

NatureScot consultation on National Parks (2) – the role of local communities and the national interest

Description

After the first three questions in NatureScot consultation on National Parks, which are about whether to turn them into vehicles for “green finance” ([see here](#)), the fourth is about the role of local communities ([see here](#)). The introductory text to the section claims that our National Parks “provide exemplars of community engagement” but contain no suggestions about the role local communities should play.

In the paper considered by NatureScot’s stakeholder advisory group on potential new powers for National Parks not a single option considered would give more power to local communities. For example, Option 1 in the table, which contains proposals for minimal change, suggests:

“Require greater coordination of management of the public estate in National Parks”.

without mentioning how local communities should fit into this, as in Glen Prosen ([see here](#)) where Forest and Land Scotland has or is about to buy a huge area of land.

It appears therefore the question may be mainly about box-ticking. This is little surprise from an organisation whose Board and senior management failed to involve the local community in their decision to sell off Kinloch Castle ([see here](#)). Lorna Slater, the Green MSP who is minister responsible, for both NatureScot and National Parks, had to step in to halt the sale and at the same time ticked off the board. All this makes it even more important that people respond to the consultation and insist the proper consideration needs to be given to the role of local communities in National Parks.

Below is my draft response to the question, an attempt to set out some of the issues which need to be considered from the perspective of someone who believes there is considerable scope to improve our National Parks from both a national and a local perspective.

4. What role should local communities play in the National Park and how should National Park authorities work with and for them to secure a just transition?

Consideration of the role that local communities should play in National Parks has been very limited to date. The assumption has been that by having a board a third of which is directly elected and a third of which composes local Councillors, nominated by local authorities but appointed by Scottish Ministers, somehow a “balance” will be achieved between local and national interests. Apart from Board representation, there has been no attempt to articulate what role local communities should play in National Parks and the question is therefore very welcome though it is regrettable that there is no analysis of the background.

Unfortunately, there is no parallel question which asks what the role of “national interests” like outdoor recreation should be in our National Parks. This is an important omission and it should also not be assumed that local residents, many of whom for example enjoy outdoor recreation, represent the

national interest rather than also having a stake in it.

There are some strong arguments for the Scottish (and UK) model of National Parks where local communities are included within their boundaries and these comments assume that. A properly functioning National Park on this model, however, should be zoned into three broad types of area: the first reserved for nature, where there is very little human intervention or management; the second where the land is managed for production (timber, food etc) but in nature friendly ways; the third the areas where most people live and where the associated infrastructure necessary to support this is located.

The zones should not be treated as mutually exclusive so, for example, people should be able to live or stay in the nature zone and there should also be areas dedicated to nature within human settlements. While such a zoning system was envisaged when the Cairngorms National Park was being created, it has never been implemented. Zoning is crucial to enable National Parks to take the right decisions: broadly speaking in the settlement zone, local interests should be given much greater weight whereas in the core nature zones they should have far less weight (just like the interests of outside developers who want to develop tourist attractions in remote places).

In terms of local interests in the settlement zone, while living in a National Park should be different to living elsewhere – that is part of the attraction – fundamentally everyone living in a National Park should have the right to decent jobs, accommodation and services as exist elsewhere. The specific challenge and mission for National Park Authorities should be to develop infrastructure and employment that supports this and enables the rights of residents and those working in the National Parks to be respected, while national objectives are met.

The statutory “sustainable development” aim of our National Parks were designed with this objective in mind but so far neither of our existing National Parks have managed to deliver: the rural population of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs is still falling; wages in both our National Parks are below the national average; there are serious housing shortages; and a significant proportion of the poorly paid jobs that are available are linked to destructive environmental practices like muirburn and industrial forestry. The challenge for our National Parks should be to replace these jobs with sustainable ones, and help people make the transition.

If the objectives of National Parks are to be met locally, however, local residents have to have a real say and real power. This would also help present a check to the over-centralisation of power we have in Scotland, such as we have seen with the Flamingo Land development at Balloch. There the local community has provided a crucial block towards Scottish Enterprise attempts to build a massive development on the shores of Loch Lomond.

In theory, local residents are well represented on the National Park Boards, a third of whose members are directly elected by them and a third by local councils. However, the current election processes for local members is first past the post which has often had undemocratic outcome,s with local members being elected by as few as 21% of those voting. Meantime some councils appear to have used their nomination rights as a means of patronage rather than as a means of promoting local residents interests and ensuring councils and National Park Authorities work together: the longstanding failure of councils and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority to take a joint approach to litter prevention and rubbish removal is a good example of this..

While there have been some positive attempts to involve and support local residents and communities in decision-making processes and management of the National Parks, there have also been some shocking failures: the LLTNPA's history of support for business interests rather than the local community at Flamingo Land and now Luss ([see here](#)); the way both Forest and Land Scotland and Highland and Islands Enterprise have been allowed to sideline the Aviemore and Glenmore Community Trust ([see here](#)); etc.

Many of these problems come down to local communities lacking power when it comes to decisions about land and lacking resources, problems that will get worse if our National Parks become vehicles for green finance. Much wider land reform is required to address these issues but meantime, instead of greenwashing, our National Parks should be seen as vehicles part of whose mission is to empower local communities, including helping them to acquire land and manage it in a more sustainable way.

A local tourist tax, as exists all over Europe, would help kickstart this process and enable communities to start taking initiatives such as employing local people to maintain the paths that help bring in the tourists). While National Parks should be in a good position to help implement such a tax, all money raised should go to local communities not the National Park Authorities.

In terms of a "just transition" any proposals need to be built of analysis of what has happened to date and what resources are available in our National Parks. A massive opportunity was missed with run of river hydro schemes. While there have been a handful of community schemes these are generally the smallest such schemes (the Kingussie community hydro is dwarfed by the two hydros owned by the Pitmain estate upstream on the River Gynack) and most of the income from the schemes flows to very rich landowners or financiers in the city. The outcome has been that local residents are now suffering from very high fuel prices while many live next door to a cheap, if not always abundant, form of electricity, albeit one with significant environmental costs. Run of River hydro provides a good illustration of why the introduction of green finance into our national parks will not be in the interests of local communities.

The greatest opportunity now for National Park residents to transfer to more sustainable energy systems probably lies in wood. But not large power stations like Drax, rather woods close to local communities where they can grow trees and manage the wood for fuel (and other benefits). For this to happen will again require land reform and reform of Forest and Land Scotland which used to allow local people to use wood but now refuses this on health and safety grounds.

Finally, the centralisation of both our National Park Authorities with almost all staff being based in either Balloch or Grantown is not in local community interests nor that of the National Parks in the long term. There need to be staff on the ground who are aware of local concerns and broker between local and national interests. Unfortunately our National Parks have been part of the centralisation of government in Scotland which has disempowered people and communities and needs to be reversed.

If interested, you can fill in the survey [here](#). It has been designed so you can draft an answer and then come back to it. The closing date is 30th November.

Category

1. Cairngorms

2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. National Parks

Tags

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2. CNPA
3. grouse moors
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5. Local communities
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Author

nickkempe

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