

Reform of Scotland's National Parks – centralised government control has been the problem and is not the solution

Description



Badenoch and Strathspey Herald "the Scottish Government recently recommended that protected predatory species should not be controlled"

Scotland National Parks and the Scottish Government

If you want to understand why Scotland's National Parks have achieved so little in the 20 years since they were created, you need look no further than successive Scottish Governments, both the Ministers responsible and the civil servants that have supported them.

Instead of encouraging and empowering our two National Parks to do what they were set up to do, most importantly to protect and conserve the natural environment, they have been kept on a very tight rein and effectively prevented, for example, from doing anything meaningful to end the land-management practices that have been destroying nature in Scotland (primarily industrial forestry,

driven up grouse shooting, and uncontrolled grazing by large herbivores).

While our National Park Authorities have spent lots of time developing fine sounding policies (there have been literally dozens of strategies and plans), these have been meaningless because their scope to control land-use so that it meets conservation objectives has been deliberately limited to “projects”. These “projects” never tackle the fundamental issues, for example those aimed at restoring eroded peatland and riparian woodland have always avoided tackling the primary cause of the problems, such as overgrazing. Instead they have served to provide photo opportunities and soundbites for Scottish Ministers and others to claim they are doing something to restore nature and offset carbon emissions while all the time nature, as reported by NatureScot the agency responsible, has continued to decline while more carbon is released into the atmosphere.

The reason these failures have been able to continue so long is that successive Scottish Ministers have, despite statements to the contrary, effectively supported the status quo and the vested interests responsible for the environmental destruction. Hence the endless time it takes to implement even minor changes to the current system of landownership and management (grouse moor reform provides the classic example).

This conservatism on the part of the Scottish Government has extended well beyond National Parks but has been made possible by the way in which and other public authorities have been managed and controlled. Among the mechanisms that the Scottish Government uses to control our National Parks the most important is arguably finance (the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, for example, has managed to protect its budget against the trend in public authorities precisely because it is so compliant to government bidding).

The survival of this system of control has depended on the maintenance of the fiction that our National Parks are independent, so they rather than the Scottish Government can be blamed when things go wrong, while any critical thought or debate by their boards that might challenges the status quo is stifled – a gap that parkswatch has tried to fill for ten years.

The Scottish Government’s proposals to reform the “governance” of our National Parks

It has always required a bit of a juggling act on the part of the Scottish Government to pretend our National Parks are independent when they have almost no room for manoeuvre, but more so in the Cairngorms. Their board members have been far more independent-minded and more likely to do what they think is right than what they have been told to do by senior management and the civil servants behind them. That almost certainly provides the real explanation for why the Scottish Government is now proposing to reduce the size of the boards, increase the proportion of members it appoints and to appoint the convener. (The proposals for legislative reform of National Parks are tucked away in Section 7 of the Scottish Government’s current consultation on tackling the nature emergency ([see here](#))).

The proposal to increase Scottish Government powers over the National Park Boards is highly ironic given their long history of failing to advertise and fill the posts which they control ([see here](#) for recent

example). The arrogance may be breathtaking but when you have a board like that in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA) the majority of whom won't say boo to a goose, there is little need to rush to appoint another.

This increased centralisation, which should be viewed as an attack on democracy, is being justified by a supposed need for a National Parks to provide strong leadership in tackling the nature emergency. The truth is that it is the Scottish Government that has been and continues to be responsible for the lack of action. The last thing our National Park Authorities need "to restore nature and tackle the climate crisis" is more "effective and efficient governance" of this sort. Rather our National Park Authorities need more powers (almost none are proposed), real debate and more democracy.

It is significant the Scottish Government has made no proposals to reform the corrupt first past the post system by which local members are elected to the National Park Authority ([see here](#) for example) or the way in which the Scottish Government appoints board members. Why not replace the current system where individuals put themselves up for boards with one that give nomination rights to organisations like Revive or the North East Mountain Trust which really do want change?

The Scottish Government is also proposing to amend the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 so that instead of other public authorities having "a duty to have regard to National Park plans" ([see here](#)) they have "an obligation to actively support and contribute to the implementation of National Park Plans". The difference is tiny but the proposal is all smoke and mirrors.

