



Parks for Tomorrow

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A Park for tomorrow? Lessons from the Cairngorms National Park, Scotland

Scotland, Local, People, Consensus, Collaboration

Introduction

1. Within the last few years, Scotland has put in place one of the world's newest system of National Parks. Several commentators have already noted the irony that Scotland, birthplace of John Muir, should have taken quite so long to get its act together. However, as such a late developer, Scotland has had some advantages – not least the opportunity to add to its system of protected areas in a way that was specifically designed to meet the needs of the 21st Century. This paper reviews the process of National Park establishment, focusing particularly on the Cairngorms National Park which was only designated in 2003, and assesses the early years of its life to determine to what extent it is a “Park for Tomorrow”.

Why develop a system of National Parks now?

2. What led to the creation of National Parks in Scotland at the start of 21st Century? During the last Century there had been numerous initiatives to create a system of National Parks for Scotland but the concept never quite caught on. Although a sophisticated system of protected areas emerged from the 1940s onwards there was never sufficient political will or commitment to overcome the opposition to National Parks which came at various times from private land managers, industrialists and developers and even from some wildlife conservation bodies (Mackay, 1995).
3. However, by the mid-1990s there was a growing consensus that a suite of National Parks (or a similar designation) was required. The principal forces for creation of a system were:
 - *Criticism that Scotland lacked a “top-tier”, integrating designation.* Scotland had been singled out in Parks for Life (IUCN, 1993) as being particularly, and anomalously, deficient in the management of its most valuable natural areas. Although a number of smaller sites were protected by a range of different designations (including sites of Special Scientific Interest, National Nature Reserves and National Scenic Areas) there was a need for an effective mechanism for the management of extensive areas of high and diverse natural heritage interests (Thompson, 1997)
 - *The need for greater trust and cooperation between people striving to further both national and local interests.* Some of the candidate areas for National Parks had experienced a number of high profile conflicts about how to manage the area. For example, the proposed new developments for expansion or renewal of skiing facilities in the Northern Corries and on Cairngorm in late 1980s and mid 1990s had strong and vocal groups of supporters and objectors. It was generally felt that these polarised battles were not the best way to plan or manage the long term future of such special and important areas (Scottish Natural Heritage, 1999).
 - *Better policy coordination between different interests.* It was felt that there were a number of instances where different public bodies were, at best, not working effectively together or, at

worst, had policy positions that were directly contradicting other parts of government. (Curry Lindahl *et al*, 1982). And in the Cairngorms, the lack of integration across the geographic area of what is now the Park has historically been quite remarkable. The area is one of the few places in Scotland where the administrative boundaries (including local authorities, public agencies and Parliamentary constituencies) always seem to meet. And so the policies, debates and budget-setting processes on the various sides of the mountains have been quite different with the result that the management of this very important area has frequently been fragmented and inconsistent.

- *The need for long term management solutions.* A number of reviews had been undertaken over the years. Some Ministerial initiatives were set up (for example the Cairngorms Partnership between 1995 and 2003) and much good work was done, especially in bringing the relevant partners together. However, what was lacking was a long term commitment to the positive management of such areas (Scottish Natural Heritage, 1999).

A Scottish approach to National Parks

4. In 1997 the Government asked Scottish Natural Heritage to make proposals for a system of National Parks. After reviewing best practice elsewhere, and conducting a period of public consultation, SNH recommended a flexible model that allowed different forms of Parks in different parts of Scotland (SNH, 1999) but all as part of the same national system. SNH advised that the system should place a purpose for economic and social development alongside that for conservation and enjoyment. Critically, SNH also recommended that specific emphasis should be placed on the collective achievement of these purposes so as to reduce conflict between them, but with balance of interests favouring long term protection of the resource.
5. The Scottish Ministers broadly accepted SNH's advice and, following yet more public discussion and due parliamentary process, the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 was passed. Scottish National Parks have four aims, in summary:
 - conservation of natural and cultural heritage;
 - sustainable use of natural resources;
 - promotion of understanding and enjoyment of the Park's special qualities; and
 - sustainable social and economic development of the area's communities.
6. The purpose of each newly created National Park Authority is to "...ensure that the National Park aims are collectively achieved ... in a coordinated way" (National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000). Although the new Authorities were given a wide range of powers to use at their discretion, the word "Authority" is almost a misnomer – the emphasis is generally on long term planning and reaching consensus through dialogue, facilitation, enabling and incentives.
7. It is worth noting a few key points that flow from the legislation. First, there is an important difference between the four aims of the National Park and the job to be done by the National Park Authority. The purpose of the Authority is not to deliver the four aims itself, but to ensure that they are delivered by others, all working collaboratively. This aspect is still frequently misunderstood. Second, the primary emphasis of the Authority is on collective delivery of the four aims. Only if there is a conflict should greater weight be given to the first aim. Third, there is a strong expectation that all public or state bodies, whose collective financial resources and influence is very significant in rural areas, should play a strong role in making the National Park a success.

