

Dirty Camping, the Scottish Parliament's debate and how to fund visitor infrastructure in the countryside

Description

The Dirty Camping debate in the Scottish Parliament

On Wednesday, almost an hour after it was scheduled and after a very long day, MSPs started to debate Murdo Fraser's motion on Dirty Camping ([see here](#)) at 6pm. Although the chamber appeared mostly empty, a number of MSPs contributed online and the debate went on until 7.15pm, long after parliamentarians normally head home. That illustrates the amount of interest in the issues and the debate was generally excellent. If you have the time, it is well worth a view ([see here](#)).

While Mr Fraser had floated the idea of permit zones across Scotland, in opening the debate he pointed out that the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority byelaws had displaced problems with anti-social camping to other areas like Perthshire (something the LLTNPA continues to deny), acknowledged that creating byelaws was a very lengthy process and that the money spent in creating and enforcing them could be better spent in other ways. In other words, permit zones are not the answer. By the end of the debate not a single other MSP had supported the idea.

While the contributions of a number of MSPs started by blaming people for their irresponsible behaviour – with notable examples from Liz Smith (Tory), Gordon MacDonald (SNP) and Bruce Crawford (SNP) – in almost every case they ended up proposing solutions within the spirit of the Land Reform Legislation involving provision of infrastructure and education. Liz Smith (at 18.40) described a recent visit to St Fillans to meet the Community Council where she had been astonished by what she saw – broken branches, litter and human waste – but did not seem to realise that all this was within one of the LLTNPA's camping management zones. Proof of their failure and the failure of permit systems. She ended up, however, calling for an end to the cuts in outdoor education centres. Gordon MacDonald (at 18.45), whose constituency covers the Pentlands Regional Park, after calling for more double yellow lines to stop people parking and a new legal ban on fires (the only suggestion in the whole debate that would require the Land Reform legislation to be amended), also ended up calling for improvements from Edinburgh City Council in public transport and for his government to invest far more in infrastructure. He knows that the once proud Pentlands Regional Park ([see here](#)) is now close to collapse. Only Bruce Crawford, whose constituency covers part of the LLTNPA, appeared to have no solutions apart from enforcement, but even he was not calling for new laws.

I will cover the other contributions in the order they were taken (while I did not record all the time each contributor was given four minutes):

Finlay Carson (Tory) (at 18.17) pointed to the need for a national strategy to tackle visitor issues in rural areas before focusing on the role of Countryside Rangers. In 2003 there were 350 Rangers in Scotland but by 2017 141 of these jobs had been lost. He explained how Scottish Natural Heritage had passed responsibility for funding Council Rangers Services to local authorities, how the Scottish Government had then removed ring-fencing for these services and they had then collapsed. He

highlighted how SNH had then also stopped funding Rangers provided by landowners, whether voluntary sector or private. While noting that one or two Ranger posts had been created through renewable energy company community funds, he called for funding of Ranger Services and the creation of an apprenticeship scheme.

Emma Harford (SNP) described how local volunteers around Loch Ken in Galloway had met with verbal aggression and threats of violence when trying to engage with some visitors and suggested that one solution to this might be a hotline for such volunteers to call the police but also that volunteers should be trained in “de-escalation” techniques. Better still would be to take a conciliatory approach to start with that avoids the need for de-escalation. But rural communities having the ability to call the police easily where people refuse to engage is clearly needed.

Clare Baker (Labour) gave the best exposition of the law and referred to briefings provided by Mountaineering Scotland ([see here](#)) and the Ramblers ([see here](#)). While many MSPs made a point of differentiating wild camping from Dirty Camping, only Ms Baker clearly stated that roadside camping is included in access rights and what is more stressed its health and economic benefits. She clearly explained the reasons for the surge in camping, including the cancellation of outdoor events like festivals, and explained how MSPs now accept that bans simply displace problems. She called for funding of new infrastructure in the countryside.

Andy Wightman (Greens) in a powerful speech (at 18.30.55) accepted there were problems but urged we should keep these in perspective and look at them from the perspective of people’s relationship with the land. We should not punish people for going out but see the increase of people visiting the countryside as a great opportunity, educate people through the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and provide new visitor infrastructure. This he described as “woefully inadequate” compared to all other European countries and gave an example from the crowded Netherlands. He also supported the calls for a reversal of cuts to rangers and outdoor education centres, the acceleration of the hutting movement and called for the countryside round Scotland’s cities to be managed primarily for outdoor recreation.

Stewart Stevenson (SNP) (at 18.35), an MSP who made a significant contribution to getting our access legislation through the Scottish Parliament in 2003, described how he had camped all over Scotland in his youth. He noted that many people now seem unaware of how to camp responsibly and wondered if the difference between his youth and now has been the weakening of organisations like the Scouts and Boys Bridge (and as he clarified later similar organisations for girls). He asked if the Government should start funding such organisations.

