

The priorities of our National Parks in the corona crisis

Description

The corona crisis has swept all before it. What seemed rational just a few days ago is now deemed unacceptable, whether that was the advice issued out by our recreational organisations ([see here](#)), the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority holding a truncated Board Meeting last Monday ([see here](#)) or the measures put in place by our ski areas, three of which are located in the Cairngorms National Park. With lockdown, this is now not just a health crisis for older people but a financial crisis for everyone whose working hours have been affected. Many people who live or work in our National Parks, where the average wage is well below Scotland as a whole, now have no income because they were self-employed or work in the gig economy and have been put out of work.

In my view none of this would have been necessary if public health, which has for over a century very successfully controlled disease through “contact tracing” and isolation of carriers, had not been slashed and sidelined in both Scotland and the wider UK. The letter from public health expert, Allyson Pollock, to the Scottish Government on what they have got wrong is recommended reading for anyone who wants to understand the crisis and how it could have been prevented ([see here](#)). The simple message is COVID-19 could have been contained. The sidelining of public health and the failure to control the spread of the disease, initially through a reluctance to limit air travel, has allowed Covid 19 to spread out of control around the world. The deliberate decision of our governments not to test people and isolate the virus has resulted in the situation where it now threatens to overwhelm health services in all the richer countries of the world. Unless there is a mass testing programme and public health are given the resources they need, it's difficult to see how COVID-19 won't spread again as soon as lockdown is relaxed.

The neo-liberal view of the state, that it shouldn't intervene, is now being rocked to its foundations, with both the Scottish and UK governments taking control of everyday life and a Tory government injecting £ millions into the economy. The problem, however, is that this only goes so far and government is still not acting in the wider public interest. This is demonstrated by all the additional UK government money only going to certain places. Many people are suffering, particularly the self-employed, don't know how they will manage and are being shown few signs of relief.

Our National Park Authorities may comprise a tiny part of government, but what could they be doing in the wider public interest? It shouldn't just be business as usual for those staff who are able to continue working, albeit from home. So here are some suggested priorities for our National Parks during the lockdown:

The financial impact of the corona crisis on people working in tourism

First and most importantly our National Park Authorities should assess as a matter of urgency the financial impact of the lockdown on the tourist industries that provide a large proportion of employment

in their areas. This should start with National Park staff ringing every tourism business, from ski centres to Bed and Breakfasts, from wildlife tour operators to baggage handling, to assess the issues these businesses face and the likely financial costs of the crisis. The assessment could include ascertaining which tourist businesses have proper employees, who might qualify for the UK Government's guarantee to pay 80% of wages for those affected by the crisis, to the impact on all who are self-employed and those who work in the gig economy. This work could then be used to assess the financial impact of the lockdown on the rural economy across Scotland as a whole and for the Scottish Government to put the case to the UK Government about what resources are needed.

The assessment should include identification of those left most in need as a result of the crisis and how resources can be channelled to them quickly.

To enable this work to take place, our National Park Authorities should seek authority from the Scottish Government to suspend the processing of ALL planning applications immediately. Proper democratic scrutiny of planning applications cannot function during the lockdown and is not a priority.

Once the work on tourism is complete, staff could start assessing the impact on all the other businesses in our National Parks which are being affected by the lockdown.

Provision of food

The second most urgent priority is for our National Park Authorities to deploy resources to assess supply chain issues that are being created by the corona crisis to ensure that shops in rural areas do not run out of food. Indeed, supplies to these shops need to be increased to reduce the need for people from rural areas to travel into towns to shop.

Provision of public facilities

One of the disgraceful side-effects of the crisis as it developed was the closure of public facilities such as toilets which, like the public health service itself, are no longer seen as essential for public health. This is not just about tourism infrastructure, there was by last weekend not a single public toilet open along the A82. That is an issue, whether the country is in lockdown or not. Drivers of essential delivery vehicles should have access to toilets:



Part of the problem is that all public infrastructure has been run down under austerity and, like the NHS, other public authorities cannot cope with the crisis. As explained on Radio 4 yesterday morning, Public Authorities simply don't have the resources to keep toilets as clean as they need to be to prevent increasing risks of infection (including protective equipment for staff). With viruses lasting for up to three days on hard surfaces, places like public toilets present real health hazards unless properly maintained. The converse to this is they play an important role in public health and the stupidity of Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park policy, which has been to direct people to use toilets in cafes and bars, has been reinforced now all such spaces are closed.

The corona crisis should present an opportunity for our National Parks to get their estate facilities teams to re-think what infrastructure is needed in the countryside from a public health perspective and to cost this properly. If we can afford to pay for the costs of this crisis now, we should be able to afford to pay for public hygiene in future.

Guidance on being outdoors

In the current lockdown there is no point arguing with the effective shutdown of the countryside to visitors. There is, however, no public health justification for restricting people who live in the countryside to their houses in the same way that has been applied to the rest of the population – which is what both the UK and Scottish governments did last night. There is plenty of space in which to avoid other people and absolutely no need to limit local people to one trip outside a day for exercise.

That is another reason why our access rights are so good, they allow people to disperse into the countryside and not just keep to paths. While effectively suspended just now, along with all other civil liberties, once the lockdown ends they have a key role in enabling people to get into the countryside again safely. Our National Park Authorities could be helping with this by using their access and recreation teams to develop guidance, building on the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, about how local people can continue to enjoy the countryside responsibly (i.e without passing on the infection to others) during this time of crisis and then getting the Scottish Government to endorse this and relax restrictions for those living in rural areas.

Once corona virus has peaked, we know the NHS can cope and restrictions on movements start to be relaxed, such guidance could be extended to include visitors to the countryside. The science of how COVID 19 is transmitted (e.g personal contact and hard surfaces) means it should be possible to lift restrictions on walking in the countryside, and help get rural tourism back on its feet, much earlier than it will be possible to lift restrictions on large numbers of people gathering in enclosed places like concert halls or sports stadiums.

Our National Parks could start showing a lead here by engaging NOW with bodies like the National Access Forum, Public Health experts and the bodies representing recreational users to develop guidance that ensures people feel safe once restrictions start to be lifted.

Category

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Tags

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