

## Scottish national parks: *overstepping the mark?*

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**National parks are a relatively new entrant to safeguarding and celebrating some of Scotland's highest value landscapes. How successful have they been?**

They were sanctioned by Donald Dewar immediately after the referendum in 1997 to establish the Scottish Parliament. A political moment had arrived. Dewar asked Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to develop proposals for consultation.

The legislation crucially defined the purposes, powers and governance. Novel measures were a socio-economic aim to support communities, but with



Loch An Eilein,  
Rothiemurchus  
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an overriding duty to ensure that conserving and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage was safeguarded when it came to any conflict. Marine areas could be classified as national parks: this was unusual, as other countries needed separate legislation. And the governance system, largely modelled on national parks in England and Wales, had an added item of election of five members by local plebiscite.

Selection criteria were developed and rigorously applied by SNH

with a great deal of national and local consultation. The two most obvious areas were selected: Cairngorms and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs, but the boundaries of each were subject to political manipulation. The extension to Cowal to satisfy political demands from the junior coalition partner, and the determination not to extend to Highland Perthshire to keep an opposition party out of play, were examples. The latter exclusion was overcome when the SNP came to power as a minority administration.

The governance system was originally 25 members, later reduced to 19 for Cairngorms and 17 for Loch Lomond & The Trossachs following a review. Both the original size and the reduced size are far too large for effective governance, but are a reflection of the perceived overriding need for local representation at the expense of national overview.

The development of national park plans was an innovation set out in the legislation in the light of best practice in other parts of the world. The plans were well drawn up by the earlier working parties, and there was unnecessary duplication of effort by the new bodies. But, at least, there is a clear sense of mission and purpose in the plans, they have been up-dated, and they are being reviewed to meet changing circumstances.

The issue of responsibility for determining applications under the town and country planning system has been fudged, with Cairngorms having full powers and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs only advisory powers.

Sense of purpose is one of the most critical aspects of the two parks. The benefits to the management of natural heritage assets from their establishment, other than the work by land owners, are not obvious. Decisions made are highly dubious and arguably a breach of the legislation, especially the approval of a new village opposite Aviemore and the failure to stop the Cononish gold mine development near Tyndrum.

The park authorities have not followed the original proposition to add value, but have strayed into other territory which is properly the responsibility of other public sector bodies. A senior member of the Cairngorms authority regards affordable rural housing as its primary concern! Extraordinary, when that is the responsibility of the local council. Political correctness, rather than sticking to the basic role, has become a problem.

The level of resources granted to the two parks, at £12.4m, is much higher than needed for the concerting and co-ordinating role, and too many staff are employed. As a result, there are no government resources for other novel mechanisms such as maintenance of the UNESCO Geoparks (Lochaber has folded), and for new initiatives such as the proposed Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere.

Should there be more national parks? The Scottish Council of National Parks says yes. National politicians of all parties remain implacably opposed to more than two.

### *My current assessment is:*

#### **Positive**

- comprehensive legislation process for extensions and new parks
- large areas designated
- multi-dimensional approach
- clear plans

#### **Negative**

- over resourced in cash and staff
- outmoded governance style
- inadequate partner engagement
- stray beyond core purpose
- weak in resisting inappropriate development

#### **Jury out**

- real added value beyond existing organisations
- value for public money invested
- improvements in the management of the natural heritage