

The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board and camping

Description

In the paper on the camping byelaws presented at the June LLTNPA Board Meeting, it was reported that:

“86% of people said that they would be quite likely or very likely to recommend staying over in a camping/motorhome permit area”

and

“82% of people found it easy or very easy to find their permit area”.

Board Members treated this as a “killer fact” for, if such a high percentage of people filling in the permit feedback survey are so happy to recommend staying in a permit area, that suggests they have accepted the removal of access rights by the Park and think the permit zones a reasonable replacement. Both these figures are repeated (its strange that the the percentage rate has not altered at all despite the number of returned surveys increasing from 431 to 1066) in the Your Park Update ([see here](#)) to the September Board meeting tomorrow. This post argues it is essential that the Board subject these figures to critical scrutiny rather than accept, as they did at the last meeting, that they prove all is well.

Having visited the majority of the camping permit areas (many of which have been featured on parkswatch) and to have found them underwater, overrun with brambles, without any flat areas for camping etc etc I found it quite frankly incredible that 86% of people returning survey forms had said they would recommend staying in a camping or campervan permit home area. So, I asked for the data under Freedom of Information and received it in the form of two Pdf files, one giving the total bookings for each permit area [EIR 2017-055 Appendix A Permit Area Bookings 1Mar17 to 26Jun17](#) and the other giving the breakdown of survey responses [EIR 2017-055 Appendix B Permit Area Feedback 1Mar17 to 26Jun17](#). By separating the data in this way, the Park has made it much harder for anyone to do an independent proper overall analysis of the data. However, to demonstrate there is a serious issue with the data – which the Park Board needs to explain – I will compare feedback responses from what I regard as one of the worst permit areas, Coilessan Glen, with one of the best, Invertrossachs Rd on the south side of Loch Venachar.

Which is best – Coilessan or Invertrossachs Rd permit area?

My assumption, and I think it is reasonable because its how Trip Advisor and other accommodation websites work, is that you would expect a variation in how people rate different permit areas, with some scoring much more highly than others. In camping terms you would expect people to rate this:



Most of the area on the west shore of the Loch Long south of Ardgarten which makes up the Coiless area looks like this



There are two or three small open areas at Coilessan but they are all sloping, even more though than in this photograph



The driest and flattest area I could find at Coilessan appeared to have been used for camping – it w
been hard to pitch a tent in a way to avoid sleeping on tree roots

differently to this:



The largest flat grassy area at Invertrossachs Drive, which I visited on the day of the last Board Meeting in Callander, had been clearly used by campers



It also appeared some people had camped on the beach at Invertrossachs Drive. Unlike many of the zones there are places on the beach which are flat and sandy, ie suitable for pitching tents. Note area of grassy sward left side of photo.

Now Invertrossachs Rd permit area is far from perfect (there are places in the zone where it would be very hard to camp) but I hope I have shown enough to demonstrate why I think it is a much better place to camp than Coilessan Glen. Encapsulated in words, rather than pictures, I would point to the outlook/scenery (its hard to see much from out of the conifer forest at Coilessan), the vegetation (open native woodland at Invertrossachs) and the availability of dry flat grassy places to pitch a tent. And its not just me that thinks this: I spoke to someone doing maintenance work near the Coilessan site who told me he had heard there had been complaints about the site (and also about the history of anti-social behaviour there).

The message from the feedback data supplied by the LLTNPA however gives a very different message:

Colessan	10	2%	
Tent	10	100%	
Very likely	6	60%	90%
Quite likely	3	30%	
Very unlikely	1	10%	
Loch Venachar South Shore	14	3%	
Tent	14	100%	
Very likely	6	43%	71%
Quite likely	4	29%	
Quite unlikely	1	7%	
Very unlikely	3	21%	

According to the LLTNPA people rated Colessan (90% favourable) far more highly than Invertrossachs Drive (71% favourable). (NB By the June Board meeting 55 people had camped at Colessan (Loch Long) with 10 submitting feedback forms while 66 had camped Invertrossachs Drive so the level of use appears broadly comparable).

What is the explanation for people rating Colessan more highly than Invertrossachs Rd?