8. The model of National Park which emerged in Scotland is within IUCN Category V, defined as “Protected Landscape/Seascape – a protected area managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation and recreation”. For the Cairngorms this position in the international system of protected areas recognises the important links between the outstanding natural environment and the people that live in, work in and enjoy the area. It reflects the interactions of people and place that must be addressed.
9. Scottish National Parks have a few particularly novel or distinctive features:
- a) *The focus is on sustainability:* Rather than the more traditional focus of National Parks on nature or landscape conservation and recreation, Scottish Parks are primarily focussed on the broader principles of sustainability.
 - b) *Emphasis is on collaboration, not control:* In contrast to some international models of National Park, most of the land in the Cairngorms National Park (approximately 75 per cent) is privately owned, with a further 13 per cent being owned by voluntary sector bodies (e.g. Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and only about 10 per cent being owned by state or government agencies. And the designation of the Park did not, in itself, change any aspect of who owned the land. Perhaps most surprising is that the National Park Authority actually owns no land at all and does not manage land any directly. These facts reinforce the role of the private, voluntary and community sectors in managing the day to day aspects of managing parts of the National Park with the Park Authority playing a “hands off” role largely fulfilling the function of strategic planner, coordinator and facilitator.
 - c) *Governance with strong local input:* There are 16,000 people living in the Cairngorms National Park. The Park Authority Board is made up of 25 members, each drawn from one of three groups:
 - each of the four local authorities (regional government) in the area nominates a number of members, to be appointed by Scottish Government, depending on the size of their area and population within the Park (10 members);
 - members selected by the Scottish Government, after an open application process, on the basis of their skills, knowledge and experience (10 members); and
 - members who are directly elected to the Board through a special postal vote in which only people who are resident of the Park can participate (5 members).

The net result in the Cairngorms is that 22 of the 25 Board members in 2007 lived within or very close to the National Park. This last listed feature, the direct elections to the Board of a non-departmental public body, is quite unique in UK at present and has been highlighted recently as being particularly innovative at international level (Borrini-Feyerabend et al, 2007). Within Scotland there have been moves in recent months to copy the system for use in Health Boards to promote local accountability (Scottish Parliament, 2007).

- d) *Making the most of Board members:* Generally, Board members are not representative of any particular organisation but are appointed because of their skills, knowledge and experience. Each member is therefore able to bring a range of useful perspectives to the table without the obligations come with strictly representative roles. Board members are accountable to Scottish Ministers and must act to fulfil the general purpose of the National Park Authority.

10. This distinctively Scottish approach to National Parks offers the following opportunities (Cairngorms National Park Authority, 2007a):
- Delivering better outcomes – National Parks, by focussing on the more co-ordinated efforts of the public, private, community and voluntary sectors, can deliver more integrated and

