

The Scottish Parliament and the need to review Scotland's existing National Parks

Description

A day after the initial consultation ([see here](#)) about creating a new National Park in Scotland closed, there was a Scottish Government sponsored debate in the Scottish Parliament on the issue, introduced by the responsible junior Minister, Green MSP Lorna Slater. (You can view the proceedings [here](#) or read the official report [here](#)).

While there have been other debates about National Parks since the SNP came to power, what is different now is that the SNP Government, as a result of their agreement with the Greens, has committed to the creation of at least one new National Park in the lifetime of the current parliament. The shift in position by their leadership has meant that SNP MSPs are now freer to speak out than previously and several spoke in favour of new National Parks during the debate which agreed the following motion:

That the Parliament recognises the key role that national parks are playing in tackling the twin biodiversity and climate crises, and the important cultural, social and economic benefits that they bring to Scotland; welcomes the announcement by the Scottish Government that at least one new national park will be designated during the current parliamentary session; understands the need for an open and transparent evaluation process to identify the areas to be progressed to national park designation; welcomes the start of stakeholder engagement to set the criteria for identifying the areas to be designated as new national parks; notes that there are over 3,500 national parks across the world; regrets that there have been just two national parks created in Scotland, the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, in 2002, and the Cairngorms National Park, in 2003, since the Parliament passed the National Parks (Scotland) Act in 2000; praises the work of the Scottish Campaign for National Parks, which identified at least seven further potential sites in 2013, as well as community groups in Galloway and the Borders, and elsewhere, which continue to demonstrate clear demand for new national parks; recognises that, in addition to the designation of new national parks, it is vital that the national scenic areas and regional parks are reinvigorated to help tackle the climate, nature and biodiversity emergencies, and believes that the Scottish Government must pave the way for the opening of a number of new national parks across Scotland

What was particularly welcome was that the motion recognised the importance of Regional Parks and National Scenic Areas. In other words that the Scottish Government needs not just to consider National Parks in isolation but as part of a wider suite of designations which have been neglected over the last decade ([see here](#) for Regional Parks and [here](#) for the example of the Glen Etive NSA). For example, many of the areas suggested for new National Parks in the recent consultation (eg Ochils/Carron Valley, Lomond Hills and Loch Leven, East Neuk and landward Fife, M8 corridor) would be much more appropriately considered as new Regional Parks, while a very interesting proposal for restoring Ravenscraig might be considered for a new Country Park.

The motion, however, failed to mention what I believe to be the most important thing that needs to be done before Scotland creates any new National Parks and that is to consider how far our two existing National Parks have met their statutory objectives: to conserve landscape and nature, promote public enjoyment and understand, ensure wise use of resources and promote sustainable development. Read almost any post on parkswatch and I would hope it is clear that our National Parks have been falling well short of delivering their statutory objectives and have failed to take serious action to address the climate and nature emergencies.

There has only been one partial review of Scotland's two National Parks and that was in 2008. It was originally supposed to be in two parts, the first dealing with governance and administration, with the second looking more at performance, ie what the National Parks had actually achieved. In the event, after the publication of the Stage 1 report ([see here](#)) whose main recommendation was to reduce the number of Board Members nothing further happened. A change of Minister, from Mike Russell to Roseanna Cunningham, probably did not help. But I suspect a more important factor was that the then Scottish Government had no intention of creating new National Parks and no real vision for the existing ones. For the civil servants responsible, carrying on with the review therefore appeared work unlikely to go anywhere. Hence why it was quietly abandoned.

Conducting a proper review of the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authorities is therefore as much unfinished business* as the creation of a new one. A review is required to ensure any new National Park is fit for purpose and is urgently needed if our existing National Parks are to deliver anything like their potential. The parliamentary motion was therefore a missed opportunity for MSPs to recognise there is a need to take a critical look at how our existing National Parks are doing and to consider critical issues that impact on this, from the availability of resources to landownership and the power of landowners.

[*Note. Unfinished Business is the title of the report from the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (SCNP) which made the case for new National Parks in Scotland and was mentioned in the parliamentary debate. I served for a time on the Executive Committee for SCNP and consistently argued we needed to make our existing National Parks work as well as advocate for new ones].

Category

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