

The collapse of the Great Scottish Swim – time for the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park to re-think its priorities

Description

Statement on the Great Scottish

We are disappointed with the Great Run Company's decision not to stage the Great Scottish Swim at Loch Lomond this year.

The Swim has become a key event in the National Park calendar which has grown in popularity and has enjoyed great support not just from those taking part but also the local community.

Hosting the Great Scottish Swim and the European Championships Open Water Swimming in Loch Lomond is a fantastic sporting venue. We hope this will attract other open water swimming events and options to attract other operators. In particular, with next year being Scotland's Year of Coast to Coast, we hope to see a similar swimming event being staged at Loch Lomond.

20th March 2019

It's no wonder the Loch Lomond and National Park Authority are disappointed by the collapse of the Great Scottish Swim. For the last few years they have told everyone who would listen – particularly gullible civil servants and Scottish Ministers – what a success mass commercial events have been:

Great Scottish Swim

A sporting success

- **Where:** Balloch, Loch Lomond
- **When:** Summer
- **Event Type:** Mass participation open water swimming
- **Participants:** Swimmers of all ages, with 45% of participants coming from outside of Scotland
- **Audience:** Over 9,000 spectators made up of families, friends and visitors
- **Capacity:** 2,650 participants

Vision

A world-class sporting event which inspires participants of varying swimming ability to sign up and train for an open water swimming challenge in one of Scotland's most iconic settings.

Challenges

- Significant specialist infrastructure and event support and safety staff and volunteers required
- Multiple stakeholders
- Weather and environmental risks

Funding model

The Great Scottish Swim is funded by [EventScotland](#), the National Park Authority and [West Dunbartonshire Council](#). It generates additional income from entry fees and commercial sponsorship.

Ongoing sustainability

The event has grown steadily over five years by delivering a strong product; generating positive media coverage; and developing different swim courses to attract more participants of wider swimming ability. For example, in 2018, the family Swim250m was launched and sold out at 100 entries.

The Great Scottish Swim has successfully secured public funding to help progress the event towards commercial viability because of its value in terms of the social and cultural benefits it delivers in addition to the clear health benefits. In a 2018 survey, participants indicated that while they visited the area, they also enjoyed walking, sightseeing, eating and visiting other local areas. The event brings locals, visitors and tourists to the area with a significant proportion of entrants and their parties staying for at least two nights over the event weekend. The local community and local businesses benefit from the Swim having a positive economic impact on the area, particularly via accommodation, dining out and use of local transport. The event supports 150 UK suppliers, half of which are based in Scotland.

Sustainability is also addressed via the Great Scottish Swim's environmental policy which includes recycling plastic water bottles and using bio-degradable finishers' bags.

Extract from LLTNPA website 24th Marchg. Despite being dependent on public funding and volunteer Scottish Swim was marketed under "Business in the Park".

Now, the Park's most prestigious event is no more. The claims last year that European Swimming Championship would cement Loch Lomond's reputation as a world class venue for competitive open water swimming are in tatters. While the Park's claims of "ongoing sustainability" and "progress.....towards commercial viability" have disappeared in a puff of air. What's gone wrong?

Visit their website



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Reasons for the collapse of the Great Scottish Swim

I suspect LLTNPA senior management may have provided an update on the Great Scottish Swim at the end of their Board Meeting last Monday. Hence the Statement which appeared on the Park's News Page on Wednesday. Unfortunately, its unlikely any member of the public stayed to the end of the marathon meeting and, because meetings are not recorded, there is no way for the public to find out what might have been said.

The LLTNPA claimed the decision was taken by the "Great Run Company", although there is no company with this name registered at Companies House. There is nothing on the Great Swim website ([see here](#)) to explain the decision either. That website provided the vehicle for organising the event last year. It contains glowing quotes from the powers that be, including the Park's Chief Executive Gordon Watson, as to its success. How then to explain the collapse? Its possible the new sponsorship arrangements between the "Great Swim" and "John West" might account for what has happened. Its also possible that the level of public funding offered meant the event was no longer "attractive" in business terms.

There are also some other factors which, although they may not explain the decision, almost certainly would have impacted on mass events at Balloch in the near future..

Loch Lomond is a high risk site for open water swimming events

Last Monday Board Members expressed shock at the following statistic from the Wild Park report:

Currently 44% of waterbodies within the National Park have been given the status of either high or good overall condition by SEPA which is below the national average of 62%.

Despite the spin about clean fresh water, Loch Lomond is one of Scotland's polluted lochs and Drumkinnon Bay, which is frequently affected by algal blooms, is one of the places most prone to this. Not a good place for running open water swimming events.

The problem has been that the Park, instead of focusing on what it should have been doing – which is ensuring the Park's natural environment is in good condition – has instead focused it resources on tourism promotion. That the Park's freshwater bodies are on average in less good condition than most of the rest of Scotland is a national scandal which threatens to undermine the reputation of the area and along with that tourism.

Then there are the safety challenges posed by such mass events. To me this was epitomised by the death by drowning of Reban Rehan last year ([see here](#)) which the Procurator Fiscal's office has now told me will not be subject to a Fatal Accident Inquiry.

Also being swept under the carpet is the key role of volunteers from the boating community in providing safety and rescue services. With boat launching prices being hiked ([see here](#)), why should any of the

boating community continue to support these events voluntarily so other people can make money? The problem is that senior Park staff, without any discussion or consultation, are alienating the very people on whose goodwill such events depend.

The absence of any strategy or consultation

The LLTNPA has failed to produce the Events Strategy it had promised to deliver under the Balloch Charrette which could have given both these factors their rightful place ([see here](#)):

Project		Short Term (Years 1-2)	Medium Term (Years 2-5)	Long Term (Years 5+)
Activity/Event Strategy and Plan	PP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prepare an activity and events strategy and plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver and facilitate calendar of events and activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver and facilitate calendar of events and activities

Had the Park done this, the importance of the natural environment and people to mass events might have been given their rightful place. That could then have instigated a serious attempt to prevent pollution in Loch Lomond and proper consideration of the needs of the boating community. Neither has happened. It might also have initiated discussion on the extent to which events were likely to need continued public subsidy.

Instead, the Park appears to be grabbing at further straws, hoping that it can get another operator in time for Scotland's "Year of Coasts and Waters". Rather than getting the fundamentals right, the priority for senior staff is still being seen to contribute to the latest Scottish Government Year of this or that.

The implications for the Flamingo Land development

The announcement also has implications for Flamingo Land, not that many people would be keen to dive off into the loch under the shadow of a large hotel. One of the major arguments for the large number (100 or so) of camping pods which would destroy the woodland around the Riverside Site is that Balloch has insufficient accommodation for major events. However, if there is no events strategy and it's unclear when the next event might materialise, what is the justification for all these pods?

What needs to happen

The collapse of the Great Scottish Swim provides an ideal opportunity for the LLTNPA Board to reconsider the Park's uncritical approach to tourism and in particular how it has promoted mass events without any consideration of the wider implications. The Park needs to shift its focus from supporting business to protecting the natural environment and working alongside the outdoor recreation community instead of against them. While I did not witness the debate on the Great Scottish Swim, if any, there were signs last Monday that there are now some members of the Board who genuinely

believe the Park's job is to put the natural environment first. I will cover that in a further post.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. flamingo land
2. LLTNPA

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Author

nickkempe

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