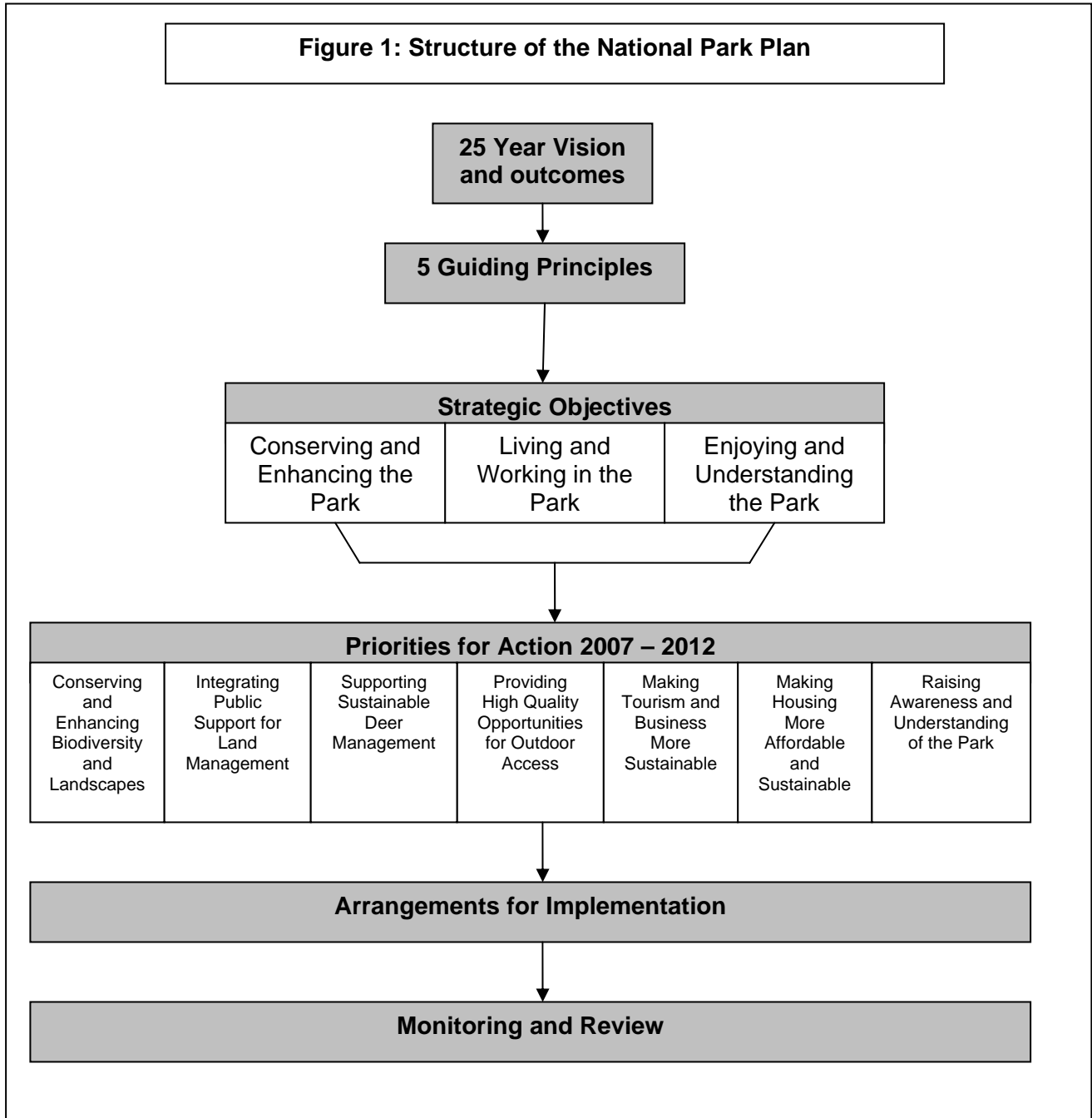
sustainable results in terms of environmental, economic and social benefits. This fits particularly well with agenda of the new Scottish Government to deliver more “joined up” and effective services for customers in rural areas.

- Developing solutions for rural Scotland – National Parks provide the opportunity to develop and test innovative solutions to rural issues which can be applied to benefit other areas across Scotland. National Parks are an opportunity to develop and disseminate best practice that makes a difference to people living and working in rural Scotland.
- Providing National Parks for All – National Parks offer excellent opportunities for people of all backgrounds, interests and abilities to enjoy, learn and benefit from these special places.
- Promoting ‘The Pride of Scotland’ – National Parks help protect some of Scotland’s most iconic landscapes and reflect the natural and cultural heritage that shapes that nation’s identity. They are national assets and by showing how people and place can thrive together, National Parks can make a significant contribution to Scotland’s national identity.

Key achievements in first few years

11. Since the designation National Park in 2003, the single most important achievement has undoubtedly been the preparation and approval of the first National Park Plan. The Plan was approved by Scottish Ministers in early 2007. The structure of the Plan is shown in **Figure 1**. The vision for the Park in 2030 begins:

“Imagine a world-class National Park – an outstanding environment in which the natural and cultural resources are cared for by the people who live there and visit; a renowned international destination with fantastic opportunities for all to enjoy its special places; an exemplar of sustainable development showing how people and place can thrive together. A National Park that makes a significant contribution to our local, regional and national identity....”



