the various partners can definitely contribute to make the Plan happen (an exception is a list of major capital investment projects both private and public). Nor is there any attempt to describe the resource gap, things that the Partners would like to do if they had the resources. What most striking about this is its completely unclear how the Park’s conservation objectives in the Plan will be financed (apart from the Peatland Action project).

## What next?

The Partnership Plan, once amended/approved by the Board needs to be approved by the Minister for the Environment, Roseanna Cunningham. While there is a lot of good things in the Plan, much of this, particularly the conservation objectives, are likely to unravel because they are totally dependent on the voluntary principle. If the Minister really wants objectives such as the elimination of raptor persecution to be achieved, she would be wise to ask the CNPA to develop alternative mechanisms to ensure the Partnership Plan is delivered.

## Category

1. Cairngorms

### **Tags**

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. hill tracks
4. landed estates
5. planning
6. wildlife persecution

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