

The role of volunteering in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park

Description



Photo of volunteers working by the A82 on west Loch Lomond – Photo Credit Friends of Loch Lomond

I spent Saturday evening, along with a few hundred others at a sold out event in the Glasgow Concert Hall, listening to George Monbiot talk about his new book “Out of the Wreckage”. George’s message was that contrary to neo-liberal ideology, the vast majority of people are altruistic and will contribute to the wider good expecting nothing in return. Volunteering epitomises that. Its a great thing.

Why therefore did the photo above and accompanying news release from Friends of Loch Lomond and

Trossachs (see below), of volunteers who are obviously enjoying themselves, make me feel uneasy? The answer, in a nutshell, is that the volunteers are compensating for failures in basic service provision by our public authorities, in this case Transport Scotland and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority.

The voluntary work included *“dozens of bags of rubbish being collected from litter strewn laybys and neighbouring areas beside the A82”*. Transport Scotland, who are supposed to maintain our trunk roads, should be ensuring this work is done. Instead, neither they nor the LLTNPA nor Argyll and Bute Council can even agree who should provide litter bins in the A82 laybys – with the consequence that there are none – let alone who should empty them. This makes what is a national litter problem even worse. And then volunteers are left to clear up.

The other work volunteers were involved in in this case was clearing the cycle path and removing scrub to enable people to enjoy views of Loch Lomond.

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Photo Credit Friends of Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Its a shocking indictment of both the National Park and Transport Scotland – both of which claim to promote cycling – that basic maintenance of the path network is being left to volunteers. In the Spring the verges of the A82 along Loch Lomond were all cleared of scrub by professional contractors, so why not the cycle path? While I am sure the volunteers did as good if not better job than professional contractors, had the work been done by people equipped with electric rather than hand tools, it could have been done by just one or two people. Was this really the best use of volunteer time? If there are not enough resources to keep cycle paths clear, Transport Scotland and the LLTNPA need to call upon the Scottish Government to provide these and challenge the neo-liberal narrative that the state can do ever more less and that voluntary effort can be used to substitute for paid jobs.

The other point here is parkswatch has been reliably informed that when the A82 was re-aligned, a landscape plan was produced. This preceded the creation of the National Park but the Loch Lomond Joint Committee which preceded it, visited Lochlomondside with the then Scottish Office Roads Chiefs and commitments were given that the landscape along the road would be maintained. All this has conveniently been forgotten as austerity has sunk its ugly tentacles ever deeper into public life.

In saying this, I imply no criticism of the Friends of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. They have long understood that the landscape of the National Park should underpin everything the LLTNPA does and a fundamental aspect of this is that all people should be able to enjoy the landscape. Hence the initiative a few years ago to clear the scrub from pulpit rock – Transport Scotland missed another trick in failing to provide decent parking there when it widened the A82 by the former traffic lights. FOLLAT have effectively had to step into the breach left by our Public Authorities. It has been using that experience to show up the failures of our public authorities, inform its advocacy for what should be happening in the National Park and its call for the National Park to get back to basics.

Let us not neglect the rural envi

I WAS interested to read your front-page article highlighting the stark claims by environmental charity Keep Scotland Tidy that "Scotland is being choked by soaring levels of litter and filth which is creating an image of a country gripped by decline and neglect with rubbish and fly-tipping standards at their lowest level in a decade" ("One million Scots living in 'dirty' towns and streets", The Herald, October 16).

This is a damning, but fairly accurate, indictment of the current situation which equally applies to popular beauty spots such as Loch Lomond and the busy A82 route

corridor, as well as the communities in urban and rural Scotland referred to in the article. In response to the unsatisfactory state of affairs on Loch Lomondside we organised a successful "Make a Difference Day" last week which saw 30 volunteers from a wide variety of walks of life getting their sleeves rolled up and removing dozens of bags of litter strewn beside lay-bys on the Bonnie Banks as well as opening up views of Ben Lomond. We have found that direct action of this nature is often far more productive than making fruitless representations to public agencies appealing with them to face up to their responsibilities and

to address the situation in a consistent and coordinated basis

Sadly, many public agencies have become more skilled in passing the buck and hiding behind PR-speak rather than admitting there is a problem that needs concerted action with their involvement and resource commitments. To be fair, the national park authority has recently acknowledged the deteriorating situation with regard to litter and is making attempts to bring local partners together to improve the situation. No doubt as part of the latest annual round of local authority budget-saving reviews throughout Scotland the

Letter to Herald last week following release of Keep Scotland Beautiful Report on litter levels in Scot

Which bring me back to Monbiot and the people who volunteer. While volunteering is a demonstration of altruism and generally good for the mental and physical health of those involved, and volunteering outdoors doubly so as it helps connect people to nature and involves physical activity, the experience of volunteers is sidelined by those in power. The clearest current example I can think of this is Food Banks, which could not operate without thousands of voluntary contributors all of whom do so because they care. And yet these people are fundamentally disempowered when it comes to debate about how our social security system is falling apart as the rich become ever richer. If the volunteers had power, I doubt we would have any food banks and the volunteers could go and do something else.