12. A great deal of work that was undertaken by a wide range of people, both individuals and in organisations, to develop and agree the final Plan. This collaborative work was critically important in order to address a key issue that IUCN claim has bedevilled many protected areas – the poor level of interagency cooperation (IUCN, 2004). The final printed version of the Park Plan carries the logos of the 16 different public sector organisations on the inside cover to reinforce the point that each organisation had contributed significantly to the development of the Plan and has, at senior level, signed up to implement it. It also acts a useful visual reminder for everyone that the Plan is for all players in the area to deliver, not just the National Park Authority.

13. Other recent significant achievements include:

- Development of an award winning **Sustainable Tourism Strategy**. Around 80% of the local economy of the Park is based on tourism and so particular emphasis has been given to work on the sustainability of tourism. The Park was awarded with the Europarc Charter for Sustainable Tourism in 2005, the first National Park in UK ever to receive this award.
- Following extensive public consultation exercises a number of important new plans and strategies are now in place for the area. For example, the new **Local Plan**, which guides built development, is the first ever such plan for the area and has replaced four Plans, some of which were over 12 years old. A new **strategic plan for management of the key paths** (over 850 Km of paths) has been developed in consultation with wide number of interested parties.
- A **brand image for the National Park** has been developed and is being used voluntarily by over 120 businesses to give them a competitive advantage by promoting their connection to the Park and, at the same time, to promote higher environmental and quality standards;
- The Park is acting as a stimulus for new economic opportunities. A new **Arts and Crafts Marketing Association** and a new **Farmers Market** have become established, both based on the geography of the Park, and using the National Park brand image.
- The **John Muir Award Project** promotes discovery, exploration and conservation action in wild places and sharing the experiences with others. The Award is particularly attractive because it is extremely flexible and low on paperwork. In the last few years more than 5000 people have gained the Award in and around the Park.
- The new geography of the Park is starting to influence the institutional framework of local organisations. For example, the **Chamber of Commerce** which once covered only one side of the mountain massif has now radically changed its geographic basis in order to act in the interests of commercial businesses across the National Park.
- **New management and advisory structures** are in place. For example, a special Advisory Forum, “Inclusive Cairngorms”, now provides special advice and ideas to promote inclusion of people of all abilities and backgrounds.

Key lessons learned

14. Standing back from all this day to day activity, what are the key lessons that can be learned from the establishment of Scottish National Parks?

Nothing changes without political leadership and support

15. The Scottish National Parks are a product of the new Scottish Parliament – the devolved administration in Scotland – which met for the first time in almost 300 years in 1999. The Scottish Parliament passed the National Parks (Scotland) Act only a year after becoming established. The legislation, despite some of the long-standing controversies around the topic, got off to a flying start – there was unanimous political support for the Act across all political parties. Such positive, high level political support cut through almost all previous opposition and the public debate changed to how the National Parks could be made to work for the benefit of Scotland’s people.

Focussing on the strict protection of nature simply wasn’t working

16. Previous efforts to conserve the special qualities of the area had largely focussed on a series of specific protective designations for nature conservation (generally IUCN Category IV). But these were relatively small areas which were tightly defined around the habitats of very highest quality. Focussing on these areas in isolation of the bigger picture tended to lead to specific resource management conflicts. The designation of the Park has made it easier to work at the landscape scale and has greatly facilitated the engagement of people, especially local people, with the protection of the resource.

Start as you mean to go on

17. The establishment of the National Parks was done in a way that included people from the very start of the process. There were multiple consultation exercises about detailed matters – even about how big the Parks should be, where precisely should the boundary be, what type of people should be on the Board and what powers the Park Authority should have. This involvement was expensive, time consuming and, at times, rather frustrating for all involved but it demonstrated the commitment to work with and for people. This approach paved the way for an inclusive approach to Park management which has put local people who live in the area in prominent roles on the Board of management.

Put local people in leadership roles on behalf of the nation

18. The arrangements for putting the Board in place mean that the great majority of Board members live within or very close to the National Park. The members are not appointed for their specific expertise in management of protected areas but they know the area well in a number of overlapping roles. They also have fantastic social networks in the area, meaning that they are well “tapped in” to what people are thinking and saying. The Board are supported by a professional staff. Checks and balances are in place to ensure that the Park is being managed on behalf of the people of Scotland, and the system works well.

