

## **National Parks for Scotland**

**Saturday, 26 June 1999**

### **Transcript of Presentation to the Scottish Branch of the Royal Society of Arts**

Thank you very much for the opportunity to discuss National Parks for Scotland. What I want to do first is just give a little bit of the history of why we haven't had them when England and Wales have for fifty years; talk a little bit about our general proposals, and talk specifically about the proposals for the first park here in Loch Lomond & the Trossachs. The book of the film is at the back, so please take one of those - that's our formal advice to Government.

#### **Why not National Parks?**

So, why haven't we got National Parks in Scotland yet?. I think there is a combination of reasons most of which revolve around the term 'vested interests'. The vested interests of landowners who felt that having National Parks would impose systems upon them which they didn't much like. Recreational interests who wanted the freedom of the hills but didn't much like the idea of having imposed solutions which they have seen particularly in the National Parks of North America. Farming interests who were very concerned about not being able to continue to farm in their own way and becoming park keepers as opposed to food producers. Local authorities who were very worried about losing their powers to a new body, particularly their planning and traffic management powers, because that was the essence of many of the early proposals for National Parks. And also some elements of the Scottish psyche which said 'Well just because England and Wales have them, why do we have to have them?'

The irony in all of this is that the first National Park system in the world was devised by a Scot, John Muir of Dunbar, but only when he went to America. That was the real flowering of land for "conservation in perpetuity". That is a wonderful phrase: protecting land for people's good now and for ever more. The essence of National Parks is, therefore, a contract on behalf of the nation.

So perhaps it wasn't surprising, therefore, that following many reports proposing National Parks for Scotland that the decision was taken in the same month that the majority of the voters of Scotland voted for devolution and their own Parliament and tax raising powers. So in September 1978 Donald Dewar, then the Secretary of State for Scotland, said 'We shall have National Parks'.

There has been a long history of development of proposals for National Parks in Scotland, with a particularly a fertile period of thinking in the early post-war period: that wonderful period of the reconstruction of Britain in all its many dimensions. And some excellent reports were written about nature protection, about recreation and access to the countryside, including an important report chaired by Lord Ramsey, which proposed a system of National Parks for Scotland. There wasn't a political will then, neither was there in the mid-70s when the then Countryside Commission for Scotland proposed a system of National Parks under the heading 'special parks', (because it realised the tendentiousness of the term 'National Parks'). Nor was there in the late 1980s when the then Conservative administration asked the Countryside Commission for Scotland to come up with proposals for 'popular mountain areas' and how to deal with them; And it recommended establishment of National Parks. I happened to be the man in the Ministry at the time receiving these proposals and advising Ministers. I knew darn well that there was no point in me saying these are good ideas because the Ministers would just say "no". There was no **political will**. So, my conclusions from this very brief view of history is that without the political will we can't move forward on National Parks.

### **New beginnings**

Obviously, there was a resonance between National Parks for Scotland and feeling the nationhood at the referendum in September 1978. It is quite interesting talking to Donald Dewar: he had no doubt whatsoever that this was a good thing to do, he had a feeling about it. I suppose as an MP for a Glasgow constituency he could feel that this wasn't just a rural issue, this was an issue for the whole of Scotland. It wasn't, therefore, something that if rural areas said "No, we are not having it" he could ignore the feelings of his constituents and fellow, residents in Glasgow or he could ignore the many practical problems.

So, what the Government did ask Scottish Natural Heritage, which is a government quango paid for by all of you the tax payers to advise on natural heritage (on wildlife, on landscape, on recreation and access to the countryside), please develop some proposals for a Scottish solution, please do not give us a diluted English solution. So we said fine, we were very happy to do that and the result of our work is in the book at the back.

So, the first thing we did was to see what we could learn from the experience (the good, the bad, and the indifferent) from other countries in the world which have National Parks, including England and Wales in the light of the review undertaken there in the 1990s. So, if I could forebear your tolerance for a moment I shall summarise our findings from international experience.

We hired some guys who knew what they were talking about, who were very familiar with National Parks, to work with those of us in SNH who also knew a great deal, so that we could get the essence of the best practice. The first lesson is that we must link wildlife with landscape and public enjoyment. You can't separate those particular elements. Second, we must include the cultural element of the parks, remembering that in Scotland most of the land is a result of the interaction between humankind and nature over 5000 years. The third lesson is perhaps the most significant of all. We must not ignore the local communities. The opportunities for their benefit socially and economically have to be built into the system. Though of course, inevitably, if you are trying to develop parks with wildlife, landscape, public enjoyment and local benefit there is going to be tensions. So, fourthly, there must be a way of saying well when push comes to shove, so to speak, where do you stop? We felt very strongly that the international experience was indicating that we must look at the basic environmental resources and when there are conflicts they must take precedence.

