



Conservation or Consumption?

The core contradiction of National Parks

In recent debates on the proposed new National Park in south west Scotland, proponents of a Park have made much of the potential for economic development through increasing tourism. The Galloway National Park Association (GNPA) has referred to *'the National Park brand'* and the support this would offer to promote local businesses. This focus on opportunities for economic development appears to conveniently disregard widely acknowledged negative impacts of increased tourism and recreational activities on natural heritage and on communities.

We must therefore consider the evidence on whether it is possible to promote conservation at the same time as increasing consumption, in the form of tourism and recreation. This contradiction lies at the heart of National Park aims and what is being presented in the consultation. However, clear evidence to demonstrate that National Parks can successfully achieve this is not on offer.¹ Instead, a recent report² describes *'The Invisible Burden of Tourism,'* where an increasing number of visitors to an area can exceed infrastructure capacity and cause harm to both the environment and local communities³.

The National Park *'brand,'* to most minds, is a positive force for conservation, based on early international models, where Parks were established to protect wilderness areas such as Yosemite. This brand is being used to sell the current proposal, particularly to younger audiences, although the reality for the natural environment inside UK National Parks is rather at odds with this. For example, *'there is no positive impact of being inside National Parks and the condition of Sites of Special Scientific Interest⁴,*' and in December 2023, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature National Committee UK Protected Areas Working Group downgraded the status of UK National Parks. They no longer regard the UK designation of National Park as a Protected Area.⁵

A biodiversity report⁶ commissioned by GNPA highlights the special qualities of the area's biodiversity. This notes few other areas in the UK offer such a diverse range of habitats in a comparatively small area.

¹ Mark Rowe **The failure of Britain's national parks** Geographical 12 March 2020

² Dr D Stanford **Who Pays for the Lake District? 2024**

³ Ibid - highlighting the significant negative issues directly linked to more visitors than local infrastructure can support and the 'hollowing out' of communities due to second homes and holiday lets

⁴ The British Ecological Society-Scottish Policy Group (BES-SPG) policy debate on National Parks with the Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management (CIEEM) October 6th 2022.

⁵ Statements of Compliance for UK protected areas and 'other effective area-based conservation measures': 2023 review Protected Areas Working Group of the IUCN National Committee UK

⁶ Biodiversity Report prepared for GNPA by South West Scotland Environmental Information Centre 2023

Sadly, it also notes that the area has not escaped from the global biodiversity crisis and needs protection and restoration. Can a proposed National Park, which places such emphasis on increasing tourism and recreation, really offer this? Consider the Solway Firth mudflats, which provide a wealth of biodiversity and an important overwintering food supply for winter visiting birds, hence the Solway's national and international designation and recognition. More visitor pressure would undoubtedly threaten this special place, as the disturbance of birds reduces their ability to feed, and in the breeding season, causes the desertion of nests and chicks.

We have also witnessed other more stark examples of the negative impacts of increased tourism at first hand, with damage to the environment caused by an influx of visitors in the post pandemic lockdown period. Local communities were horrified by irresponsible visitor behaviour such as littering, toileting and lighting fires. Sadly, such behaviour persists and an increase in vehicles and irresponsible parking causes more road kills of wild animals, the erosion of verges and air pollution. Marine motorised and non-motorised craft such as paddle boards and kayaks disrupt animal feeding and breeding behaviour. Pollution can result from the pressure of an increasing visitor population on limited local sewage systems.

There is also an increased risk of the introduction and spread of invasive species and the spread of animal and plant diseases. Even issues such as footpath erosion, caused by increasing numbers of walkers, can have a negative impact on biodiversity. Eroded paths are *'not only unsightly, but unpleasant to walk on and can lead to habitat loss as well as damage to the heritage, archaeological and natural history qualities of the area.'*⁷ Excessive erosion on popular routes has an impact on wildlife, *'Degradation... has a harmful impact on the rivers and lakes as sediment washed off the hillside can cover the gravel in rivers and lakes used by fish to lay their eggs, reducing their breeding habitat. Sediment can also impact plant and insect numbers, which in turn will attract fewer birds.'*⁸

Without Park designation, visitor numbers are already increasing, with the South of Scotland Destination Alliance (SSDA) recently reporting the area had grown its visitor numbers by 26 per cent in the last year. One of the aims of establishing a National Park is to increase this further, placing significant additional pressures on the natural environment and inadequate local infrastructure. We should also bear in mind that if visitor numbers were to increase to levels which cause significant harm to the environment and communities, as they have in some Parks, there are no mechanisms to impose limits on this.

When we consider the proposed new National Park we must, therefore, acknowledge the conflict between its various aims, and the dilemmas this presents. In the words of Emeritus Professor Roger Crofts, of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, *'Scotland needs to be much clearer about what it is trying to achieve by creating more national parks.'*⁹

Our community needs a more honest presentation of evidence when being asked to consider the proposal of a new Park.

⁷ https://www.fixthefells.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/path_erosion_factsheet.pdf

⁸ Joanne Backshall, Fix the Fells programme manager, quoted in <https://keswickreminder.co.uk/2021/08/27/500000-annual-cost-to-tackleerosion-on-lake-district-fells>

⁹ Time to think again on national parks Roger Crofts Thursday April 18 2024, The Times