



**SCOTTISH
POLICY
GROUP**

BRITISH ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY



NATIONAL PARKS POLICY DEBATE DISCUSSION SUMMARY

Location: Summerhall, Edinburgh

Date: 6th October 2022

The British Ecological Society-Scottish Policy Group (BES-SPG) co-hosted a 'Pie and a Pint' (PAAP) policy debate on National Parks with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) on October 6th 2022.

This document provides a transcription of the main points and questions posed by the workshop participants in the breakout room discussion. The workshop operated on Chatham House Rules therefore no comment is attributed to any individual or organisation, including the BES. For further details on the event please see the [event blog](#) written by BES-SPG member Sophie Bennett.

Question 1: Going forward, what role should National Parks play in delivering national priorities for local communities and the biodiversity and climate crisis? What responsibilities and powers would they need to achieve these goals?

Leadership

- National Parks have the potential to be leaders and provide examples of best practice:
 - This will require coordinated strategy and delivery, for example through the delivery of Agricultural Bill, Scottish Biodiversity Strategy and land reform. They should all be connected. In this way National Parks could tie together national priorities.
 - National Parks have the potential to act as facilitator between different organisations and have a coordinating role in leadership.
 - There needs to be a stronger duty on park and other public bodies to achieve the National Park Plan.
- Land use planning and having management exemplars will be key.
- National priorities are determined by a multitude of factors, not local parks.
- There is a need to go back to reassess the proposed overall objective then set a longer-term vision to achieve that objective. Currently short-term politics, influences and considerations have too much of an influence.
- National Parks should act as an exemplar and be different from the other local authorities, and be experimental where possible.

- A key question: What should the scale of our priorities be: local, national or global?
- There could be a focus on places that have not been focused on historically.
- National Parks have unused potential to have a holistic approach to problem solving at landscape scale.
- National Parks need additional powers to trial new ideas.

Partnership & Local Communities

- Partnership is key:
 - Land ownership needs to be considered.
 - Key question: What is the best way to engage people?
- Objectives have to work in the local context as this acts as mechanism to avoid conflict.
- Restoration should be a key focus:
 - Restoration (not preservation) to a new “environment”, creating resilience to a shifting baseline. There needs to be caution with the term “rewilding” as this term is divisive.
 - There should be a clear direction of what the environment should be like within a National Park for land managers to work with.
- It is important to recognise that communities need to be part of the solutions to the issues. Local communities should have some power over the area and decision making taking into consideration the Just Transition.
- There should be a recognition that there is a difference between the benefits to tourists and local people.
- Educating children can be a catalyst for change. More resources and funding are needed to connect schools to National Parks.
- It is important to consider communities and their complexities. *Who* are the local communities? *How* are they engaged or served by the National Park?
- In the preparation and implementation of partnership plans technical wording needs to be strengthened.

Delivering for Nature

- A key question: how much can National Parks do for nature protection in light of 30x30?
- Soil health should be higher on the agenda.
- Could legal protection such as ‘Conservation Easements’ be introduced that are attached to land units to ensure sustainable long-term use?
- Priorities should be sustainability and education, with a focus on local communities.
- What could the role of National Parks be in the circular economy?
 - National Parks could set an example in a nature-based economy.
- Lessons learned in National Parks can help to shape policy.
- Funding for staff will be key in enabling National Parks to deliver for nature.

Question 2: What role should the National Park Authority play in delivering the National Park Plan? How might they better influence or direct other public bodies to achieve the required outcomes in the Plan?

Governance structures

- A National Park's role could be more focused on creating active partnerships.
- Should other public bodies have more than "regard" to National Park Plans? If so, this would need sufficient political mandate.
- Should National Parks owning land in a National Park operate differently?
- Do we need a single national authority and then individual park authorities beneath that?
- There is a need for shared learning between different park authorities.
- Will there be limitations on power? If there isn't, there is the potential for National Park Authorities having a similar function to a council.
- National Park Authorities should not be responsible for full planning development.
- There is a need to avoid another layer of bureaucracy. National Park Authorities need to be facilitators and brokers on those challenges where different parties don't agree on delivery.
- At present, public bodies have a duty to have "regard" to a National Park Plan. This needs to be strengthened. Currently it's seen like a single plan, not a joint working approach. This will require the early involvement of different bodies, organisations and stakeholders in National Park Plans.
- National Park Authorities should ensure that stakeholders will be accountable. This will help to avoid 'woolly wording' of responsibilities and expectations.

Challenges

- At present there is no positive impact of being inside National Parks and the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). How can this be addressed?
- It is crucial to balance both the potential negative and positive impacts of increased tourism, there is a conflict between local and national policies on tourism.
- There is an opportunity to learn from Wales with regard to issues of second homes.
- Infrastructure pressures are very acute in the Highlands at present, how can we ensure this is addressed? This needs to be considered if a new National Park is designated.
- Current regulations on the exclusion of wind turbines inside National Parks may need to be reviewed given that the adoption of renewable energy is essential for meeting energy targets.
- We need to be sure to avoid delineating local communities.
- How to get five-year plans to meet long-term objectives?
- It is currently quite difficult to sign up to things like Cairngorms Connect, more movement and flexibility is needed in initiatives like this one.
- There are currently boundary issues with National Parks, e.g. with different landowners. How can these be managed?
 - Perhaps through stakeholder coordination and consolidation of borders. For example, RAMSAR, SPA, SAC and other different boundaries.
- Is there a positive or negative impact to being outside or inside the boundaries?

Opportunities

- National Parks offer a choice to make connectivity work at a landscape scale.
- National Park Authorities need to act as a Convening Hub for landscape initiatives.
- They have the potential to direct "nature networks".
- National Parks need to have the power to trial new ideas.
- Community engagement is extremely important. How do we ensure community voice and representation? There is a real opportunity through the designation of a new National Park to do things differently.
- Monitoring and baseline data are essential. The aims need to be evidence based.
- There are opportunities to create effective buffer zones, through relationship building and the correct support.
- We need to consider how to balance tourist numbers versus conservation. There are opportunities to *manage* tourism pressures in National Parks.
- Could being within the National Park confirm autocratic protection to some level on sensitive habitats?
- Environmental Impact Assessment regulations on developments, rotational land use change and National Park Authority influence a national land use strategy to deliver those objectives. There should be a link to agricultural support.
- National Park Authorities should have a key role in Regional Land Use Partnerships.

Question 3: Where should we designate a new National Park and why?

- The Scottish Borders could promote a less-visited area and raise its profile. For example, Cheviots and Galloway.
- Areas that have potential for restoration. For example, overgrazed, degraded moorland.
- There could be value in favouring areas where there is community 'buy-in' already.
- What is the impact of tourism and the impact of biodiversity status?
- The socio-economic impacts of designation have the potential to be damaging so need consideration.
- Should National Parks be large or small? For example, if smaller areas are considered this may get better engagement of local communities.
- The extent needs to be considered, where are the boundaries?
- The designation of a National Park may potentially affect the housing market. This could price out local people, through second homes, Airbnb and houses not being affordable when a National Park is designated. This is a fear for some local communities.
- A 'nice' area is not a good enough reason, it should be issue based. For example, an area that has the potential for restoration.
- Motivations and desired outcome must be clear.
- It is important to consider that a National Park has a vision for the future so will change and a National Park in the wrong area could exacerbate rather than solve issues.
- Should National Parks fit with international ideas of what National Parks are?
- There was some discussion about the idea of National City Parks. Could this confuse the public and devalue the existing National Parks?