The other major issue is how to establish National Parks. Many people feel that the difficulty with any form of nature designation is that it is done top-down, it is imposed on local communities. So the first lesson from international experience on this topic is that we've got to get the locals involved and so we built into our proposals the

notion that any constituency, local or national, can come forward with proposals for the Parliament to consider. Second, the issue about boundaries - should there be large areas or should there be small areas? We feel that at least there should be some sort of entity within the area but we need to make sure that if there are large settlements and large economic development areas outside the park what happens there benefits the park rather than undermines it. And of course thirdly there is the age old story that we can't do it for nothing and in the majority of countries it's central government, the national government, that provides for it all.

### **Proposals for Scotland**

So, if you distil all of this experience what should our vision be for National Parks for Scotland? First, there should be a greater clarity of the purpose for some of Scotland's most special areas. Second, how many? Ministers so far have talked about a handful of National Parks. Donald Dewar has talked about Loch Lomond & the Trossachs first followed by the Cairngorms and possibly two or three others. Some of you in this room might have other ideas and, indeed, as might I. We have come up with various other suggestions, which we have, so to speak, slipped into the system as possible ideas. Possibly the Flow Country of Caithness and Sutherland, possibly the Inner Hebrides, the Small Isles. Third, within National Parks there should be much higher standards of environmental stewardship, and by that I mean the way the land is managed for agriculture and for forestry and the way that the water resources are used. Fourth, that we should have a contract between the national interest represented now by our Parliament and local interests. And fifth we should try out in any way possible all sorts of techniques for achieving sustainable development. And if that sounds a hard word for Saturday morning, really that's trying to bring together the importance of looking after our environment as a major asset, the water, the soil, the air, along with improving economic prosperity and social well-being.

So our specific proposals were that the purposes of protecting and enhancing the natural heritage and the economic and social development had to be supported. The balance of interest when there was a problem should favour the long term protection of the natural resources. We needed to have very clear criteria to select National Parks with no fudges. We should promote local community involvement

throughout. We should have as a major document a National Park Plan, which sets out what we are trying to achieve over what timescale. Developing the plan would be the responsibility of a National Park body which would have quite specific powers. The park body would have predominantly local representatives. We did not describe what they should be: whether they should be locally-elected councillors, local community councillors or other ways - we felt that that is a political decision, but we set out a series of options. There should be a shared responsibility between the national and the local interests for the preparation of the plan and then its implementation. And also, and I think this is a very critical one is that our National Parks for Scotland should involve the marine areas as well; conservation and enjoyment doesn't stop at the high-water mark.

So we tried to influence what might be in the National Parks of Scotland Bill that hopefully will go before the Scottish Parliament sometime this Autumn. We see their purpose as follows: "The National Parks of Scotland are areas of outstanding natural heritage of special importance to the nation where management in perpetuity (in other words the long-term vision) to safeguard and enrich biodiversity, natural beauty and amenity, the natural systems which support these qualities and the cultural heritage; promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the soil, the water, the woodlands; promote social well-being and economic prosperity and provide for an enriched enjoyment and understanding by the public."

So I hope that that is the sort of thing that at least one of you in this room will be debating and giving a favourable steer when it comes to the Transport and Environment Committee at the Parliament.

What about the criteria for National Parks? We shouldn't just collectively think of them as a problem, we should select them because they have a resonance with the national psyche - they have got to be of national natural heritage importance. They ought to be reasonably coherent, in other words not too big and not too small. They should have support nationally and locally. They should be areas where there are needs and problems to be sorted out and benefits to accrue. And we need to recognise that within a National Park area there will be a great deal of complexity and we've got to deal with it.



.....

And the bred bonny ash that sits over the burn

What would the world do once bereft of wet and wilderness

Let them be left, oh let them be left

the wildness and wet

Long live the .... and the wilderness yet.'

I think if you have been to Inversnaid and sat by the burn, you will have experienced the wonderful images which he beautifully captures there. But it's the manifestation of the images which you capture as you walk around much of this area that give it the real sense of place.

