

Will the Greens agreement with the SNP result in National Parks worthy of the name?

Description

This post takes a look at the implications of the co-operation agreement and shared policy programme that has been agreed between the SNP Government and the Greens ([see here](#)) for National Parks in Scotland.

Investment in National and Regional Parks

While the SNP said absolutely nothing about National Parks or Regional Parks in their election manifesto early this year ([see here](#) for extracts from the main political parties), the Scottish Greens committed to:

“deliver an ambitious programme of reform and expansion of our National and Regional Park network. We will create at least two new National Parks and one new Regional Park. We will invest in our new and existing parks so that they have an adequate ranger service and more powers to deliver its goals. We will deliver a programme of public and community land acquisition so that more of our Parks are publicly owned owned and managed in the public interest.”

The statement in the Shared Policy Programme appears to represent a compromise between the two positions:

National parks

The Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party believe that our National Parks bring many positive benefits to our environment and our economy.

We believe National and Regional parks have an important role to play in protecting Scotland's landscapes, restoring our environment and opening up access to quality greenscape to all.

We believe that National Parks should be designated only in response to local community demand, so we encourage communities, stakeholders and local government to come forward with proposals, which we would expect to accommodate progressive land use, be smaller in scale than existing parks and to demonstrate good value for money.

We will designate at least one new National Park by the end of this session, provided relevant legal conditions can be met. This will support progressive development, address the climate emergency in the way we use our land, and improve public and community wellbeing. We will make funding available to support these ambitions.

We also agree to increase the amount of funding available to improve visitor facilities, safety measures and access opportunities, including in existing regional parks.

Instead of two new National Parks, the Greens have obtained a commitment from the SNP Government to designate at least one – but only in response to demand from local communities.

There is only one place in Scotland where that has any chance of happening in the next five years and that is in Galloway where there is a well-organised campaign ([see here](#)) for a National Park that is supported by politicians from across the political spectrum. While a National Park in Galloway could make a difference, any idea that we should be aspiring to a coherent network of National Parks across Scotland and its coastal areas appears to have been abandoned. While not decrying the importance of local involvement, it appears that National Parks are no longer seen as a national issue but a local one.

The expectation that any proposals for new National Parks should be “smaller in scale” than existing National Parks will further limit their impact. It also appears unlikely the Scottish Government will entertain the idea of any coastal and marine National Parks which, to offer effective protection against the depredations of the industrial fishing industry, would need to be larger scale.

The commitment to invest more in visitor facilities and access, including in Regional Parks (which have been starved of resources and have been in danger of collapsing completely – [see here](#)) could have as great an impact. But that will depend on the amount of investment and it is not clear whether the Greens have agreed with the Scottish Government what that should be. Given the increase in staycations and visitor pressure on the countryside it would be in the public interest that an announcement is made very soon.

Improving the effectiveness of existing National Parks

In their manifesto the Greens committed to delivering:

“a programme of public and community land acquisition so that more of our Parks are publicly owned and managed in the public interest. As in the last Parliament, we will also oppose developments which exploit and degrade our National Parks for profit. As a matter of urgency, we will support a community buyout of the land currently under threat from a renewed Flamingo Land development at Loch Lomond.”

There is no mention of either land acquisition or Flamingo Land in the Shared Policy Programme. While the SNP Government would no doubt claim that land acquisition was costly, the £70.01m they have committed to spend on repairing and subsidising the funicular at Cairn Gorm over the next 30 years ([see here](#)) could have been used to buy up a substantial amount of land in our National Parks. The funicular, together with the fact that the Greens appear to have been unable to persuade the Scottish Government to instruct Scottish Enterprise to stop the proposed Flamingo Land development at Balloch, suggests that “developments which exploit and degrade our National Parks for profit” are likely to continue.

But perhaps the Green MSP, Lorna Slater, in her new Ministerial role will be able to change things for the better in our National Park working behind the scenes?

Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity

Current role holder: Lorna Slater MSP



Lorna Slater MSP was appointed as Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity in September 2021.

Responsibilities

Supports the [Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy](#) and the [Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport](#).

- Green Industrial Strategy
- green skills
- circular economy
- Zero Waste Scotland
- nature recovery targets
- NatureScot
- biodiversity
- national parks and natural heritage
- plant health
- and serving as a member of Cabinet Sub-Committee on Climate Emergency

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✉ Email

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Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

The challenge facing Ms Slater is considerable. For a start, in announcing her new Ministerial role, which includes responsibility for biodiversity, national parks and natural heritage and plant health, the Scottish Government failed to say anything about Mairi McAllan, the Minister who is currently also responsible for these areas.

Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform

Current role holder: Mairi McAllan MSP



Mairi McAllan MSP was appointed as the Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform in May 2021.

Responsibilities

Supports the [Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport](#) and [Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands](#).