Jackie Baillie (Labour) (at 18.50) after stating that the camping byelaws which cover part of her constituency has “worked reasonably well” pointed out that the LLTNPA had recently had to close a camping permit area because.....it was not working! While saying it was not the whole answer, she emphasised the lack of toilets and litter bins in the National Park. She described how she had recently been to a meeting at Duck Bay, a very popular visitor stopping off place on west Loch Lomond, where Argyll and Bute Council had closed the public toilets several years ago and how there have been very sad consequences ever since.

Gail Ross (SNP) a member of whose staff has had put a petition to the Scottish Parliament last year calling for no wild camp zones ([see here](#)), gave an excellent summary of the political pressures on rural MSPs, how people in rural communities are on the one hand concerned but on the other want

and need visitors for the economy. She accepted people in cities needed to get out after lockdown and should be welcome in the countryside but also stated how the influx of visitors had taken some in local communities by surprise. She explained how Highland Council had been closing toilets, when more were in fact needed, and how motorhomes were turning up to campsites and finding no places available. She reported the NC 500 steering group, which covers her constituency, is to reconvene next week.

Mairi Gougeon, Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment, responded for the Scottish Government. She opened by welcoming the brilliant and interesting debate. She went on to say that if we are to tackle dirty camping, litter and fly tipping “*we need to understand what is going on in the mentality of people*”. That is something unfortunately the LLTNPA never asks, why do people do these things? Despite having recently approved the LLTNPA’s Three Year Review of the Camping Bye-Laws, Mairi Gougeon said the Scottish Government does not want to go down the enforcement route, it wants to prevent issues. (That leaves it open for the LLTNPA to change course). She then crucially recognised that capacity is insufficient to meet demand and that while there are particular issues of “party campers” after lockdown, the Scottish Government wants people to be outdoors.

What the Minister didn’t say was how much money the Scottish Government is prepared to invest. First on her list of initiatives on what government is working in are things that don’t cost much: working with the motorhomes association to promote responsible behaviour; Zero Waste Scotland’s campaign for people to take litter home. Neither will work without facilities. But she then went on to acknowledge that, despite the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund being increased to £9 million, the lack of “vital facilities” is a major issue. She stated that this would be considered at a “summit meeting” on rural tourism that is due to take place next week which had been announced in the Scottish Parliament that afternoon. The door therefore is open to a new strategy based on provision of much improved infrastructure rather than stupid attempts to ban camping, close roads, car parks and toilets and save money on litter collections.

The problem for Mairi Gougeon is money over which, as a junior minister, she has no control. She avoided answering a number of challenges from MSPs about whether the Scottish Government would commit to funding various proposals for infrastructure, including ranger services, that had been made during the debate.

How to fund investment in visitor infrastructure in the countryside?

There is an easy short-term answer to the money issues, which follows on from the points made by several MSPs that we have been promoting tourism in Scotland while failing to invest in the necessary visitor infrastructure to support this. In 2019 Visit Scotland spent the vast majority of its budget, £44,309,000, on marketing. That no longer makes any sense. Due to Covid-19 there are severe constraints on tourism from abroad and there is now absolutely no need to encourage people to visit the countryside due to the number of staycations. While a small proportion of Visitor Scotland’s marketing budget could usefully be diverted into re-invigorating awareness of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (£5 million could achieve a huge amount), the rest could be spent on infrastructure in the countryside. The Scottish Government could quadruple the amount in the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund from £9m to £40m overnight for the next year.

That would then buy six months to introduce other measures. First up should be a small visitor

“bednight” tax – £3 maximum – which would be applied to all accommodation and any outdoor stopping places where facilities were provided (eg £3 for a campervan to stop off overnight in a car park). If this money went to councils and local communities, it would enable them to manage longer term facilities like aires and toilets funded by capital investment. The argument that it would deter tourists has never been justified – such taxes are in place all over Europe.

Secondly, however, the Scottish Government should review its commitment not to change how agricultural subsidies are paid in the immediate future as a result of the UK leaving Europe. While the need for some stability is accepted, with farmers complaining about traffic problems and blocked gates, it would be in their interests if some of this money was available to invest in rural tourist infrastructure. Opening up fields for car parking or temporary campsites are obvious examples.

Third, into the medium term, a small proportion of Visitor Scotland’s marketing budget should be permanently re-allocated to promote the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

The Scottish Government therefore has available to it the powers and budgets to enable much greater investment in rural tourism infrastructure to take place. Enough to enable most issues, apart from the notable exception of the cuts to outdoor education, to be addressed. The question is really whether they have the political will to do so?

A similar question faces our National Parks. I have asked to speak to the LLTNPA Board meeting on Monday ([see here](#)) on the need for far greater investment in visitor infrastructure as a result of Covid-19, including over the winter period. It is quite predictable that high demand will continue until such time as an effective vaccine for Covid-19 is found. If the Board agree to hear me – you should be able to view the proceedings online through the link above – I will be on shortly after 9.30am.

Category

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Tags

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2. camping
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Date Created

September 11, 2020

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