And, of course, our present view of the area seen in different sorts of light: from the little island of Inchcailloch at the bottom end of Loch Lomond (which we have the good fortune to own and which I hope if you haven't been you will go and have a walk around and take a picnic). The majesty of the Ben itself. There are those you think 'the ben' is Ben Nevis but I think in this part of the world quintessentially 'the Ben' is Ben Lomond, the wonderful mountain. And, of course, the beauty of the Trossachs, the hills, as a whole, as seen from Ben Ledi looking over Lochs Venachar and Katrine to Ben Lomond.

There are many experiences of nature that we can have in these areas. If you have ever experienced a brochan spectre it is really quite dramatic; that's actually my shadow in the slide from this peculiar lighting condition which you get in these areas. Another thing, it's very evocative of the nature - extremely exciting and awe-inspiring. And, of course, the fun of being out in the hills as well, particularly if you are a young boy, as my son was there. But also the importance of the natural environment in this area. In Loch Lomond there are some very important fish, the powan as well as some perhaps some not so important and rather irritating introduced fish, the puch, where we have the potential problem of the interaction between the introduced fish and the native fish. Important birds - there are major populations of capercaillie, for instance, on the islands in Loch Lomond which people don't realise, given the fact the bird is on the decline yet again. It is important for its natural history, particularly

the period when the ice last melted away, about ten thousand or so years ago. We have major moraines from that stage and it is called now, internationally, the Loch Lomond Readvance.

And if you have ever been through the fairy channels in the islands of Loch Lomond you will see not the beauty of the area but the tremendous tranquillity and think quite hard about what is below those waters. Because, of course, the loch itself is curious. It is a lowland loch and a highland loch. It is a lowland loch with islands and quite shallow south of the Highland Boundary Fault which runs from Conic Hill and Inchcailoch out in a south-south-west direction. And north of that it is a highland loch, very narrow, very deep. And its importance is best captured by the different types of natural heritage designation in the area - Sites of Special Scientific Interest, for example, internationally important oak wood. (And I am sure you have seen that beautiful hue on the east shore of the loch in the Spring as the oak woods come into bloom.) Together with the landscape of the area which means that it is a National Scenic Area in the heart of the loch itself and also into the Trossachs, particularly around Loch Achray. The fact that a lot of the map is covered with these designations is the best manifestation of its importance for landscape and wildlife.

## **(2) Why Loch Lomond & the Trossachs? The negatives.**

That's the plus side but there are some issues. If it had been a very bright sunny day today we would probably have seen congestion on the road up past Balmaha to Rowardennan as traffic is a major problem. Or if you had been to Milarrochy Bay day a few years ago, you would have seen total chaos and congestion. And, of course, all the usual problems as a result of lots of visitors who perhaps have less care for the countryside than one would help. Not just leaving rubbish, but burning it and burning the trees with it. And some forms of development where you begin to scratch your head about whether our town and country planning system really works, for example, the new hotel on the loch shore at Luss. We all have our own personal views about design, aesthetics and all the rest of it, but it does seem to me to be rather incongruous.

The use of the loch is a key issue arising from its accessibility to 2½ million people within an hour's drive, with plenty of money now to buy expensive kit, easy to get down to the waterside and launch your jet-ski and play macho man. The result is a lot of noise, potential pollution, and conflict with other pursuits, including water-skiing and quieter water-side pursuits. People's desire - having got a boat on the loch - to go and have a picnic on one of the islands is fine, if they do it carefully and don't set trees alight.

Or the management of the water levels in the loch. This is a major reservoir supplying water to Glasgow and elsewhere in the Central Belt. At times of very heavy rainfalls it is often very difficult to manage the levels and in a loch of this size with a bit of wind will soon whip up quite a lot of waves and substantial damage along the shoreline occurs. If you have been particularly along the east shore from Balmaha northwards, you will see where the banks have been undermined.

There has been a major transformation in the look of the landscape as the result of forestry development. And there is a major challenge, particularly as you will see at its best, or should I say worst, as you drive over from Aberfoyle to Brig-o-Turk where wall-to-wall Sitka spruce, fine for producing softwood timber to build houses has been planted in an unthinking way over hill tops in one of the most scenic parts of Scotland.

And also, there is perhaps a bit of an "out of sight, out of mind attitude" by local authorities. The area is sub-divided into a number of local authorities. The boundary between Argyll & Bute and Stirling runs right up the middle of Loch Lomond, West Dunbartonshire pops in at the bottom end of the loch, and so it is at the geographical extremity of all these local authorities. And each has got other priorities elsewhere, all of them: West Dunbartonshire obviously in the Leven valley, Argyll & Bute particularly in Knapdale, Kintyre and the islands, and Stirling in the heart of the Carse of Stirling itself.

