

The different approaches to National Parks in England and Scotland

Description

Reviewing our National Parks

Ten days ago, writing in the Sunday Telegraph ([see here](#)) or ([see here for Guardian article](#)), the Westminster Environment Secretary, Michael Gove, who currently has no powers to speak of in Scotland, announced a review of National Parks in England chaired by Julian Glover:

“The goal of Julian’s review is not to diminish their protection in any way, but to strengthen it in the face of present-day challenges”.

While there are reasons to be sceptical about why Michael Gove has announced this review – the Telegraph portrayed it as “greening” Brexit – were the Scottish Government to announce a review with similar terms, that would mark a radical departure from its current policy position. This could be summed up as “we don’t need or intend to do anything to change existing or create new National Parks in Scotland”. I am delighted therefore that the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (I sit on their Executive Committee) this week issued a News Release ([see here](#)) challenging the Scottish Government to set up a review of National Parks in Scotland.

Michael Gove has asked his review to consider several things, including:

- How National Parks in England could “*enhance natural habitats and protect plants and wildlife*”.
- How National Parks could improve public access, particularly through using agricultural subsidies differently post Brexit, and improve people’s connectedness to the countryside
- How National Parks could support farming, again post Brexit
- And, whether any of the 43 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England, equivalent to our National Scenic Areas but with dedicated resources, should become National Parks.

While there is potential conflict between some of these goals – e.g farming and wildlife – and while there are fears that Michael Gove’s intentions are to create a few protected islands within a sea of deregulated countryside (he has supported fracking and trade deals which could see the introduction of GMOs into Britain) these proposals are already opening up new areas for public debate as this quote in the response from the (English) Campaign for National Parks illustrates:

“We’ve already highlighted the problems of accessibility and the lack of public transport in many parks, risking confining them to people who can afford to drive there, which creates its own problems of traffic congestion in what should be beautiful tranquil places.”

This offers a pretty succinct description of the accessibility and transport issues which the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park should be leading the way on.

And the proposals themselves would be quite radical within the current context in which Scotland’s National Parks operate:

- Take Gove's proposal to improve wildlife protection. Anyone who reads Raptor Persecution UK's excellent blog will know raptors regularly disappear on the grouse moors of the Yorkshire Dales, Peak District and Cairngorms National Parks, something which undermines everything that National Parks should be about. While Gove's announcement has opened the door to a wider debate on how National Parks in England should tackle this issue, in Scotland the Cairngorms National Park appears to be waiting for an instruction ([see here](#)) from the Scottish Government before doing anything. Imagine if Roseanna Cunningham, the Minister for the Environment, asked our National Parks or a review body to consider what more they could do to protect wildlife, from mountain hares to raptors?
- While access rights in Scotland are, as a result of the Land Reform Act 2003 – still one of the finest achievements of the Scottish Parliament – generally far stronger than in England, in some ways those rights have been eroded over the last ten years. Ironically, the main legal restriction on those rights has been in a National Park through the Loch Lomond and Trossachs camping byelaws but there has been a failure by Access Authorities, including our National Parks, to enforce access rights by removing obstructions and signs. On the ground, Scotland started way behind England in terms of its path network and, apart from the investment being made in the cycle network through Sustrans, has like England suffered from totally inadequate public investment in the last ten years. Gove's review suggests there is the kernel of a plan to improve the situation in England, while in Scotland.....?
- And contrast Michael Gove's request that the review consider the creation of further National Parks when the Scottish Government is resolutely against creating more National Parks on the grounds they might cost more money. Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty already receive some resources, have done some good things with this and the plan in England appears to be to give some of them more. Meanwhile in Scotland National Scenic Areas receive no resources. What value Scotland's landscape?

The evidence suggests therefore that, broadly speaking, Gove's terms of reference for his review of National Parks would, if adapted for Scotland, offer a positive step forward.

So what's going on – Tory England more radical than SNP Scotland?

Gove's review stems from his 25 year Environment Plan ([see here](#)) launched earlier this year which set out a vision for the countryside post-Brexit. Gove is of course a brexiteer trying to sell Brexit and unlike many of his cabinet colleagues is trying to develop a vision for the future which involves rethinking how the money wrapped up in the EU subsidies currently paid to agriculture might be used. Part of this involves the development of an idea, that of England as a green and pleasant land. His Environmental Plan has a whole section titled "Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment" and National Parks are seen to play a key role in this, hence the review.