Specific responsibilities are:

- land reform and land use
- Royal Botanic Garden
- environmental quality
- natural resources, peatland and flooding
- Scottish Land Commission
- Hydro Nation
- Drinking Water Quality Regulator
- private water
- forestry and woodlands
- Forestry and Land Scotland
- Scottish Forestry
- EU Support and related services
- Forest Research (cross-border services)
- environmental and climate justice
- Crown Estate Scotland
- marine planning
- national parks and natural heritage
- plant health
- GM

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Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

Screenshot downloaded 3rd September

In the absence of any other information, it appears Scotland may now have two Ministers for National Parks and Natural Heritage, Biodiversity and Plant Health!

Even if that gets sorted out, it appears Lorna Slater is likely to have very little power. For example, in terms of trying to change the way land is managed in our National Parks and lead the way in tackling the climate and environmental emergencies, it appears Lorna Slater will have to get agreement from Mairi McAllan who leads on land reform and land-use, forestry, peatland etc.

Now Mairi McAllan is new and for all I know is green at heart, best buddies with Lorna Slater and is looking forward to working with her. But even if that is the case, the organisational confusion and complexities between Ministerial portfolios are likely to continue. For Lorna Slater has a different boss – two in fact, Kate Forbes the Finance Secretary and Michael Matheson, the Secretary for “net zero” – reflecting the economic elements of her remit. Whereas Mairi McAllan is responsible to Mairi Gougeon the Rural Affairs Minister. Add in different civil servants and how that will work in practice is anyone's guess.

Reform in the Gorms

If this is not challenging enough, the co-operation agreement between the Scottish Government and the Greens explicitly excludes five areas one of which reads as follows:

“8. While we have been able to agree significant areas for priority action in species protection, field sports are excluded from this agreement, except to the extent they are addressed in the shared programme.”

If the Cairngorm National Park is ever to function as intended, let alone address the climate and nature emergencies, there are two key issues which need to be tackled: high deer numbers and intensive grouse moor management. Both have serious negative consequences for woodland and peatland and have been responsible for the extermination of much of the wildlife that would potentially be found in the National Park. Both are a direct consequence of land being managed for field sports but the SNP Government's agreement with the Greens means that this cannot be tackled.

I would like to be proved wrong but it appears Lorna Slater has more than one hand tied behind her back and the commitments in the shared programme (see below) to species protection and matters like licensing of grouse moors are unlikely to go very far.

Our natural environment

The Scottish Government and Scottish Green Party agree that Scotland must urgently play its full part in tackling the twin global crises of climate and nature.

We commit to a Natural Environment Bill aiming at introduction in year three of this parliamentary session. This will follow on from the new biodiversity strategy which is due to be published in 2022.

The Bill will:

- put in place **key legislative changes to restore and protect nature**, including, but not restricted to, targets for nature restoration that cover land and sea, and an effective, statutory, target-setting monitoring, enforcing and reporting framework.
- contain targets based on **an overarching goal of preventing any further extinctions of wildlife and halting declines by 2030**, and making significant progress in restoring Scotland's natural environment by 2045.
- contain targets that are achievable and challenging, reflecting the priority for early action in this agreement. These targets will be developed in consideration of available evidence and through consultation, and are expected to include **outcome targets that accommodate species abundance, distribution & extinction risk, and habitat quality and extent**. The targets will reflect the challenges of a changing climate.
- cover key actions to deliver our targets, including **our agreement to protect 30% of Scotland's land and seas by 2030, and highly protect 10%**.

These targets, like our climate targets, will drive action across Government, including farming and fisheries policies and legislation.

How can you protect species and allow field sports to continue in their current form, which depends on persecution of other species?

We agree that urgent action is needed to tackle wildlife crime and to address environmental impacts of intensive grouse moor management.

We will support the transition to more economically and environmentally productive uses of land where appropriate and **deliver the recommendations of the Grouse Moor Management Review Group** as a matter of urgency, including the licensing of grouse moors.

Licensing or further regulation will cover the key areas identified in the review including muirburn, wildlife control, the use of medicated grit and wildlife crime. Licensing will be supported by clear penalties to encourage compliance, as well as additional effort to detect wildlife crime.

The independent taskforce to **consider whether the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Scottish SPCA) should be given extra powers** to investigate wildlife crime will be asked to report back by in a timeframe that will allow any changes to the Scottish SPCA powers to be delivered by legislation implementing changes to grouse and other wildlife management in the course of this parliamentary session.

Grouse moor reform depends on field sport reform which is excluded from the agreement

Time will tell!

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. National Parks

Tags

1. CNPA
2. conservation
3. Deer
4. grouse moors
5. LLTNPA
6. Scottish Government
7. visitor management

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Author

nickkempe

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