Its the same in our National Parks. The draft LLTNPA National Park Partnership Plan makes noises about the importance and success of volunteering in the National Park, but nothing about how volunteers are being used to compensate for cuts:

“The number of people volunteering in the National Park has grown significantly and in our annual volunteer survey 80% of volunteers indicated that volunteering benefited their health and wellbeing.”

More importantly, there is no acknowledgement that volunteers in the National Park might have something important to say about how the LLTNPA and other public authorities operate at present. These are after all people who do not just enjoy being out in the National Park, they contribute their own labour on a voluntary basis to protecting or improving the landscape. In short, they care and should be key stakeholders of the National Park.

I would like to see the LLTNPA explicitly acknowledge that they should not be using volunteers to compensate for or hide failures in service provision. Instead, I would like to see them engage with volunteers about how they could be empowered, not just through representative organisations but directly. Part of this would involve engaging volunteers about their existing experience of how basic issues, such as litter, could be addressed and using this to inform the “back to basic agenda” for service provision. It should also though involve engagement about where voluntary work is best directed in future. There are lots of great things for volunteers to do but compensation for cuts should not be one of them.

For anyone interested in the current role of volunteering in our National Parks and its future potential, the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (I am a member of its Committee) produced a report on volunteering and National Parks in 2015 ([see here](#)). In the Report it was estimated that the potential value of volunteering if new National Parks were created was £500k a year. While National Parks offer great opportunities for volunteering, I think the figure demonstrates that volunteering will never compensate for the cuts in basic services that have been taking place ever since the crash in 2008.

The Friends of Loch Lomond and Trossachs New Release from the beginning of



Volunteers help to open up

views of Loch Lomond as part of special Make a Difference Day event

Volunteers taking part in the latest 'Make a Difference Day', organised by Friends of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs, the independent and conservation and heritage charity for the National Park, helped to remove trees and shrubs to open up scenic views of Loch Lomond and Ben Lomond along a stretch of the busy A82 tourist route.

A group of 30 volunteers travelled to Inverbeg, just north of Luss, to remove several hundred metres of overgrown plants and shrubs from the side of the road, giving motorists, cyclists and walkers clear views of Loch Lomond. Also, part of the day was a litter clearance exercise, which resulted in dozens of bags of rubbish being collected from litter strewn laybys and neighbouring areas beside the A82. This was part of the Friends' 'Windows on the Loch' project, which aims to improve views of Loch Lomond along the busy A82 tourist route.

The volunteers came from a variety of walks of life including Luss Estates, the Department for International Development and Scottish Water as well as motivated individuals who volunteer regularly with the Friends and Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority. The nearby Inn on Loch Lomond Hotel also provided shelter and complimentary lunch for the volunteers.

The event was the latest Make a Difference Day to be led by the Friends, and builds on the efforts made by the conservation and heritage charity in recent years with funding support from the National Park Authority to remove stretches of the Loch Lomond 'tree tunnel' which for years effectively meant there were no views of Loch Lomond along the entire twenty mile stretch of the A82 between Duck Bay, near Balloch and Tarbet.

In recent years other Make a Difference Days have involved litter and rhododendron clearance and path improvements works at different locations around the National Park with volunteers and corporate bodies helping to protect the special landscapes of the National Park.

Friends Vice-Chairman John Urquhart, who was among the volunteers who took part on the day, said: "Anybody passing this area of Loch Lomond now has a much better view of its natural beauty, and it is all down to the efforts of the volunteers, who turned out in force to ensure that this event was a great success. We even noticed passing motorists stopping in laybys to have pictures taken against the new backdrop!

"We were delighted with the response we had to Make a Difference Day, especially at a time of year when the weather can be so unpredictable. Fortunately, we had the elements on our side this time around, and with the hard work of so many people to open up views of the loch and Ben Lomond has made a real difference."

Niall Colquhoun, owner of the Inn on Loch Lomond, added: "We were very pleased to support the Friends and the volunteers on the day, helping the hard workers to enjoy a relaxed lunch in between their spells of unstinting efforts. The improved views of Loch Lomond from the A82 has already been positively commented on by some of our visitors and I am delighted with what has been achieved by the volunteers."

Category

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Tags

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