

Party election manifestos and Scotland's National Parks

Description

While who gets elected in the General Election may in large part be decided by attitudes to Scottish Independence and Brexit, the wider issues facing the world are the ongoing crisis in the capitalism, the climate emergency and the collapse of the natural environment. Our National Parks are microcosms of that wider world and reflect all those issues, so austerity for example, as a response to the crisis in capitalism, has had clear impacts on our National Parks and the people living in them just like every other area of society. Our National Parks have a particular importance, however, in terms of how we address the Climate Emergency and world environmental crisis. What our political parties say about them, therefore, should tell us something about how they propose to tackle these global issues and has an importance beyond the General Election. This post takes a look at what the main political parties in Scotland have said about National Parks in their manifestos.

Election manifestos and National Parks summary

National Parks don't get a single mention Scottish National Party and Liberal Democrat, either UK or Scottish, election manifestos.

The UK Greens manifesto contains two commitments to improving existing National Parks, while the separate Scottish Greens manifesto, which is much shorter, contains no reference to National Parks.

The UK Conservative Party manifesto welcomes the Glover Review of National Parks in England and says it will create new National Parks but the Scottish Conservative manifesto makes no mention of National Parks.

The Scottish Labour Party also says it would create new National Parks but it is the UK Labour Party manifesto which says by far the most about National Parks: they commit to reversing funding cuts, creating ten new National Parks and placing National Parks at the centre of a new vision for nature in England.

I will therefore consider what UK Labour says first as it is by far the most extensive and interesting manifesto when it comes to National Parks even if its not clear how much of it might apply to Scotland (I am not a member of any political party and have had no input into any election manifesto). Whatever your political views, if you are interested in the future of our National Parks, Labour's manifesto commitments are worth reading.

The UK Labour Party election manifesto

Labour have not one but a number of manifestos including one for the environment ([see here](#)). There is a separate manifesto on A green industrial revolution, which sets out Labour's plan to tackle

carbon emissions, with the environment manifesto containing *“both our plan for climate change mitigation and nature restoration for net gain biodiversity.”*• The rationale for this is clearly explained:

“The climate emergency and the environment emergency interact with each other, with changes in one reinforcing changes in the other: global heating is melting the polar ice caps, which changes ocean salinity and temperature, which affects the role in the global carbon cycle of the microorganisms found in oceans which leads to more global heating and more depleted marine life.”•

The manifesto goes on to describe the role they see in this for National Parks. It worth quoting extensively (see pages 7-10):

“Our Plan for Nature starts with a transformational programme to recover and enhance the natural state of our National Parks, working with scientists, farmers, local communities and conservation groups to reverse years of decline. The new challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss mean that radical approaches are needed to get the most biodiversity net gains out of England’s most loved but now environmentally degraded landscapes.

A Labour government will reignite the founding spirit of the ten National Parks of England by giving them the task and additional new purpose of delivering nature restoration, along with new protections for the habitats and species found in them.

We will increase the funding for our National Park authorities by 50%, from under £50m each year to almost £75m each year. Since 2010 the Conservative government has cut the annual funding to these authorities by £11m, or 20%. We will more than reverse that cut in funding, in order to enable the Parks to fulfill existing responsibilities and undertake their new purposes, too.

Our National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty cover a quarter of England’s land and are home to over 2.3 million people. They generate more than £20 billion for the rural economy, and support 75,000 jobs. Bold action in a holistic approach is required in order to make them greener, more beautiful and still open for everyone to enjoy.

We cannot limit our ambition to simply preserving the last British semi-wildernesses. We will restore the natural environment of Britain in a network of large, connected areas across the entire country, founded on our National Parks. We will link them with connecting restored pathways, hedgerows and water courses to each other and to smaller protected conservation areas. Connecting natural corridors will allow animal migrations, seed dispersals and provide habitats in their own right, and can lead onwards into the parks and gardens of our town and city centres along railway lines, canals, footpaths and cycle routes.

