

RSE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION BLOGS: ROGER CROFTS

NATIONAL PARKS

What's the problem?

The adjustments to the aims of national parks and changes in the byelaws in the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill 20026, have missed a fundamental point of the role of Scottish national parks in supporting action to address the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. There was really no justification in the modest rewording of the aims as they will not make any difference to how the national park authorities operate. Although the addition of aims of “restoring and regenerating biodiversity in the area, and mitigating and adapting to climate change” are welcomed, the confusion of the aims is compounded by the addition of five other aims unrelated to these crises. In other words, Scottish national parks are about use and activity within the designated area which can be to the detriment of the natural environment. Indeed, Scottish national parks can be described as ‘all things to all people” and therefore do not subscribe to the accepted international definition of a national park propounded by IUCN. What is also usually ignored in decision making about activities in the national parks is the ultimate duty of national park authority to favour nature when there is a conflict between it and other aims of the park. This is made clear in Section 9 (6) of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 *“In exercising its functions a National Park authority must act with a view to accomplishing the purpose set out in subsection (1); but if, in relation to any matter, it appears to the authority that there is a conflict between the National Park aim set out in section 1(a) and other National Park aims, the authority must give greater weight to the aim set out in section 1(a)”*; which states that *“the aim is to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area”*.

It is over 20 years since the two national parks were established. More recently, the consultation on proposals for a Galloway National Park led to vociferous opposition from communities and land owners. The basic issue is that Scotland has not resolved what national parks are for – social and economic development zones or nature and landscape restoration areas. The approach epitomised by the proponents of the Galloway National Park, for instance, is that its establishment would be the single silver bullet for resolving provision of affordable rural housing, providing jobs in rural areas and increasing educational attainment. Even the Scottish Government’s assessors questioned this and commented that many of the duties which the proponents wished to have included would result in overlap, duplication and confusion of what the proposed national park’s purpose was.

What is needed?

Cross party support is needed for a fundamental review of the roles and responsibilities of the national parks to address the basic issue of what are they for and what is their primary purpose in the light of the climate change and biodiversity crises. The outcome of this review should set the basis for revision of the aims and purposes in revised

legalisation and give an unambiguous signal of the national intent in the continuation of the two existing parks and the criteria for any new proposals.

RURAL JOBS

What's the problem?

Jobs for managing environmental assets are now available and demand is likely to increase in the future. The growth areas are as follows. Renewable energy companies require skilled staff to maintain the infrastructure throughout its operational lifetime and for the decommissioning period. Skilled labour is needed to meet the government's plans expand forests and woodlands and for felling and restocking. Likewise, there are jobs needed for the substantial improvement of woodland and forestry management trees in their natural ecosystems and for repairing the severe environmental damage being caused by bad forestry practices. Equally, the demand for resorting nature and natural systems, for example in river catchments to improve biodiversity and increase flood resilience, on peatlands and other carbon rich soils and on agricultural land to meet the ambition of regenerative agriculture all require skilled practitioners. However, the potential workforce is not available because of poor job training opportunities locally, and lack of incentives for potential employees to stay locally because of shortage of affordable housing, diminishing access to health and welfare services in rural communities and closure of small schools. All of these factors are increasing the move of working age population and young families to towns and cities.

Opportunities for the creation of rural jobs in managing and improving environmental assets are being missed. Governments nationally, regionally and locally are not collectively focussing on meeting the opportunities. Nationally, the rural strategy promised by the Scottish Government has been on the agenda for some years, but nothing has materialised as presumably it is not high enough on the political agenda. Regionally and locally, the three enterprise agencies and local councils have responsibilities covering all of the opportunity areas, but there is no concerted effort to overcome the problem as a result the opportunities being missed. Furthermore, much of the work on the ground is being done by labour contracted from outside the geographical areas of need with little or no benefit accruing to local communities. Addressing the problems and realising the opportunities requires a multifaceted and multi-party approach. Sadly, most of government at all levels continues to operate in silos when concerted planning and action is needed.

