

Crisis of confidence in our National Parks – the Lake District, Loch Lomond & the Trossachs and Flamingo Land

Description

Last Thursday a friend of mine who lives in the Lake District attended a packed extraordinary meeting of Keswick Town Council called to consider a motion of no confidence in the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA). The motion was prompted by the decision of the LDNPA to grant planning permission to itself to tarmac the old railway line between Threlkeld and Keswick. This was a popular path until storm Desmond swept away two of the bridges in 2015. At the meeting councillors argued that tarmac-ing this path would fundamentally undermine the character of the National Park and was a step too far. The motion of no confidence, a historic first, was passed unanimously.

Discontent with the LDNPA has been brewing for some time. The LDNPA has increasingly seen its role as one of promoting tourist development. The LDNPA initially voiced its support for proposals to install a zip wire high across Thirlmere. This received thousands of objections ([see here for info on Friends of the Lake District's campaign](#)) but was withdrawn early last year after the Ministry of Defence stated it would pose a danger to low flying aircraft. There was also a plan to install gondolas on the Whinlatter pass. Then, just a couple of weeks ago the LDNPA refused to approve a ban on 4 x 4 vehicles using old vehicular rights of way despite a petition with over 300,000 signatures calling on them to do so.

The response of the LDNPA's Chief Executive, Richard Leafe, to Keswick Town Council's vote of no confidence was to claim that the Park had consulted properly and to carry on impervious to criticism ([see here](#)).

Parallels with the LLTNPA and Flamingo Land

Large numbers of people now appear to have lost confidence in both the Lake District and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authorities. There is almost certainly very little overlap between the 56,000 or so people who submitted objections to the Flamingo Land Planning Application and the objectors in the Lakes: the 300,000 who signed the petition against 4 x 4 use and the 16,500 who objected to the Thirlmere zip wire. What the objectors have in common, however, is a deeply felt concern for our National Parks, a belief that they should be different and a preparedness to defend the National Parks against inappropriate tourism developments. That is something both National Parks ignore at their peril.

That public concern is now being reflected in political concern. The parallels between Keswick Town Council's unanimous vote of no confidence in the LDNPA and the decision by West Dunbartonshire Council to object unanimously to the Flamingo Land Planning Application are striking.

The response of senior staff in both National Parks has been the same, to dismiss the concerns expressed by local democratically elected representatives speaking on behalf of their constituents. In the case of Flamingo Land the LLTNPA planners, in their report to the Board Meeting which would have heard the Application had it not been (temporarily) withdrawn, rejected Councillors' concerns about the increased traffic in Balloch which would stem from the development. Instead they decided to

rely on the views of Council Officers and Transport Scotland, neither of whom were concerned about the increase in traffic, to ignore their own policies on promoting “sustainable transport” and act as if a Climate Emergency had never been declared. This arrogant “we know best” attitude, which twists policy commitments to promote development, is shared by both National Parks.

What is different between the two National Parks, however, is that one of the most prominent critics of the Lake District National Park sits on their Board. Councillor Tony Lywood (Labour), who is also an elected member for Keswick and has helped lead the opposition, was quoted in the Guardian as saying:

“As someone said at the Keswick town council meeting, ‘This is the Lake District National Park not the Lake District Theme Park,’”

Exactly!

It would be nice to think that the example of Tony Elwood will inspire a member of the LLTNPA to challenge their ruling hierarchy, support West Dunbartonshire Councillors and speak out against the swathe of development now threatening the south west shore of Loch Lomond ([see here](#)).

At the end of the day, however, if National Park Authorities, whether in England or Scotland, continue to ignore public opinion they risk their political legitimacy. Far from undermining the concept of National Parks, public opposition to our National Park Authorities appears based on concerns that they are not delivering what they were set up to do, which is primarily about conserving the natural environment and enabling people to enjoy this without destroying it. The political challenge is to reform our National Park Authorities so that they start delivering their statutory aims instead of acting, as they are at present, like third rate tourism development agencies.

Category

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