Our approach is challenging: granular, holistic and integrated. We aim to adapt the way we live with nature, not expect nature to survive alongside our unchanging ways. We all deserve the opportunity to live with and alongside nature, and we must learn to do so. City dwellers benefit from access to the countryside just as much as rural communities need to live in vibrant, thriving local economies.”•

Comment: Parkswatch has long argued that our National Parks in Scotland, with their statutory duties to promote conservation, public enjoyment of the countryside, sustainable development and sustainable use of resources, should be leading the way on environmental matters for the rest of Scotland. The UK Labour Party, not only commits to this “placing National Parks in England at the centre of a plan for

nature – it introduces two radically new ideas for National Parks. The first is that they should be given a new statutory duty of ‘nature restoration’. The second is that they should form nodes, if you like, in a network of natural corridors. Given there are National Parks all over England, from the South Downs to Northumberland, from Dartmoor to the Broads, the impact of this, if delivered, would be enormous.

Not only this, however, but:

‘10 new National Parks will be created under a single National Nature Parks Authority. Labour will propose and consult on the locations and establish the authority with an annual budget rising to £50 million a year to manage ten new parks in England. The new authority will have the primary purposes of nature restoration and climate change mitigation, for both of which we will set challenging targets consistent with the best available scientific advice. Secondary purposes of the new authority will include the maintenance of recreational access to the countryside and protecting countryside landscapes.’

The National Nature Parks will increase our National Parks’ land coverage by 50% and to ensure that by 2030 75% of the English population lives within half an hour of a National Park or an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.’

Comment: there are some questions here, not least that Labour’s model for new National Parks appears slightly different to the model for existing ones, but this is visionary thinking which is relevant to anyone who is concerned either about National Parks or about how we might address the climate and environmental crises.

The Scottish Labour Party manifesto

This [\(see here\)](#) by contrast provides one brief mention of National Parks:

Scottish Labour would support the designation of new National Parks (including coastal, marine and city parks) while strengthening local accountability through new models of governance. We will seek to strengthen other protected area designations, with an eco-systems based approach which will guard existing wildlife sites and join up important habitats, while also ensuring more people can enjoy living closer to nature.

While the reference to new coastal and marine National Parks is welcome, and goes beyond the UK Labour Manifesto, it is worrying these are mentioned in the same breath as city parks – it suggests a lack of understanding of what National Parks are really about.

One cannot help think that Scottish Labour has missed a trick here, not least because the UK party handed them the solutions on a plate:

‘Our plan is designed for England but we recognise that we live in an island ecosystem. We will work with the additionally funded devolved government administrations of Scotland and Wales to ensure that nature recovery networks are developed to extend across the entire island of Great Britain and adjacent islands.’

To nature, borders don't matter, so from a National Parks and conservation perspective a nature recovery network which linked say the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park with a new Scottish National Parks in Dumfries and Galloway which in turn linked to the Lake District National Park would make very good sense.

The Scottish National Party manifesto

The SNP manifesto ([see here](#)) makes not a single mention of National Parks. This might not matter there are some cogent arguments to be made against National Parks particularly as they operate at present but the manifesto says almost nothing about the natural environment either. There is one reference to planting trees and that is about it:

We will press for an increase in new woodland creation, working towards a target of 60 million trees planted annually in the UK by 2025, with 30 million of these in Scotland to help tackle the Climate Emergency and to support biodiversity and rural employment. We will share Scotland's success in this area in an effort to drive up planting rates across the UK.

There are other more general references to the environment, particularly in the context of climate change:

And, perhaps most urgently, the environment cannot continue to suffer the impact of unrestricted economic growth that has led to the climate emergency now facing the planet. We need to change the way the economy works and that requires the wholesale transfer of powers to Scotland. Until Scotland has those powers, SNP MPs will campaign at Westminster for the UK to adopt progressive, sustainable economic reform that reshapes the economy, tackling economic and environmental injustice at source.

What the SNP leadership would do for the natural environment if Scotland were to become independent, however, is not stated. There is not even a reference to current Scottish Government initiatives such as the restoration of peat bogs. One can only guess at the explanation for this but it does not seem to me to reflect the interests, concerns and ideas that SNP members and supporters I know have for the natural environment.

The Liberal Democrats

While neither the UK or Scottish Liberal Democrat election manifestos say anything about National Parks they both acknowledge there is a serious environmental crisis and set out what they propose to do about it ([see here](#)):

A healthy natural environment, where people breathe clean air, drink clean water and enjoy the beauty of the natural world, lies at the heart of the society and the economy Liberal Democrats want to create. Yet nature is under threat: unsustainable farming practices are depleting the soil and, together with air and water pollution, contributing to a rapid decline in the numbers of insects, birds and

other animals. One in seven UK species are at risk of extinction.