While Scotland does not have a 25 year Environment Plan as such – instead we have a whole suite of plans and strategies – Gove's summary of what he believes needs to happen could, I believe, have been uttered by almost any Scottish Minister:

We need to replenish depleted soil, plant trees, support wetlands and peatlands, rid seas and rivers of rubbish, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, cleanse the air of pollutants, develop cleaner, sustainable energy and protect threatened species and habitats.

In ideological terms there is little difference between Government aspirations in England and Scotland – with one exception, the importance of landscape and beauty. While just as many people care about the landscape in Scotland as in England – we have a similar idea to a “green and pleasant land” in “the hills of home” – the SNP Government has never put much store on natural beauty which puzzles me but is maybe linked to their civic nationalism and concerns about how landscape has been used to sell nationalism in the past:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

There are, however, completely different narratives of natural beauty in both England and Scotland. Take Nan Shepherd, whose writing in the Living Mountain while based on her experience of the Cairngorms, is universal:

“How can I number the worlds to which the eye gives me entry? – the world of light, of colour, of shape, of shadow: of mathematical precision in the snowflake, the ice formation, the quartz crystal, the patterns of stamen and petal: of rhythm in the fluid curve and plunging line of the mountain faces. Why some blocks of stone, hacked into violent and tortured shapes, should so profoundly tranquillise the mind I do not know. Perhaps the eye imposes its own rhythm on what is only a confusion: one has to look creatively to see this mass of rock as more than jag and pinnacle – as beauty. Else why did men for so many centuries think mountains repulsive? A certain kind of consciousness interacts with the mountain-forms to create this sense of beauty. Yet the forms must be there for the eye to see. And forms of a certain distinction: mere dollops won't do it. It is, as with all creation, matter impregnated with mind: but the resultant issue is a living spirit, a glow in the consciousness, that perishes when the glow is dead. It is something snatched from non-being, that shadow which creeps in on us continuously and can be held off by continuous creative act. So, simply to look on anything, such as a mountain, with the love that penetrates to its essence, is to widen the domain of being in the vastness of non-being. Man has no other reason for his existence.”

So why wouldn't a government that really cares about people protect their ability to experience natural beauty? Its well past time that the Scottish Government made beauty and landscape protection a key component of their environmental policies and now they even risk falling behind England. A review of National Parks would be a start although I cannot see any such review happening while behind the scenes the Scottish Government is driving developments like the Cononish goldmine and Flamingo Land.

We should, however, be sceptical about whether any changes will result from the Tories ostensible support for National Parks. In England, after the terrible flooding in Cumbria and Yorkshire in 2016, commitments to tackle the contributory causes to that flooding – which included agricultural practices –

appear to have faded away. In Scotland, while the Tories have led the call for new National Parks, when push comes to shove they do not appear any different to other political parties: an example, the new Tory Councillors on the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Board joined with Councillors from other political parties and the other Board Members to approve the Cononish goldmine earlier this year. None of them raised issues about the impact this would have on the landscape. Financial interests, dressed up as sustainable development, come first. In that Scotland and England appear little different in practice.

So what should the focus of a National Parks review in Scotland be?

While landscape, wildlife and access should be central to the purpose of National Parks, unfortunately at present everything which happens in our National Parks is ultimately determined by financial interests, from those of individual landowners to outside investors. Because of this a review of National Parks in Scotland should be tasked with taking a serious look at HOW National Parks might model and develop forms of development which really are sustainable – otherwise the other objectives of our National Parks will be constantly undermined.

As an example, industrial forestry is bad for jobs, recreation, landscape and wildlife and the fundamental question is what need to change, in financial and economic terms, so that forests provided well paid local employment, a good recreation experience, a home for diverse wildlife and complemented landforms instead of scarring them? That would raise questions about a range of issues from control and ownership of land to government financing which would go beyond Michael Gove's review and might start to develop a distinctively Scottish approach to both National Parks and the wider rural economy.

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Date Created

June 8, 2018

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