

REFLECTIONS ON THE GALLOWAY NATIONAL PARK PROPOSALS

With the passage of time since the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary's decision in May 2025 that the case for proceeding with the designation of a Galloway National Park is not justified, it is useful to reflect on the lessons learned.

I write as someone who lives part of the time in the area, lobbied against the over ambitious proposals from the pro campaign and with some experience of the previous national park consultations in Scotland and experience of similar situations in other countries.

I conclude that

1. The Cabinet Secretary's as justified as all experience shows that making decisions to go ahead when there is a large level of resistance puts the issue back for years.
2. The NatureScot Board was entirely justified in making its own response public as its statutory role as adviser on all natural heritage matters. That the board were broadly in favour of the national park proposition does not negate nor undermine its clear response as the Reporter under the 2001 National Parks (Scotland) Act.
3. NatureScot carried out its statutory role very effectively, and clearly separated its roles as statutory Reporter and government adviser and made their advice from both respects available publicly. It was given an impossible job because of the ridiculously short 14 week consultation period, the overegged proposals by the proponents and then the unsavoury retaliation by the anti-campaign.
4. The proponents were complacent in assuming that the political vibes were in their favour. More specifically, they had failed to address and discuss with the land owning interests what the future would hold, particularly in the light of falling farm incomes in the uplands and the switch to renewable energy and to commercial forestry, despite the fact that they were warned to do this a long time ago.
5. The opponents to the proposals were outrageous in their antics, and in particular in their totally reprehensible behaviour towards public servants doing their job and their families living on the area. The government failed to step in to calm the situation and defend the role that parliament had given to NatureScot.
6. The Scottish Government had a political and policy imperative to drive forward a rapid consultation process to meet a parliamentary timetable for designation of the new national park before the 2026 elections. This was a grave mistake, as proved to be the case with the mounting and highly funded opposition campaign. The government has to be held accountable for the consequences which have not delivered anything positive for the area and more worryingly have caused great distress in NatureScot staff and their families living locally, and caused division within previously stable communities.

7. The Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership should be given guaranteed resources for the next decade to deliver an expanded programme of activity to protect the core area and to enhance the engagement with communities in the transition and development zones.
8. Follow up action by central and local government and agencies on real issues beyond the national park which are urgent does not appear to be taking place.

I set out a series of lessons for wider discussion and debate in the hope that if there are consultations on future national parks these will be taken into account. I have also added the lessons that are obvious from international experience.

1. The role of the statutory Reporter

There was a great deal of criticism about the appointment of NatureScot as the statutory Reporter. Claims that they were biased in favour in particular were made. What is clear is that both staff and Board members of Nature Scot spent a great deal of time visiting and listening to the arguments from all perspectives. More particularly, staff had a great deal of experience from the previous consultations on Cairngorms and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Parks proposals. In those roles they were congratulated by all parties on the transparency and fairness of their work. In the Galloway consultation it is indisputable that they put even greater effort into understanding the issues and meeting all parties throughout the area. This is a classic case of 'shooting the messenger'. However, the Scottish Government failed to make clear throughout the process that NatureScot had a defined statutory role under the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2001.

Lesson 1 The Scottish Government needs to consistently tell the public about the statutory role of its appointed agent.

2. The scrutiny of the case by the proposers

It was clear that none of the cases for national park status put forward by proponents in response to the invitation from the Scottish Government were full proof according to the government's scrutineers, albeit the Galloway case was relatively speaking better than the others. I concur with that assessment.

The Scottish Government Assessment Panel made three very telling comments on the Galloway proposals:

1. On the aspects of relative social and economic of the area nominated (employment, income, education, health, and access to services) they commented that the "the role was not something that national parks were uniquely capable of addressing".
2. The Panel noted in relation to land use matters that "the national park could add an additional layer of organisational complexity".

3. The Panel noted in relation to the evidence quoted by the proposers on support for the national park, that the “evidence of support for the national park was not universal”.

These points were in the official documentation, but the Scottish Government never made it clear about these concerns when they set off the consultation about the Galloway proposals. If they had done so, then maybe a more nuanced and focussed consultation would have resulted.

Lesson 2 The Scottish Government should make clear at the beginning of any future consultation on a national park the concerns of the scrutineers so that the debates are properly informed from the outset.

3. The pro campaign

The pro campaign appeared to be well intentioned, but basically it failed to understand the way to gain additional government resources to the area. Proposing a park authority which could address many social and economic problems facing the area was a fundamental mistake on a number of counts. First, a park authority cannot address most of these as they are the remit of other authorities, particularly local councils for example in respect of affordable housing, and South of Scotland Enterprise in respect of economic development. Second, they totally failed to address the issue of changing land use, particularly the continuing commercial afforestation and installation of wind farms in the uplands and the effect of upgrading of electricity transmission systems. Third, they managed to consult many people without being honest about the limitations of their case, especially in relation to the first two points above.

