

The slow strangulation of Scotland's Regional Parks and John Foster's legacy

Description

In 2018 the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (I am on the Committee) carried out a review of Scotland's Regional Parks ([see here](#)). In large part this was prompted because no-one else seemed concerned about what was happening or the lost potential. With Councils now pulling, or threatening to pull, their support for Clyde Muirshiel, and with the Pentlands Park a sad shadow of its former self, SCNP this week went public with its concerns. I have done none of the hard work, but make no apologies for quoting the news release below.

It is worth reflecting about the context, the infrastructure for supporting people to enjoy the countryside. Regional Parks were one of the many initiatives in action on the ground, not vacuous policy of the Countryside Commission for Scotland. This was set up in 1968 and its first director, John Foster, died recently, just short of his 100th birthday. His obituary ([see here](#)) is a valuable history lesson for anyone interested in countryside management. To me, John was a public servant in the true sense, someone dedicated to the public interest. At the time the people who led our National Parks and Countryside Agencies were not controlled, as they are now, by central government. John took on other public agencies as a contrast to the current etiquette - thou shall not ever criticise another agency of government - and won. That should be celebrated.

John and his team also set up ranger services, which have been cut from much of Scotland, a short-sighted move now that they are needed more than ever before. He failed to win the arguments for National Parks in Scotland, set out in the Popular Mountain Areas Report, but at the time we had no Scottish Parliament and the big landowners could veto everything in the House of Lords. Regional Parks were set up instead. But like ranger services they too are now disappearing, victims of the neo-liberal world system that has for forty years been relentlessly attacking the role of the state. We need to make people more aware of what remains of John and his teams' legacy before it is too late.

After retiring, John became President of Ramblers Scotland, in which post he made some trenchant speeches in support of the right to roam. Retiring from public service to become a campaigning activist were not uncommon at the time. Fred Edwards, Director of Social Work in Strathclyde, for example, later became an active President of Scottish Wildlife and Countryside Link. In recent years, such committed involvement has been made almost unthinkable. There is little evidence that government is any better as a consequence and, in the case of the management of Scotland's countryside, we would almost certainly have been in a stronger position to deal with the consequences of the Covid crisis forty years ago than we are now.

SNCP's media release on Regional Parks

Activists attending the AGM of the principal organisation fighting for the better care of Scotland's finest landscapes and outdoor recreation assets, the Scottish Campaign for National Parks, this week expressed outrage at the continuing attrition of the resources dedicated to looking after the country's

three Regional Parks: Clyde Muirshiel, the Pentland Hills and the Lomond Hills in Fife. These have increasingly been starved of money and attention since they were deprived of the national funding that reflected their role in catering for the recreational needs of populations much wider than those of their host local authorities. Now, just at a time when Covid-19 has highlighted and accentuated the public appetite for outdoor experience, with the mental and physical health benefits that it can bring, the ever tighter squeeze on local government budgets risks effectively snuffing out their contribution as custodians of some of Scotland's most accessible and widely cherished countryside.

SCNP's Vice-Chairman, Graham Barrow, who has investigated the history and current state of the Regional Parks, commented that:

Regional Parks were a Scottish innovation at the forefront of efforts to open up the countryside and to reconcile the interests of land managers and those seeking outdoor leisure opportunities near to Scotland's largest urban communities. The dramatic decline in the ranger and other services that they provide is shockingly at odds with the country's needs at a time when people are more conscious than ever of the value of accessible and well-managed greenspace. If their benefits are to be retained and expanded, everyone with this cause at heart must press for an urgent review of the options for securing their future.

Ross Anderson, a former Chairman of SCNP and a long-time member of the Clyde Muirshiel Park Authority Consultative Forum, added:

Like all the many people who have devoted countless hours of voluntary effort to the task of caring for Scotland's Regional Parks, I am deeply dismayed by their neglect and progressive abandonment by the public authorities, both local and national, which should be their guardians. These bodies all have their problems financially but surely there has never been a time when the modest expenditure required to look after these priceless assets was more obviously justified than now, as we recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and look forward to the lifestyle changes that the climate emergency and biodiversity crisis will demand.

Local environmental activist, John Urquhart, Vice-Chair of local conservation body The Friends of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs, which is affiliated to SCNP, said:

The Friends are 100% behind this message. The need for better resourcing and more provision for National and Regional Parks has never been greater.

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