

NEW NATIONAL PARKS FOR WHAT?

Communities around rural Scotland have been asked to prepare bids for their area to be designated as a national park. That is best international practice, rather than being centrally imposed upon them. National parks are a contract between the nation and its people.

But what confusion there is about their purpose. Yes, there are areas of rural deprivation, as measured by the multiple deprivation statistics. This is a serious issue. But this is not what national parks are about from an international perspective.

If the objective is rural economic revival, there are already government agencies which should develop plans for reviving rural economies and for stimulating private investment. Local councils should be ensuring a supply of affordable rural housing. Tertiary education should provide rural skills and entrepreneurship courses for young people. Rural schools should encourage a desire to stay, work and enjoy life there. Solving these critical issues is not the role of existing or new national parks to resolve.

Are more tourists the real answer for sustainable rural communities based on the designation of a national park? I doubt it, as they are subject to the whims of the international tourism market. They require infrastructure to service them which all too often employs low wage semi-skilled staff who lack access to affordable housing.

Greater care of Scotland's amazing and diverse scenery - the asset which residents and visitors value so highly - is needed. National Scenic Areas do not work. Plantation forestry and wind farms are industrialising the countryside without proper scrutiny. Every bid for these developments is judged on its individual merits without thought to the cumulative effects. It is most unlikely that national parks will have the powers to halt this trend and overturn the effects of past bad practices.

The twin crises of nature and climate change, coupled with public expenditure shortfalls, demand business unusual. The Scottish Government's consultation on refreshing the purposes of national parks rightly puts these twin issues at the heart of the new policy. These objectives should be foremost in all national parks, not the plethora of objectives in the original act. As a result, new Scottish National Parks would have international cachet fully in tune with the International Union for Conservation of Nature's definition "*Large natural or near natural areas set aside to protect large-scale ecological processes, along with the complement of species and ecosystems characteristic of the area, which also provide a foundation for environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities.*".

Scotland needs to be much clearer what it is trying to achieve by designating more national parks.

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