The Scottish Government already exercises similar controls to those it uses in relation to National Parks over the main public agencies and authorities whose work impacts on nature and climate change (Scottish Forestry, SEPA, NatureScot, Forest and Land Scotland). It could instruct those agencies to do more to support National Park plans tomorrow. The truth is it was the Scottish Government that abandoned the practice of chairing annual performance reviews of the National Park Partnership Plans which provided a means of holding those agencies to account and were held in public.

It has also been the Scottish Government that has allowed the LLTNPA to create new Park Plans out of thin air without any reference or analysis of what was achieved by previous ones. In other words the Scottish Government has connived with the lack of progress that they are now criticising. In short, all the solutions to the many failings of the National Park Partnership Plans already lie in the hands of the Scottish Government which is legally responsible for approving them.

The significance of the September meeting of the Cairngorms National Park Authority

Park board members blasts FLS for its management of Glenmore area

By Gavin Musgrove
gavin.musgrove@rmedia.co.uk

MEMBERS of the Cairngorms National Park Authority have launched a blistering attack on one of their public agency partners.

Several members of the park's board hit out at Forestry and Land Scotland's lack of investment and management of their site at Glenmore.

Ex-park convener Xander McDade was one of those who did not hold back at the latest meeting on Friday at the organisation's headquarters.

He told the meeting: "I have been left deeply unimpressed by FLS recently. They may have been putting a lot more resources in but it is from practically nothing to negligible in my opinion.

"I think that we as an authority are having to prop that up at great expense to other areas in our communities.

"This is a publicly owned landowner who are responsible for their own land and should be taking the vast bulk of the resource...

"We should not be doing the day to day management for them."

Fellow board member Lauren MacCallum said: "We stood on the beach last week and got told that Glenmore is the most visited FLS



LOCH MORLICH: Can be a very busy place in the summer and winter creating a host of problems for local residents.

site in Scotland other than perhaps Peebles which has a completely different user type.

"The fact that we have got three part time rangers and maybe one full-time ranger working limited hours is shocking to me.

"Those who lose out as we all know are local residents..."

She later said: "What also shocked me was the attitude of some members of FLS staff - the scoffing and the rolling of eyes made me so angry.

"People who are camping on the beach do think they are wild camping... If you are from Aberdeen and you are on the beach with that vista of the Northern Corries then you are wild camping.

"If we are not thinking like our visitors then we are not managing our visitors.

"I think FLS and the CNPA need to start putting the pressure on to get more resources there before there is a fire, or a death or something else extreme that happens.

"That is something which has ripped through the conversations I have had and we need to challenge the organisational snobbery because it is not getting us anywhere."

Ms MacCallum also said she does not believe that further parking charges will deliver the 'silver bullet' that FLS think.

Board member Bill Lobban had triggered the debate by asking CNPA officials what level of resources FLS had committed to Glenmore, adding: "It does not seem to be a lot to me."

He added local businesses did not even know who the appropriate FLS contact was for the area if there was a problem.

"I simply do not believe they are putting adequate resources into their site," he said.

Murray Ferguson, the CNPA's director of planning and rural development, said that he had been in contact with FLS ahead of the meeting and that they were treating the Glenmore Forest as one of their six national priority sites.

He said: "They have told me that they are putting more resources into the site than they ever have done before and have given details of their area management which is working across a rather broad geography and their site specific management."

Mr Ferguson said, however, the

CNPA was now also having to put more resources into Glenmore than any other part of the national park and this 'raised questions' whether the balance was right.

CNPA chief executive Grant Moir said: "Glenmore is under public ownership... it should be an exemplar of how to do this (of visitor management) and not the bit lagging behind."

CNPA board convener Sandy Bremner summed up: "We will be seeking an urgent meeting with FLS to discuss resourcing.

"The one thing that is screamingly obvious is that it is inadequate at this moment and we will be expressing this very forcefully."

FLS has contested the comments. Alex Macleod, FLS north region manager, said: "Some of the comments from the CNPA board members are disappointing and not entirely accurate.

"We have had four full-time members of staff - including three full-time recreation rangers - providing visitor services at Glenmore throughout the summer, and put a great deal of management and maintenance time into the Glenmore area."



