

Research in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park – a new beginning?

Description

Knowledge and the abuse of power

Globally, there is a struggle going on about who controls information and part of this is about who gets to see publicly funded research. George Monbiot has given excellent coverage to how academic research is being captured by corporate interests and what people are doing to oppose this ([see here](#)). Its not just universities, however, that pay for research, our public authorities do too. This covers everything from public attitude surveys to technical reports on the state of the local economy, the historic or the natural environment. For a long time research commissioned by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority has been kept secret. Its good to be able to report that after my long battle about this which I blogged about at the beginning of the month ([see here](#)), the LLTNPA now appears to be pro-actively making research it has commissioned publicly available. This should be of interest and benefit to everyone concerned about what is happening in our National Parks.

Steps towards greater research transparency

Sometime after September 2018 when the LLTNPA responded to my request for the research reports listed in the Chief Executive's Reports, the Park created a research and audit page on its website under Plans and Publications ([see here](#)). Its not that easy to find BUT now has 12 items. Some of these, like the report on "Overcoming barriers to engagement" date from before 2012, i.e pre-date what I asked for in my Information Request. That, I believe is a sign of good intentions.

There are still significant gaps. The West Highland Way report ([see here](#)), for example, is still not published. The Waterbus Survey ([see here](#)) can be found on under the Information Responses section of the Park's website but NOT under research.

Last week, however, I was sent two further research reports which had been referred to by the Park in their letter last September, a Wildcat Survey ([see here](#)) and Habitat Survey ([see here](#)), together with an update:

Work is ongoing to publish the research reports listed in our letter to you of 12th February 2019, we are aiming to have these published before the end of May.

Date	Detail
22/03/2013	Commissioning of Callander Landscape Capacity Study.
12/12/2013	Fee to cover Housing Research
27/03/2014	Conservation Research.
07/07/2014	Balance of conservation research.
17/08/2015	Business Barometer research.
10/11/2015	Preparation and supervision for survey work.
11/11/2015	Survey of West Loch Lomond
25/11/2015	survey of East Loch Lomond.
10/12/2015	report & follow up survey work.
10/12/2015	survey of 5 lochs area.
15/03/2016	West Highland Way development study (in consortium with walk the talk & scainte.
02/05/2016	West Highland Way Economic Impact Assessment (in consortium with walk the talk & scainte)
19/12/2016	West Highland Way development study (in consortium with walk the talk & scainte.
22/03/2017	Annual steam report 2017 incl 1x sub report (LLL) + 1 x narrative report.
24/03/2017	Topographical survey of 4 sites.
29/03/2017	Whitespace feasibility study on internet connectivity in the Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park.
01/09/2017	Non-visitor survey as part of Scottish Enterprise Destination Development fund
20/09/2017	Camping research.
31/10/2017	Architect fees for prolongation of project

Reports listed in the 12th February letter

That is most welcome and the staff concerned should be congratulated. It is, in effect, what I asked for back in November 2017. While its not totally clear what this list of research covers or indeed whether its all really research, the Park's commitment to publish everything listed should make everything clear without the need for further Information Requests.

I will consider in further posts what all this research paid for by public money has to tell us about the current and future management of the National Park. It does appear, however, that one of the reasons the Park has been so resistant to making this information public has been to cover up its past failures.

During the development of the camping byelaws, papers to the LLTNPA Board on several occasions referred to research, with the implication being that they had evidence to support their introduction. Every time I asked for this, however, difficulties were put in my way. For example, it took 13 months for example to get hold of the Keep Scotland Beautiful Litter Audit ([see here](#)). This revealed there was no clear link between camping and the litter problems in the National Park. Had the LLTNPA published this research earlier, it would have helped to undermine the case for the camping byelaws.

Knowledge is power.

The report on the management of the West Highland Way – one of the most important recreational and tourist resources in the National Park – was produced back in 2016. NOTHING appears to have been done with its recommendations:

1.3 Key recommendations

- ***A radical change of management model is proposed***, with a planned and costed transition to a single managing body to look after all aspects of the West Highland Way.
- ***The appointment of 'Champions' is recommended*** to advocate and promote the West Highland Way.
- ***Genuine engagement with stakeholders in the public, private and third sectors is recommended*** to guide the strategic management of the route.
- ***A revenue generation model is proposed*** that allows the people who benefit from the route to contribute towards its management and thereby help sustain the maintenance of the West Highland Way.

An ongoing programme of marketing and engagement with visitors is recommended to help enhance the visitor experience.

Why not?

On reading the Wildcat Survey, it is apparent the LLTNPA committed to researching whether there might still be pure or hybrid wildcats in the National Park back in 2013. This was part of Scotland's 2013-19 Wildcat Action Plan. Unbelievably the LLTNPA did not start the research for four years. A missed opportunity. The reason? Well I don't think its a coincidence that until very recently the LLTNPA was devoting almost all its resources to trying to enforce the camping byelaws rather than nature conservation.

Research in the LLTNPA – what needs to happen?

After a completely needless information battle, which took up the time of LLTNPA staff, the Information Commissioner's office and myself, it looks like the LLTNPA really is now set on a course of publishing the research it commissions. If true, that is most welcome and a far better way of doing things.

Research, whatever it says, should be informing the management of the National Park, whether the work of individual members of staff or the decisions the Board makes.

Its now time, therefore, for the LLTNPA Board to take a formal look at what research the Park commissions at present, what they they should commission in future and what they should do with this. The Board should:

- ensure ALL completed research and research related work commissioned by the Park is published and timeously and made available to the public and staff on a section of the Park's website dedicated for this purpose
- consider the development of a research strategy, including priority areas for future research and

how public authorities can co-operate on research matters in the National Park (like in the Cairngorms). I would like to see much more focus on conservation issues within the National Park (again like in the Cairngorms).

- ensure that the Park publishes a list of all ongoing research together with target completion/publication dates
- ensure that the implications of all research commissioned by the LLTNPA is considered by the Board or those of its sub-committees that operate in public so that this can be used to inform their decision making

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. Camping bye laws
2. Freedom of Information
3. Governance
4. LLTNPA
5. secrecy

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