They also seem to have been sent signals politically that the government were on their side. So that led to a complacency in their approach. And also led to the argument that this mechanism was the way forward for the area.

The fact they claim to be absolutely furious (their words) with the NatureScot advice and the government’s decision, shows that they failed to play a more nuanced role in what a national park could and could not deliver.

Lesson 3 Proponents should be open and honest about what can be achieved if national park status is to be awarded. In particular, they must address how a national park authority can have influence on land use change.

4. The anti-campaign

It was inevitable that an anti-campaign would materialise. That emanating from people in Newton Stewart was entirely reasonable and demonstrated that many of the issues of the area had not been thoroughly debated and discussed and solutions sought. What took many by surprise and caused much aggravation and discord in otherwise stable

communities was the large scale of funding and the vociferous nature of the land owning interests known to have funded the anti-campaign behind the scenes. As noted above, their enmity towards NatureScot staff and their families was totally inexcusable. The campaign had a point about the issue of land rights, land use change and future government support, but it could have brought forward its own proposals and begun a dialogue with government on these matters in the context of a national park or otherwise. Sadly, it appears to have chosen a more belligerent campaigning approach.

Lesson 4 Campaigning bodies should be moderate in the way they address their concerns and especially in relation to their dealing with public servants and their families. Government has a duty to make its position clear on the unacceptability of anti-social behaviour.

5. The time scales of the process

The Scottish Government's commitment to the establishment of a third national park arose out of the Bute House Agreement between the SNP Administration and its coalition partner the Scottish Green Party. Despite the collapse of the coalition, the administration decided to go ahead with a public consultation. However, the time available between that decision and the closure of parliamentary business ahead of the elections to the Scottish Parliament in March 2026 was very short. First, the government proposed rewording of some of the subsidiary purposes of national parks through the Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill; there was never any intent to fundamentally change the terms of the 2001 Act despite requests to do so from various sources, including the Royal Society of Edinburgh. As that Bill was unlikely to gain parliamentary approval until well into the 2025-26 session, moving forward on a consultation on a new park was likely to be out of kilter with that process. In fact, a Designation Order for a new National Park would have to pass through all of its parliamentary stages before the closure of business in March 2026. This meant a foreshortened consultation process locally and nationally. This proved to be a grave mistake. It was as though the political process was the driving force compared with the more measured and ultimately successful approaches used for the consultations on the two previous national parks. NatureScot had an impossible job of achieving any measure of consensus in a 14 week period, despite its best efforts in visiting the area and holding open meetings all-round the area. The fact that NatureScot has been blamed by many locally is typical of the old adage 'shoot the messenger', i.e. the public agency, so that the government of the day is protected from criticisms.

Lesson 5 A long, consultative process is needed to allow local and national communities of interest to provide their views. Facilitation through appropriate means works well as was proven for the two previous national parks. Mediation is the order of the day and this takes time.

6. Losses and gains?

The major loss is lack of interest and lack of new government resources being directed to the area. It is typical of government to breathe a sigh of relief and move on to other matters. However, there are pressing concerns in the area, such a poor educational attainment, poor job prospects for school leavers, lack of affordable housing especially for the elderly and for young families, and the totally inadequate A75 and A77 roads as the vital supply lines to Northern Ireland through the Cairnryan ferries. The government centrally and locally through councils and agencies needs to address these issues as a priority.

The other major loss arises from enmity between the parties in an area which rarely if ever experienced this situation. This will take a long time to disappear and for relations to be rebuilt.

On the plus side, it has raised the importance of this ‘forgotten corner of Scotland’.

Lesson 6 After future national park consultations central and local government and agencies should identify a programme of action and delivery on priority issues if a national park is not established.

7. What are the lessons learned from international experience?

Here I merely repeat the headline lessons I have personally learned from international experience through my long standing involvement in IUCN’S World Commission on Protected Areas, that I included in my Briefing Note widely circulated in October 2024.

Lesson i Nature first: the protection and restoration of nature and natural processes should be the primary objective.

Lesson ii Other objectives are important but of second order: social, cultural, economic, scientific, educational are regarded as supporting the primary objective.

Lesson iii National parks should be chosen within a bioregional context

Lesson iv National parks should cover a large area

Lesson v The speed of development of proposals must take into account the views of local communities, and historical rights and practices.

Lesson vi The contract between national and local interests must secure a working partnership for the future

Lesson vii Removal of perverse effects of policies is essential

Lesson viii Adequate resources need to be secured in perpetuity

Lesson ix Novel governance systems to include all communities of interest are vital

I would be happy to discuss my observations with NatureScot and with the Scottish Government.

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