If we do nothing in Loch Lomond then we might ultimately have a small wildlife sanctuary totally surrounded by car parks, camping sites and the roads will be blocked off. I think in many respects that is the epitome of why we need to have a

National Park here: this is such a wonderful area of national status where we need to make sure that we value it, that we improve its management so that we can enjoy it better and so that it is handed on to successors.

### **(3) Specific proposals**

So, way back in the dim and distant past of 1990, the Government decided, having said to Countryside Commission for Scotland “We don’t want to have a National Park”, to set up a working party, chaired by Sir Peter Hutchison who is a local resident. The working party, whose terms of reference were drawn up by me on the instruction of the then Ministers, Mr Forsyth and Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, would not allow it to look at the National Park solution but Peter is a wily operator and had a very clever annex which brought forward the other proposals. It did take things forward: it got all the parties round the table, both national and local authorities, national bodies and local interests, communities, landowners, farmers, recreation users.

So at least we had a vision for the management of the area. What we did not have, because the Government of the day wouldn’t allow it, was how do you put that vision into practice. So there were then protracted periods of consultation, including one led by the local authorities, trying to tease out what the people themselves wanted, And then, from late 1997 right through last year, we instigated a period of consultation, trying to get opinions about the National Park idea. And it was very clear: the headline was that people wanted to have a National Park in this area. Yes, there were concerns about what impact would it have on farming, what impact would it have on recreational use of certain areas of Loch Achray or Loch Lomond, would it stop people being able to drive cars to certain places here or there, etc? But they were the technical details compared with the tremendous support for the idea of the park which in that sense justified the Government’s proposals.

Our specific proposals for the Park are conservation and enhancement of the natural and cultural heritage, sustainable use of the natural resources of water, air, timber and soil, social well-being of the local communities, hopefully greater economic prosperity, and enjoyment and understanding of the special values of this area. A strong National Park plan should be developed involving all interests, a whole range

of powers given to National Park Authority for the area. The great source of argument has been and continues to be between me and my colleagues and some of, should we say, the more traditional National Park views, borne of the English experiences that the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park Body must have town and country planning powers taken from the three local authorities. We don't agree with that at all. We think that that would mean that they would spend all their time dealing with dormer window extensions and bathroom conversions and all the rest of it, instead of dealing with these much bigger issues that I have been talking about. But the Park Authority should be - and we coined this phrase - "a principal partner". And this is something we have negotiated with the Local Authorities Association so that we were able to present this proposal jointly to John Sewel, the Minister, and he signed up for it. So rather than this authority taking powers from the local authorities, which had been a bug-bear in the earlier proposals, we now have a deal. Ok, it is going to be quite complex to operate. The one quite specific thing for Loch Lomond & the Trossachs is that it would be the development control authority, in other words it could stop building conversions and new buildings if it felt it wasn't in keeping with the Park's objectives.

There are also proposals for recreation and visitor management, so that there would be Ranger Service for the whole area on both land and water, and for managing the West Highland Way which cuts right through the area in a north/south direction; powers to make by-laws, particularly important in controlling water management; interpretation facilities; visitor information services; water-based recreation management and regulation of those activities. And, also very significant in this area, bearing in mind the congestion on the roads, traffic management powers, which rest with the local authorities at the moment - the Park Authority we believe should have the responsibility for developing a traffic management strategy to promote integrated road, rail and water-borne public transport, and be able to ensure traffic management schemes. De-coding that latter one, what it really means is that we ought to be able to shut off some roads if they are likely to become too congested and institute other ways of giving access, like shuttle-bus schemes.

The most delicate of all the issues is where are the boundaries. We have been typically public-servants and said there are a number of options here. Here are the

criteria, but we believe that the area embraced in red on the map has to be the core area and whatever is done must have that area in the National Park; it would embrace Callander, Aberfoyle, Drymen, Balloch, it would go over to the head of Loch Long and Arrochar and into the Arrochar Alps, but be south of Glen Dochart, Crianlarich and Lochearnhead. How far the boundary goes out from there is a matter of great debate and I am sure that there will be great debate on this particular issue. One of the critical considerations is what happens at gateway settlements to the National to indicate that they are the things which happen there that are different from what happens elsewhere, so perhaps there is a logic for having some of the settlements on the Stirling-Drymen road inside the Park, obviously places like Callander, but should Killin be in the Park? That stretches some people's imagination a bit too far about Loch Lomond & The Trossachs, it certainly stretches mine. So there are some interesting issues there.

