

The media, the General Election and our National Parks

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Access Matters



Camping confusion in National Park

By David Gibson

AT the end of March I attended the Stakeholder Forum organised by the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority (the NPA). I was struck by the extent to which recreational interests, local tourism groups and community council representatives were united in being critical of the NPA and its attempts to meet the provision of 300 camping pitches at the implementation date of 1 March 2017, as required by the Ministerial approval of the byelaws.

Prior to the meeting I visited the Loch Chon campsite and two permit areas. At the meeting examples were given, by me and others, of inadequate signage, pitches unsuitable for use due to not being cleared of vegetation or lack of preparation, wholly inappropriate pitch sites for camping, and inadequate or no internet access in some areas of the Park for those who wish to obtain permits. All of this will lead to dissatisfaction for visitors.

There also remains total confusion about the status of motorhomes and campervans, which are prohibited from parking in lay-bys under the byelaws but allowed to park overnight in lay-bys on trunk roads under the Road Traffic Acts. The NPA CEO admitted that they are 'working on' the issue and were only seeking to restrict overnight parking in lay-bys which were

not on trunk routes. The NPA has clearly acknowledged that there have been 'snagging issues' and that these will be addressed in the short term.

So what next? The byelaws have been approved for an initial period of three years and that isn't going to change. Could they be extended? From comments made at the Forum it is clear that the NPA already see them as a permanent feature of the Park landscape.

The NPA are required by the Ministerial approval to provide "a formal report of a review of the operation of the byelaws no later than three years after implementation" and "an annual update on the implementation of the byelaws". What input will stakeholders have to this process? Arguably very little and there is no requirement on the NPA to include stakeholder feedback.

Then there is the issue of displacement. It's clear from the Forum that the NPA has no means or even desire to monitor displacement of 'problem campers' to locations such as Glen Elvie or Glen Orchy. The impact of the byelaws on these locations needs to be closely monitored.

There is also an issue of social exclusion. One of the Scottish Government's national outcomes is to "tackle the significant inequalities in Scottish society" through

"anti-discrimination activity, challenging attitudes, reducing stigma and building a tolerant Scotland". You could argue that lochside wild camping provides an escape and opportunity to experience the great outdoors for those who are socially excluded. What if they don't have access to the internet or a bank account? What if they cannot afford the permit or campsite fees?

Is there anything positive? We might take encouragement from the appointment as Park Convenor of the former Chief Executive of the Royal Yachting Association and current Board member of the Scottish Sports Association, James Stuart. The RYA and SSA were among the many recreational organisations which, together with Mountaineering Scotland, objected to the byelaws. If James could oversee the withdrawal of the byelaws at the end of the three-year term, that would be a great step forward in terms of protecting rights to responsible access in Scotland and tackling social exclusion.

► Mountaineering Scotland believes that it is important that your experiences are fed back to us to enable us to provide feedback to the PA, and, independently, to the Minister concerning the implementation and impact of the byelaws. Please send any comments to access@mountaineering.scot

Recreational media are now taking a far more critical view of the camping byelaws

Reading and watching some of the excellent social media during the election campaign, like many I suspect, I found it hard to reconcile all that critical thinking – reminiscent of the independence campaign – with what the opinion polls were saying. I had concluded Thursday that the traditional media, mostly controlled by the rich and powerful whose interests require that “There is No Alternative”, had won the day and that even the BBC’s coverage of alternative views, which generally improves in election campaigns due to rules on election bias, had not resulted in a shift in public opinion. I was wrong. It gives me hope that parkswatchscotland and other social media could help change our National Parks as part of a much broader movement for change in all areas of life.

The LLTNPA’s attempt to control the way we think

Attempts to control of the way we think, extends to all areas of life, including National Parks. The relentless attempts of a significant proportion of national newspapers to denigrate migrants, the indy ref campaign or Jeremy Corbyn say, during the election campaign are, in my view, little different from the Loch Lomond and National Park Authority’s attempts to denigrate campers. The LLTNPA uses many of the techniques used by the Sun and Daily Mail:

- telling photos (dozens of photos of abandoned tents, though many of these are the same abandoned site from different angles)
- ignoring data (the LLTNPA did not use its own data collected by Rangers on numbers of campers)
- falsifying statistics (the LLTNPA fiddled the result of the Your Park consultation by re-classifying some supporters of extra campsites as supporters of byelaws)
- quotes from alleged victims to create support (human faeces found on a doorstep was blamed on campers)
- smearing/discrediting opponents (Gordon Watson, now the Park’s Chief Executive, tried to discredit former Chief Inspector of the Police, Kevin Findlater, when he questioned the need for byelaws based on his experience of addressing the problems on east Loch Lomond by bringing up quotes from the past).

In terms justification for their actions, there is even a parallel between Teresa May’s endless repetition of **“strong and stable”** and Gordon Watson, who for the last six months, has been incanting **“there are too many campers.....”**.

The LLTNPA, like many other establishment organisations, employs a disproportionately large media machine to carry out all this work. Out of 135 staff employed in March 2016 eight are in “communications” while it also pays the Big Partnership to liaise with the traditional media. The job of these people is to feed biased information into the traditional media, which then tend to regurgitate it uncritically (a situation not helped in newspapers by cuts in staff numbers) and promote the Park’s

propaganda on social media. For a time this was very successful. During the consultation on the camping byelaws most of media printed uncritically shock horror images of campers circulated by the National Park with no critical comment. While there were a few honourable exceptions to this, most of the critical coverage was in form of one-off articles, and it was left to the letters page of the Herald to provide a forum to promote alternative views. It was as a consequence my experience of having failed to get sustained critical coverage of the LLTNPA in the traditional media (not just camping, but secrecy,

Wild camping in the Trossachs

In his article "Why we broke the byelaw" (TGO, May 2017) David Lintern neglected to give any context to the new, seasonal camping byelaws introduced on March 1st by Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority.