We will protect the natural environment and reverse biodiversity loss at the same time as combating climate change. We will support farmers to protect and restore the natural environment alongside their critical roles in producing food, providing employment and promoting tourism, leisure and health and wellbeing. We will:

- Introduce a Nature Act to restore the natural environment through setting legally binding near-term and long-term targets for improving water, air, soil and biodiversity, and supported by funding streams of at least £18 billion over five years.*
- Combat climate change, and benefit nature and people by coordinating the planting of 60 million trees a year [interestingly same as SNP] and introducing requirements for the greater use of sustainably harvested wood in construction.*
- Invest in large scale restoration of peatlands, heathland, native woodlands, saltmarshes, wetlands and coastal waters, helping to absorb carbon, protect against floods, improve water quality and protect habitats, including through piloting 'rewilding' approaches!*

The Conservative Party manifestos

Much of the content in the Scottish and UK Conservative Party ([see here](#)) manifestos is, like the liberals democrats, identical. Strangely particularly when conservative politicians in Dumfries and Galloway have been some of the strongest supporters of a new National Park there their Scottish Manifesto omits the commitment to new National Parks made in the UK manifesto:

'We welcome the Glover Review [into role of NPs in England and Wales] and will create new National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as well as making our most loved landscapes greener, happier, healthier and open to all. We will make the coast to coast path across the most beautiful areas of the North a National Trail.'

How this commitment fits with the cuts in National Park budgets referred to in the Labour Manifesto or the increasing commercialisation of National Parks in England due to lack of resources is unclear.

While there are a number of environmental commitments in the manifesto many of which would not be out of place in the Green, Labour or Liberal manifestos (protecting green belt, public money for public good, 75,000 acres of trees) the Party appears to be in denial about the reality of what is going on:

'Conservation is, and always has been, at the heart of Conservatism. Our Government's stewardship of the natural environment, its focus on protecting the countryside and reducing plastic waste, is a source of immense pride.'

and:

'Unlike Jeremy Corbyn, we believe that free markets, innovation and prosperity can protect the planet.'

How does this fit with the State of Nature report 2019 ([see here](#)) which shows that we are facing a catastrophic conservation crisis caused in no small part by unregulated markets and consumerism? In my view there is very little for any politician of any political party who has held office over the last forty years to be proud of here.

The Green Party manifestos

The UK Green Party manifesto ([see here](#)) contains two references to National Parks with a wider countryside plan that includes commitments on other types of protected area:

- *Strengthen Green Belt, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Sites of Special Scientific Interest protections, with development in these areas only being permitted in exceptional circumstances.*
- *Ban mineral extraction, road building and military training from all National Parks. We will give local communities a say in National Park governance, though creating new democratically elected positions on National Park boards.*
- *Open up car-free access to the National Parks with new cycling, walking and bus links.*

The Scottish Greens manifesto ([see here](#)), which is shorter, contains no reference to National Parks.

There is, however, a strong commitment in both manifestos to transforming the way we use land and to restoring natural ecosystems. To me there appears a lot in common with the Labour Party, who have adopted the idea of a Green New Deal, but without so much detail when it comes to the countryside – perhaps reflecting the resources available to the two political parties.

There are some great radical ideas, however, and while not about National Parks as such, I can't resist quoting this from the UK Greens manifesto:

We will grant to people in England and Wales the same right to roam over all landscapes as people in Scotland currently enjoy.

With the exemption of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority's camping byelaws I hope!

Whither National Parks?

I had been meaning to read the election manifestos weeks ago but have only managed to do so in the last couple of days. While I could have predicted the content of most of the manifestos, the Labour Party's took me by surprise and is in my view way ahead of any of the other election manifestos.

While Labour's ideas on National Parks are unlikely to change the way anyone votes, it seems to me that they should be of interest to everyone concerned about National Parks and the role they could play in addressing the climate and environmental crises. I would hope that whatever happens in the UK election, the ideas might inform policy development on National Parks in Scotland and the manifestos of all the political parties in future and that parkswatch can play a role in this.

Category

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