

Promoting enjoyment of the geological heritage in Scotland's National Parks

Description



View into Coire an Lochain, below Cairn Lochan (1,216 m) in the Cairngorm Mountains. The corrie was carved by Pleistocene glaciation, with Younger Dryas moraines around and below the lakes. The late Silurian Cairngorm granite in the headwall is a manifestation of the Caledonian orogeny. The area lies in the Cairngorms National Park and the summit area is within the Cairngorms Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The official site management statement describes the Cairngorms as "the most important mountain area in Britain for biological and geological/geomorphological conservation." The geology and geomorphology of Cairngorms National Park are worthy of substantial geological interpretive resources. Photo by Brennan Jordan

Credit Earth Heritage/Brennan Jordan the author of the article

As usual, the latest edition of Earth Heritage ([see here](#)) has some excellent articles about Scotland but I was particularly interested to read "Reflections from a Geoheritage Sabbatical in Scotland: The View from America":

"Scotland was a natural choice for a geoheritage sabbatical for several reasons: spectacular and diverse geology; the importance of Scottish scientists and Scottish sites in the history of geology; the presence of modern scholars who are leaders in the geodiversity, geoheritage, and geoconservation fields; and a level of governmental buy-in to the significance of geodiversity and Geoheritage most notably with Ministerial support for Scotland's Geodiversity Charter."

Geological conservation in Scotland in some ways comes out well compared to the US

Scotland (and the U.K. in general) is way ahead of the United States in terms of a systematic approach to geoconservation. At the national level, the Geological Conservation Review process has been enormously successful, designating around 900 nationally or internationally significant sites in Scotland. Geoheritage inventories have also been conducted on a local scale and these inventories provide valuable guidance for the management of local geoheritage resources.

(As an aside, the early history of geoconservation in Britain is covered in another interesting article in the same edition of Earth Heritage about William MacFadyen, the first Chief Geologist of the Nature Conservancy, which was created by the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. He oversaw the process of selecting hundreds of geological sites as “Areas of Special Scientific Interest” which later provided the foundations for the Geological Conservation Review process)

But the author, Brennan Jordan, then goes on to compare the situation on the ground, with a particular focus on National Parks:

“The greatest strength that the U.S. has in geoconservation is an enormous amount of publicly owned land. The U.S. National Park system is frequently highlighted in international geoheritage discussions, but as important are public lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and State Park systems. Significant geoheritage is found in all of these lands and Government ownership provides not only an avenue for conservation, but also a natural source of ongoing governmental funding for the provisioning of geoheritage interpretation, including visitor centres, displays, panels, and interpretive staff. The result is that the quality of interpretation available at U.S. National Parks is generally of a very high standard. The absence of such funding in Scotland means that geoheritage interpretation is supported by a mixture of lottery funding, nonprofit organizations and private partnerships, with contributions from Local Authorities, government, agencies such as NatureScot, and with other valuable assistance from bodies like the British Geological Survey.”
[My underlining]

“National Parks in Scotland are very different from their American counterparts, consisting mostly of private land, though the laudable Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 (Scottish Outdoor Access Code) assures public access to most points of interest. The two national parks, Cairngorms and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs, both encompass considerable geoheritage resources. However, the lack of a central funding mechanism means that interpretation resources are quite limited. The Balmaha visitor centre in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park, provides some interpretation focused on the nearby Highland Boundary Fault. The VisitScotland iCentre at Aberfoyle represents another potential opportunity to provide geoheritage interpretation, but none is present. The geoheritage community could continue to engage national park authorities and other local stakeholders to maximize opportunities to promote geoheritage in both parks.”



Serpentinite conglomerate (left), a product of continental collision, on the north side of the sandstone conglomerates of Conic Hill (right). The little valley marks the boundary between the two very different rocks and tells an incredible story within five minutes of the West Highland Way and main path.

This concurs with my experience. The geological display at the Balmaha Visitor Centre by the Highland Boundary Fault is a missed opportunity. It neither encourages the thousands of people who walk up Conic Hill each year to take a close look at what can be seen on the ground nor to interpret what they can see from the summit, one of the best geological viewpoints in the whole of Scotland. There is an excellent walking guide to the Highland Boundary Fault by the Geological Society of Glasgow ([see here](#)) but last time I went into the Visitor Centre it was not available. The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority website now has a geology page ([see here](#)) with a link to this guide, one to the Callander area (funded by whole host of organisations, reinforcing Brennan Jordan's point about a lack of proper funding) and a short video about glaciation, dumbed down in my view. But that's it, three links for the whole of the National Park.

The Aberfoyle Visitor Centre, identified by Brennan Jordan, is far from the only missed opportunity. The suggestion from the local community that a new visitor centre could be developed at Tyndrum as part of the Cononish goldmine development was never pursued by the LLTNPA. Along with that they lost the chance to tell the geological and human history of the nearby lead mines.

It's the same in the Cairngorms National Park Authority and there appears even less on the CNPA

website ([see here for one example](#)). The Northern Corries are, as Brennan Jordan points out, an outstanding place for mountain landforms and deserve “*substantive geological interpretative resources*”.

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View out over landforms in Coire an-t-Sneachda to Glen More, with the ski area tucked *out* of sight over the Fiacail a Choire Chais. What is Highlands and Islands Enterprise doing to promote geological understanding of the area?

Glen More provides the only easy access point to the Cairngorm mountains and is as a consequence the biggest visitor honeypot in the National Park. Yet most visitors come and go with little idea of what they are missing. Implicit in Brennan Jordan's piece is that Forestry and Land Scotland, who own most of the land in Glen More, compare unfavourably with the US Forest Service.

Seventeen years after their creation our two National Park Authorities are doing little fulfil their statutory aim "*to promote understanding and enjoyment (including enjoyment in the form of recreation) of the special qualities of the(ir) area(s) by the public*" when it comes to geological conservation. Brennan Jordan helps explain why this is the case, not just for geology but for all forms of conservation. The failures are partly due to private land ownership but, when it comes to interpretation, the problem is lack of proper public funding. The United States, that bastion of the free market, actually funds some of its public services better than we do in Scotland.

We have dozens of geological experts and hundreds of geological enthusiasts who could share their knowledge about our National Parks but they get almost no support to do so. While investment in interpretative facilities requires capital investment, a lot could be done with existing resources if there was the will. For example, the LLTNPA has the largest Ranger Service in Scotland. But they are forced to spend each winter planning for the next season of the camping byelaws rather than using their skills to develop interpretative materials for the dozens of interesting geological sites in the National Park.

Instead of treating visitors as a commodity to be managed and exploited, our National Park Authorities should, as was originally intended, be fostering informed enjoyment of the countryside. Interpretation of Scotland's fantastic geology and landforms, which are far easier to see than our wildlife which comes and goes, should – excuse the pun – provide the bedrock for such work.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. LLTNPA
4. Tourism

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