XANDER MCDADE: Told meeting he is 'deeply unimpressed'.

Badenoch and Strathspey Advertiser 14th September – note the headline "Park board members blasts (sic) FLS"

Last week much of the Strathy was taken up with three issues that were considered by the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) board meeting on 8th September ([see here](#)): a proposal to introduce byelaws to ban fires, how to save the capercaillie and Forest and Land Scotland's failure to provide resources to manage the impacts of visitors in Glenmore. To their credit the video of the meeting is still available for anyone to view on the CNPA website – a chance to view democracy in action – and I will come back to the specific issues, all of which are important, in due course. Here I want to highlight two points about what happened at the meeting which suggest that the controls and fictions that the Scottish Government has used to maintain the status quo may be breaking up and opens the door to

alternative ways for our National Parks to do more for the natural environment and meet their existing statutory objectives.

First, the open recommendation – top Strathy article – from the Minister responsible for National Parks, the Green MSP Lorna Slater, that the CNPA should cease considering the removal of legally protected species like Pine Marten as a means of protecting capercaillie, shows that the Scottish Government already has the power to direct National Park Authorities what to do. Set aside the stushi that has been stirred up by those that support sporting interests on the board – who are using the plight of capercaillie for their own ends – and the response of staff which has been to suggest the CNPA shifts its focus to outdoor recreation, the CNPA's active support of predator control as a way of saving the capercaillie is likely to come under increased pressure (lottery money has been used by the Capercaillie Project to fund gamekeeper posts on the Kinveachy and Rothiemurchus estates).

While I disagree with both the sporting interests and the recommendations from CNPA staff (I will explain why in a further post) in my view Board Members reactions were good both for democracy and for conservation and will help focus attention on the real issues behind the decline of capercaillie. And if Lorna Slater feels the voices on the board supporting sporting interests are too strong, there is a simple solution, stop appointing people like Doug McAdam, the former Director of Scottish Land and Estates, who sought assurances from staff at the meeting that predator control was still on the table. What this shows is that Lorna Slater doesn't need the power to appoint more board members to change the direction taken by our National Park boards, she simply needs to use the powers she has. Her open intervention in this case therefore sets an important precedent.

The second point relates to the criticisms that Board Members made of Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS). This breaks a key convention that has enabled the Scottish Government to maintain its cloying consensus, that public authorities should not criticise each other as they are all part of government. CNPA Board Members had already criticised FLS at their previous meeting ([see here](#)) but have now gone a step further and are “blasting” them. That is unprecedented but is extremely welcome. If Lorna Slater as Minister wants real change in our National Parks she needs board members who are prepared to blast not just FLS but other public bodies, for example Scottish Forestry who to continue to dish out grants for planting and deer fencing contrary to the Park's policies in favour of the natural regeneration and Highlands and Islands Enterprise for their disastrous mis-management of Cairn Gorm. Open critical engagement with other public authorities is in my view far more likely to help deliver the Park's plans – as ultimately it will help focus attention on resources – than the creation of an obscure new obligation which only Scottish Ministers could enforce.

What is equally important to note is that the Board's criticisms of FLS were led by Cllr Xander McDade, Perth and Kinross Council's representative on the board, who recently stepped down as convener. He would almost certainly have never served in that position if the Scottish Government's current proposals to remove the power of the boards to elect their own conveners had been in place while several local authorities are likely to lose their representatives if the boards are reduced in size

Equally notable is the fact that it was local councillors and locally elected members who supported Xander McDade and were most vocal in their criticisms of FLS. What this suggests is that at present it is locally elected members and councillors who are the board members most likely to open up critical debate in our National Parks. This provides all the more reason for the Scottish Government to stop trying to increase their power over boards and instead appoint people who are prepared to speak out

in the public interest.

If Lorna Slater wants to improve the governance of National Parks, her first priority should be to encourage members on the LLTNPA's board to speak out and challenge staff in the way that those on the CNPA are doing.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

1. access rights
2. CNPA
3. Governance
4. land reform
5. landed estates
6. LLTNPA
7. Minister Environment
8. NatureScot
9. Scottish Government
10. vision for National Parks
11. wildlife persecution

Date Created

September 20, 2023

Author

nickkempe

default watermark