What is needed?

Government at all levels needs to rise to the opportunity and work with industry and facility providers to move from opportunity lost to securing social, economic and environmental gains. This means government and business, nationally and locally, implementing a concerted multiparty collaboration to address the issues and activate plans for meeting the priorities. The key business sectors have indicated a willingness to work collaboratively to address this issue in certain parts of Scotland where the need is obvious, such as in Galloway. It is essential that the agencies of government, such as Scottish Forestry and Forest and Land Scotland, the enterprise agencies, NatureScot and SEPA, and the agriculture departments come together with businesses to devise

the solutions. The first step is agreeing the scale, timing and specification of the job opportunities, so that secondly, the secondary and tertiary education authorities, SRUC and the Further Education Colleges devise training plans to be delivered locally in the areas where the jobs opportunities are arising. This means that the training and skills providers need to work out of their normal boxes, work with industry who can specify the needs, and make provision which makes sense for those living locally and seeking the skills. Centralised facilities at a distance from the living and activity areas are not the answer, whereas on site in the area backed with facilitated remote learning is the way forward. Alongside this, is to ensure that there is a ready supply of land for affordable housing and for incentives for house building companies to make the provision in local communities.

RESOLVING THE LOCAL DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

What's the problem?

Local communities are frequently contacted by national and local authorities and government agencies on strategies, plans and proposals for development. The formal machinery for communities to respond are Community Councils. Meanwhile, consultation has become an industry requiring enormous amounts of voluntary effort by *ad hoc* groups, and by charitable organisations. However, they do not have the power or authority to concert local opinion and action. Local communities feel that having responded, they are not listened to and wonder why they should invest such voluntary effort in responding while have no real say on the decision nor its implementation. This is commonly termed the 'local democratic deficit'. It has resulted in part from the reorganisation of local government under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 which removed the small units of local governance at Burgh level and brought in a more overarching two-tier structure. This was reformed by the Local Government etc (Scotland) Act 1994 which abolished the two tier system and established the present unitary authority system. However, Community Councils remain, but with no power nor authority nor resources.

Local Plans through the town and country planning system have supposed to move matters forwards, but who is in control when it comes to development? The public authority in concert with the developer all too often. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 aims to empower and encourage Community Planning, but it is the responsibility of government bodies rather than local communities to undertake this work, so it is questionable whether 'empowerment' has been achieved by local communities.

Applying the internationally accepted scale of consultation, Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation, of eight levels, 'consultation' is only half way up the ladder of public engagement. Arnstein describes the fourth level in a category he describes as 'tokensim', which also includes informing (i.e. 'you have been told' in Scottish parlance) and placation (i.e. to keep the community quiet). The three higher levels are labelled 'citizen control' and consist of partnership, delegation and citizen control as one rises up the ladder. The democratic deficit at local community level is abundantly clear

despite claims to the contrary in Scotland, for example consultation on schemes for afforestation, renewable energy and flood protection and many others. This is systematic of the 'central knows best' approach of government and retaining power and authority centrally.

The matter is made worse by the refusal of public authorities to empower local communities to undertake projects of their own. The only chink is through funding from Lottery sources and funding from wind power community benefit funds.

What is needed?

The new government and the newly elected MSPs should be seriously considering the local government system in the light of experience and practice since the fundamental changes in structures in the 1970s and 1990s and the serious lack of local accountability and local democratic leverage in decision making. No political party seems to want to address this issue and yet it is of great concern to citizens who are frustrated that their views on strategies, plans and proposals are ignored, and they have no power or authority to act, despite the 2015 Act. The role of Community Councils in the forthcoming decades needs to be radically revised or scraped altogether and replaced by a more effective system to give communities power, with authority and resources to undertake actions which they see as beneficial to the local community. This strays beyond the town and country planning system to issues of education and community social provision and into ability to influence major and small land use changes affecting communities and addressing climate change, biodiversity improvement, flood mitigation and nature restoration locally.