But, irrespective of where you draw the boundary, it is clear to us that you can have different zones for different purposes, management is predominantly for farming and forestry and recreational activity within the Park, and the Park Plan would set down particular policies and proposals for that purpose, which would be agreed by all of the parties, and there would be both incentives and some compliance to make sure they were put into practice. So if farmers said we are not subscribing to that, well we would argue they should not get any money out of the Common Agriculture Policy.

There is a cost to implementing these proposals. The relevant figure on this is we reckon probably one-and-a-half million pounds on top of what is being spent in the area at the moment on behalf of Government, by ourselves, and by local authorities. So, it is quite clear, and we have said this to the new Minister, that there is no point in going forward with these proposals for the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park unless you vote the financial means to putting them into practice.

#### **(4) Action now**

Time doesn't stop and we have been doing a lot of planning and taking action. Because of concerns about managing water-based recreation on Loch Lomond, we in SNH have funded a water-borne Ranger Service, we made provision for the purchase of the Police boat, implemented a series of by-laws, and a boat-registration

scheme so that all boats on the loch should have a registration mark, and that includes jet skis as well, and rangers who patrol the situation from places like Millarochy Bay where they will quickly catch people if they are on the loch without a registration. Also, there is zoning on the loch, so that there are some areas where you cannot use engines at all and even within those areas you are restricted by the speed that you can go.

there has been substantial provision of visitor facilities - a great deal of expenditure, public expenditure, on visitor centres, such as at Luss, also others in Aberfoyle, and new one at Balmaha. The aim is to explain the importance of this area, help people to orientate, to know what they can do in the area and, hopefully, based in a building of a design which fits into the landscape.

Much progress has been made on the management of particular areas. On the island of Inchcailloch, which we own as part of the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve, we seek to explain to people what we are trying to achieve there: keeping the old oaks growing and getting their acorns to germinate and grow new oaks, but also allowing access, picnics and overnight stays. In other parts, we have supported the Trossachs Trundler, as it is called, trying to take private traffic off the road by using a shuttle bus. In other areas there has been effort on repairing footpaths and creating new footpaths using all the practical knowledge and experience we have gained over many years of this sort of work, in this case using tree stumps.

Where there are serious problems, we know more serious effort is required. At Millarochy Bay is what I would call a very sensible engineering solution. You can drive down onto the beach, drop your boat or jet ski off, but then you have got to pull your car and the trailer back from the edge. So the set-up is better regulated. If there are a lot of waves in the winter, then the rip rap along the shore will help to absorb that energy and not undermine the edge of the lake. And, also, to recognise that because we have so much forestry, commercial forestry plantations in state ownership, including the Memorial Park on the east side of Loch Lomond itself, should be re-structured so that they look more attractive, are better for wildlife, and have a greater variety of species instead of a single one. These are huge attempts by the Forestry Commission to bring this about. I hope over the next decades that it

is much more attractive to us and more in keeping with the Park. And in the towns and villages around, like in Luss, development control seeks to ensure that we have quality standards in building preservation and building design.

#### **(5) Next steps**

So where do we go from here? The proposals for the Park and National Parks generally are being drawn up at the moment. Obviously, given all of the work that has been going on in the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs area we need to keep up the momentum, so keeping the dialogue going with the local communities and all the other interests is important. And that is being overseen by a Steering Group led by three local authorities with special funding from Scottish Natural Heritage. Also help is required for local communities and the other interests to be better able to participate in them so that they don't feel second fiddle to all the experts from public authorities. Third, it is essential to ensure that developing a strategy which will eventually translate into the National Park Plan for the area is begun. Fourth, making sure that all the three local authorities on board, and we now have that, although I have to say it has taken some time. Fifthly, to and make sure, and this is the critical one, and I still take a deep intake of breath, that all the bits of Government will actually work together to bring this about. There is no point in having a plan unless all the bits of Government, like my organisation, the Forestry Commission, the Department of Agriculture, the local authorities, all pull together to make sure that not only do we have a vision and plan and that we are actually delivering it on the ground.

Well, let's enjoy the rest of our trip to Loch Lomond. I hope you found the talk reasonably informative.

Thank you very much.

