

Camping and countryside rangers in Scotland's National Parks – an alternative model

Description

Regular readers will know that parkswatch has, since its creation, been arguing that the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA)'s approach to visitor management is fundamentally flawed:

- instead of providing appropriate infrastructure, they blame visitors for the things that go wrong as a consequence (litter, human waste, cars blocking roads);
- instead of promoting access rights they have devoted all their efforts to restricting them through the camping byelaws and made it harder for people to get out to enjoy the countryside; and
- instead of using their ranger service to support and educate visitors to the countryside, they have turned them into a quasi police force whose primary job is focused on enforcing the camping byelaws.

While I believe many people working in organisations involved in outdoor recreation and visitor management share those beliefs, for a long time their voices have been muted (with some honorable exceptions). One of my fears over the last 18 months has been that the visitor backlash associated with the Covid pandemic might be used to undermine access rights and use as an excuse to roll out the LLTNPA's disastrous approach across Scotland. In fact the opposite appears to have been happening with a number of organisations responding to current challenges by re-asserting the case for an approach based on supporting access rights, investing in visitor infrastructure and employing people to help the general public do the right thing in visitor hotspots.

In a very welcome move earlier this year NatureScot and the Scottish Countryside Rangers Association (SCRA) issued a policy statement on the importance and importance of Rangers in Scotland called "Connecting people and places" ([see here](#)):

"The overall purpose of rangership is to connect people with places. All people with rangership roles should have strong interpersonal skills, be knowledgeable about the natural and cultural heritage and be committed to increasing enjoyment, understanding and care of these resources by and for the public."

The document is full of good things and you won't find anything in it that supports the way the LLTNPA are currently managing their ranger service, forcing staff to check permit and refer people who don't comply with their instructions to the Procurator Fiscal. With the policy endorsed by the then junior Scottish Minister for Rural Affairs and the Environment, Ben MacPherson, it appears that even the Scottish Government has now begun to realise that the LLTNPA's approach to visitor management is not the way to go.

SCRA has now produced an excellent two minute video about the work of a seasonal countryside ranger in the Cairngorms. [\(see here\)](#). In my view It provides a good illustration of what a ranger should be about:

- staff based in local communities instead of being sent out on patrol from National Park headquarters each day;
- staff helping to manage local facilities – in this case a field set aside for camping in the settlement at Tarfside – instead of trying to force visitors away;
- acknowledging that visitors want to enjoy themselves but helping this happens in a way that doesn't impact adversely on the local community (e.g reminding people who have enjoyed a drink at the camping area not to get too noisy).

We need a lot more of this approach!

This doesn't mean to say, however, that we should fund landowners to employ Rangers as has happened in the Cairngorms. While it is public bodies, like the LLTNPA, rather than landowners who provide the main threat to access rights and the ability of the public to enjoy the countryside, landowners can still be an irritant:

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Not far up the glen from Tarfside, there are a number of unlawful no camping signs along the river. Photo September 2020.

I was struck in the video by how the Ranger, who had been brought up and worked on local estates, appeared so caring about visitors and the natural environment. It shows that the idea of protecting all wildlife in the Cairngorms and offering gamekeepers other jobs, like countryside rangers, is not that fanciful. But the test is whether they can not just challenge visitors but also landowners where this is needed. For that Rangers need to be independent and to have a professional allegiance to organisations like SCRA

Category

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