I have been able to come up with a number of explanations for this, including:

- I am completely unrepresentative of campers and most campers really don't care about the scenery or having a flat, grassy area to camp, all they are interested in is getting high on drugs and alcohol. Now, I would have to say Colessan scores well on that count. Unlike most of the other permit areas its well away from the public road (so is difficult to police) and been the scene of difficulties in the past (which is why the camping management zone was extended south down Loch Long). While the photo tells a tale, people who are too intoxicated to notice what they are camping on are, I suspect, highly unlikely to take the time to fill in a survey form:



One part of the Coileasan camping permit zone is site to half a dozen half burned out tree stumps, nowhere you could have pitched a tent. If people party here, its in the open, or rather under the trees, you don't need a permit for that.

- Some other site specific factor explains why people did not like Invertrossachs Rd so much (its one of most lowly rated of all permit areas). One possible such explanation is the unlawful restriction of access rights on the south side of the road (photo below), which Park Rangers must see every day while conduct permit checking trips. Its probably not the sign that bothers people but rather than the fence which makes it much harder to go into the woods to have a crap. Perhaps campers are actually far more responsible than the LLTNPA has tried to suggest and rate camping areas by the availability of places to “go”?



These signs contravene our access rights and the sign about shooting being in progress is a lie for a large part of the year. Welcome to the brave new world of the countryside, where your every move is captured on camera. LLTNPA Rangers must pass this sign every day as part of their policing of the camping management zones – its not unreasonable to ask what have they done about it?

- Grassy camping areas have become irrelevant with airbeds. Perhaps, but air beds slide on sloping ground and not much use at Coilessan or on many of the sloping pebbly beaches, as at Firkin Point.
- The data has somehow been corrupted: for example, perhaps the system was initially tested by someone entering test data for each permit site and who ticked the box “very likely” to recommend the permit areas to others and then forgot to remove all this data. That might help explain the generally high level of positive feedback to the survey but would not explain why a poor site rated more highly than a good one.
- The Invertrossachs Rd feedback data is correct, its the Coilessan data which is wildly wrong –

that I could believe! Invertrossachs Rd is one of better places to camp (despite no access to toilets, no bins and limited parking) and 75% favourable is credible for this site. Its the other ratings that are not.



Litter which campers had collected – there was an airbed at top of bag – but was abandoned, p because there were no bins to put it in.

- The data has somehow been influenced, for example, Rangers on their rounds when talking to people ask those who are positive about the zones to fill in the survey form.
- And lastly, the figures have been made up (and by someone who knew so little about camping they did not think to consider people might rate different camping places differently)

I don't think any of these explanations, apart from the last two, can account for the differences in feedback received for Coilessan and Invertrossachs although elements of each might play a role in understanding why people might rate camping zones as they do.

Its worth stressing here that the issue is NOT just about one camping permit area. Firkin Point Zone D ([see here](#)) which other campers have told me they thought was terrible and where I challenged Board Members to come camping, received a 100% very likely to recommend rating (only two campers made the return). Meanwhile, Inveruglas, which up until June was covered in brambles and has hardly anywhere flat to camp received a 90% "very likely to recommend" rating. There are many other examples.

What needs to happen

The Board needs to ask staff to explain the statistics reported from the feedback survey forms and in particular why there appears to be no relationship between "positive" responses and what the permit zones are like to camp in. If staff are unable to provide a satisfactory explanation, the Board should commission an independent investigation for why people are apparently rating terrible places to camp so highly and commit to finding a credible explanation for its statistics with a view to developing an independent and objective feedback mechanism.

The wider issue is the one I referred to last week, how does the LLTNPA rediscover its sense of purpose? ([see here](#)) To provide proper critical scrutiny, the LLTNPA Board needs get out more. It would be interesting to know how many of the Park's Board Members would, after camping in some of the permit zones featured on parkswatch, recommend the experience to the public. If the Board got out more – preferably accompanied by people with varying points of view so they learned rather than seeing what they want to see – I think they might also question some other aspects not just of the Your Park update paper (which is basically an attempt to sell the camping byelaws as a success and which I will analyse further in another post), but other papers being presented to the meeting tomorrow (Monday).

Category

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Tags

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