

Why the National Park Ranger service should change direction

Description



Photo credit – Scotland's Nature

I was reminded a couple of weeks ago, in SNH's regular e-newsletter "Scotland's Nature" ([see here](#)), that there are some great people working for the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Ranger service. What better for a group of refugees without money and after all they have been through to get out and experience the Scottish landscape?

This seems to me to be what the National Park Ranger Service should be all about, helping people who might not otherwise do so to enjoy and connect with the countryside. To do this type of work well you need to combine the knowledge of a natural scientist with the people skills and values of a social worker.

The tragedy of the Ranger Service in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park is that for most of this summer it has been diverted from encouraging people to get out and enjoy the countryside to policing campers. With the end of the byelaw season, the staff's permanent rangers can back to what I see as their rightful jobs.

Thankfully there have been many signs that many of the Rangers involved in Your Park have not lost their skills or values. The main reason why the Loch Chon campsite has received positive feedback is because of the two Rangers who were stationed there when the Park's plans to get a private operator to run the site collapsed. "Booked a pitch which is underwater or sloping, no problem, you can find a better place here". They have not just ensured bottled water was available due to the failure of the

public water supply, they have strimmed a number of areas to create better places to camp and been available to sort out a myriad of problems caused by the incompetent planning of the site. I suspect none of this was in their job description but they deserve medals. They have rescued the LLTNPA.

There is evidence too that Rangers know that checking permits is a waste of their time and have stopped doing so (which incidentally is another reason why the Park's data on permits is worthless). Last week I was out at Forest Drive with Ross MacBeath and we got talking to an angler with a campervan who had bought a fishing permit but had not been told about the camping permit system. On site, he had spoken with a Ranger who had come round in the afternoon to give him the number to undo the Forest Drive gates which are locked at 4pm (another waste of Rangers time, why on earth is FCS locking people out of camping permit areas?) but not been asked for a permit.

While the LLTNPA has been trying, more or less unsuccessfully, to turn its Rangers into a private police force, austerity continues to bite. Many many people, not just refugees but a sizeable proportion of the population of the west of Scotland, never get an opportunity to enjoy the countryside. I remember talking at a seminar before the LLTNPA was created that an indicator of its success would be when every school child in the Clyde conurbation was able to spend a week in both primary and secondary education enjoying the National Park. Outdoor education for the many has since collapsed, despite the valiant efforts of people working in the field.

The LLTNPA could and should however be helping to change this. Indeed I think this should form a key plank of its new Partnership Plan. If its Ranger resource was freed up from patrolling and instead was given the mission to work with local authorities, instead of visits from primary schools etc being the exception, they could become the norm: the things that Rangers did every day. Given continued local authority cuts, this would be quite a challenge but the LLTNPA has, I believe, in its workforce, people with the necessary skills and commitment. The LLTNPA could make this happen if it empowered its Rangers to make full use of their skills and determine how best they spend their time, rather than forcing them to drive around in vans all day patrolling.

The LLTNPA could also make the case for abandoned resources in the National Park, like the Ardlui Outdoor Centre, to be renovated (brought into public ownership) and used once more in conjunction with its Ranger Service. That would help the Ranger Service meet its potential.



The former Outdoor Education Centre at Ardlui – the buildings were leased by West Dunbartonshire

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