The sheer number of visitors to some of our most easily accessible loch shore areas, plus the antisocial behaviour of some campers going back many years, have had a hugely negative impact on the environment and the experience of other campers and visitors. Some examples can be seen at: <http://bit.ly/llcamp>

I would also point out that the byelaws only apply from March to September and cover less than 4% of the National Park. Of course, we actively encourage true wild camping in the remaining 96% of the National Park.

Gordon Watson

Chief Executive, LLTNPA

Ed: As this is a topic of continued interest, we have offered the National Park Authority the opportunity to respond further with a longer piece in next month's issue and would welcome any responses from readers.

Owen McKee scandal) that I was prompted to set up parkswatchscotland and to cover the Cairngorms.

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One reason for the lack of critical media coverage, which I did not appreciate at the

time, was that whenever critical coverage of the byelaws appears, the LLTNPA media squad complains about biased coverage. I have heard on good authority that following Patrick Barkham's excellent piece ([see here](#)) the LLTNPA made a complaint to the Guardian. A recent example of this (see left) is the LLTNPA getting a right of reply to David Lintern's article in The Great Outdoors. The LLTNPA also appear to be trying to shut down critical coverage in social media. For a few short time a new facebook page appeared (<https://www.facebook.com/lochlomondnationalpark>) with satirical photomontages of destroyers in Park livery patrolling Loch Lomond looking for campers. The page has now gone and the only reason I can think of is the threat of legal action from the LLTNPA, either against FB or the person who put it up.

A specific reason for the lack of critical media coverage on camping is that the LLTNPA raised such a fury of righteous indignation about abandoned tents that almost no-one dared question the basis or rationality of their proposals. So you want camping to continue, despite all those wrecked tents or turd on the doorstep – what sort of person are you? (The parallel being that if you voted against restriction of civil liberties as a means of “fighting” terrorism, you must be like a terrorist). This was most effective in silencing the recreational organisations who did not want to be seen to defend irresponsible campers.

The CNPA

The Cairngorms National Park Authority, while still far from fulfilling its original purpose, is far less guilty of spin and speak than the LLTNPA. While not beyond criticism in that regard – for example it has tried to stop Board Members from speaking out and recently stopped recording its planning meetings – but has generally been far more open in the way it operates than the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park and far less guilty of Parkspin. Its also helped that one local paper, the Strathy, has been prepared to encourage debate about what the National Park does in a way rarely seen within the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park.

The development of a critical media



There are welcome signs now, however, that things are changing and

both the recreational organisations and recreational media are speaking out. While Mountaineering Scotland has given good coverage to its concerns about the byelaws, it's significant that in May its Chief Executive, David Gibson wrote what I think is a damning criticism (see above), while the LLA

magazine (left), is even more outspoken and has treated the Park's attempt to justify their cleansing of people from the Park with derision.

On the social media side, David Lintern, the brave outdoor journalist, who deliberately broke the byelaws, had an article published on UK Hillwalking on Wednesday ([see here](#)) which has been read over 7000 times. Compare this to the latest propaganda video from the LLTNPA on its Facebook Page ([see here](#)), which justifies permits on the grounds that you have the "*comfort of knowing you have booked your pitch*" – what on a stony lochshore? ([see here](#)) – which has been viewed just 3,500 times and has received a number of critical comments. In fact anything now posted by the LLTNPA on social media now tends to attract critical responses.

There is still a long way to go. The LLTNPA FB page has over 14500 likes, compared to Parkswatchscotland's FB Page's 230 likes – a massive difference – but I take comfort that parkswatchscotland received over 40,000 hits the day Nick Halls' article, also titled "Camping confusion in the Park" appeared. Again this dwarfs the number of people who watched the Park's camping propaganda video.

Day	Number of visits	Pages	Hits	Bandwidth
01 Jun 2017	866	3,114	21,070	2.67 GB
02 Jun 2017	634	2,675	14,430	1.24 GB
03 Jun 2017	969	2,621	20,410	1.44 GB
04 Jun 2017	552	2,610	11,708	1.14 GB
05 Jun 2017	3,225	7,211	40,757	3.42 GB
06 Jun 2017	992	3,818	17,324	1.79 GB
07 Jun 2017	536	4,025	18,613	2.33 GB
08 Jun 2017	769	3,082	16,686	1.81 GB
09 Jun 2017	399	2,692	11,221	1.95 G

The two days with over 20,000 hits saw publication of posts on the artificial ski slope at Cairngorm and the Strangled Hare.

I suspect a good 2-3 minute video exposing either the LLTNPA's approach to camping or Flamingo Land or what the CNPA is allowing to happen at Cairngorm could attract 100,000 views or more – anyone up for this?

Where next?

Far more people now appear now engaged with the critical opposition to what is going on in our National Parks. Parkswatch is pleased to have played a role in that but I would hope now that on various issues, from the involvement of big business in trashing our landscape to access rights, we can take that critical opposition to another level and change our National Parks so they start fulfilling their original purpose.

The challenge of changing our National Parks, is part of the challenge of how we change society, and both need an informed, concerned and active public.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

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2. Camping bye laws
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