Stimulate collaboration by agreeing on a common goal

19. In the past the debates and conflicts in the area tended to focus on development versus conservation, jobs versus capercaillie (a large and threatened woodland grouse). Increasingly it has been possible to focus on the delivery of the four National Park aims together in a mutually reinforcing way. By focussing on the search for these “win-win” projects (e.g. where habitats are enhanced while opportunities to enjoy the Park are also improved) it has been possible to change the nature of most debates. Key elements in making this approach work have been working with a big space so that developments and activity can be guided to appropriate areas and looking a long way ahead – a 30 year vision in the National Park Plan.

Create a framework focussed on encouraging collaboration – a kind of “wiki-Park”

20. The particular model of National Park in the Cairngorms can be thought of as an exercise focussed on mass collaboration, perhaps a bit like Wikipedia, the online collaborative encyclopaedia, written by users. Such Web 2.0 communities (including YouTube, Flickr and Facebook) are said to be changing the way that organisations see their role in the world, leading to fundamentally different views of customers and suppliers (Tapscott *et al*, 2006). Such approaches show the power that can be harnessed by getting the right vision agreed and then encouraging all interested parties to think and act creatively to help get there. That approach is beginning to work in the Cairngorms National Park with land managers, local communities and visitors increasingly being encouraged to think of it as “their” National Park and about how they can make it become truly world class.

Focus on, and celebrate, short term successes

21. Uniting partners around a long term vision has been broadly successful but it has also been necessary to agree the work to be done over shorter periods. The 30 year timescale of the Park Plan has been broken down into five year chunks so that everyone can be clear about the changes that are needed and see their part in making them happen. Partner organisations have also found it stimulating to be reminded of the joint successes we have had and have become excited and motivated to be part of similar projects in the future.

Having a “joined up” public sector is critically important

22. In Scotland there is a rather sectoral approach to resource management in the public sector, and this is especially visible in rural areas. For example, there is one public body responsible for water and air management, another for forest management, and yet another for conservation of wildlife and landscape – it is easy to see the potential for duplication, conflict and inefficiency. There is renewed political interest at present in making sure that all public bodies in Scotland are working well together in an integrated fashion. And this new national effort has greatly assisted the “joining up” work we are doing within the boundary of the National Park.

Working across large scale allows us to do new things in new ways

23. The new geography of the National Park, covering parts of four administrative districts with a montane core, is providing opportunities to look at issues in new ways. For example, a new strategic framework for forestry is now in place which looks beyond existing stands of trees to opportunities to link up and provide large scale ecological corridors. For paths and trails we are developing beyond individual path management agreements and schedules towards path network management a strategic scale. Such approaches are more appropriate for long term planning and a better way to focus resources.

Conclusions

24. At the time of writing there are at least three good reasons why it is useful to pause and take stock of what has been learned so far in Scotland. First, we are rapidly approaching the five year anniversary of designation of the Cairngorms National Park and there will, no doubt, be questions asked about what has been achieved.

25. Second, the Government has recently announced its intention to expand the National Park by adding in several hundred Km² of mountain land to the south and west. This extension has arisen largely at the request of the local community and other interested parties in the area. Perhaps their desire to be involved within the National Park can be taken as a positive sign that the right sorts of relationships are gradually being developed.

26. Third, a strategic review of Scottish National Parks is now under way, to be completed within the next calendar year, to ensure the system is fit for purpose. The debate in the Scottish Parliament in March 2008 was extremely positive about the early years of the two Scottish Parks with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment saying:

“The National Parks are huge assets that have helped to put Scotland on the international stage. Our Parks put the best of Scotland on show and contribute to increasing tourism revenue through sustainable means, while helping to look after nationally and internationally important species and habitats.....We all agree that Scotland's National Parks have been a big success, but we all agree that there is now a case for a review. We cannot be complacent: we have to look to the future, which is what the review is all about.”

27. At some point in the future, people in Scotland will hopefully have the benefit, as do our Canadian cousins, of looking back over a much longer period of experience of managing National Parks. No doubt there will be many more lessons to learn from each other along the way.

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