

THE COUNTRYSIDE COMMISSION FOR SCOTLAND: A SHORT HISTORY

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Established under the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967, the Countryside Commission for Scotland (CCS) existed until 1992. This article assesses why it was set up so late, what it achieved and why was it merged.

Resistance led to delayed start

Care for the countryside in Scotland had long been on some political agendas. Attempts from the late 19th century to enact legislation for national parks and for improved countryside access were thwarted by lack of political will. Local councils maintained continuing opposition not wishing to lose power. NGOs preferred their own approach. And landowning interests did not wish to have their land controlled by government. As a result, the Britain wide National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 only had provisions on nature conservation for Scotland.

What changed almost 20 years later? Increasing leisure time and desire to visit the countryside, and the potential for conflicts between economic development and preservation of natural beauty were critical. The debates styled *The Countryside in 1970* had a formative influence. The proposed establishment of a countryside commission for England and Wales, brought demands for Scotland to be treated similarly. Indeed, Scottish Ministers strongly argued the case to replace the more narrowly preservationist approach with more positive policies for the countryside.

The remit of CCS is simply stated in the preamble to the 1967 Act: *“to make provision for the better enjoyment of the Scottish countryside, for establishment of the CCS and for improvement of recreational and other facilities.....”*

And what did CCS achieve in practice?

To many the enduring legacy of the CCS will be the National Scenic Areas: the 40 areas in the mountains and around the coast representing Scotland’s finest landscapes. They still exist in name, but the legislation has always been and remains weak.

Increasing leisure time meant increasing demands for access to the countryside. CCS led the arguments on a *Parks System for Scotland*, and made progress with the establishment of 4 Regional Parks and 36 Country Parks. That the majority continue, despite reduced funding from local councils, is testament to their need.

Recognition of the importance of the setting of places where people live led to perhaps the Commission’s most important and enduring contribution. Its *Countryside in and around Towns* initiative was to improve the landscape and amenity of areas. This work has gained increasing importance with the health benefits of outdoor experiences through various greenspace initiatives.

Allied to these initiatives was recognition of the need for managing visitors and looking after the facilities. The Commission led the formation of the Scottish Countryside Ranger Service, funded the staff in authorities and on private land, developed internationally recognised training and CPD, and enlisted a new cadre of experts in environmental education and countryside management. Sadly, with funding cuts the ranger services are now a pale effigy of what they were.

The Commission failed to persuade the government of the need for national parks, frequently misreading the political signals. Latterly, at the request from government, it laid the foundations for

the establishment of Scotland's 2 national parks with its work on *Popular Mountain Areas of Scotland*.

More people were looking for walking opportunities in the countryside. Two timely and successful initiatives were established. Repairing damaged mountain footpaths was part of a wider approach to develop mountain footpath strategy, path development and the establishment of teams to undertake the work. It was a forerunner of the excellent work now being accomplished. And Long Distance Routes were identified, routes negotiated, routes waymarked and guidebooks published. The West Highland Way was by far the most successful; the Southern Upland Way the least.

The Commission's role in seeking to influence the impact of land use change, particularly through agriculture and forestry, was difficult as the sectors had powerful lobbies who were more influential with Ministers.

An inventory of the state of health of Scotland's sandy beaches systems was a trail blazer. Commissioned from Aberdeen University, it set a benchmark for judging the management of these fragile areas.

Why was it merged into SNH?

The two separate traditions of nature and countryside are inextricably linked, and access to the countryside had implications for the protection of sites to protect rare and fragile species. Also, the Secretary of State for Scotland wished to have control over what happened in Scotland rather than it being the responsibility of the Secretary of State for the Environment who was deeply concerned about the cost of large compensation agreements on protected nature sites. In the event, its work on landscape assessment and protection, on provision for public access, on environmental education, ultimately on national parks and clarifying the position on access to the countryside was continued and added to. The resources of expert staff and finance, and the political support were much greater than under the older separate regimes.

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