

Time for a Review of Scotland's National Parks?

Notes from Scottish Parliament Roundtable Event Fleming Room, Thursday, 3rd April 2025

Attendees

Chair: Jim Morrison

Speakers: Pam Gosal, MBE MSP (Event Sponsor); Sally Page (Event Organiser); Gareth Bourhill (Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association); Jamie Williamson (Alvie & Dalraddy Estates); Nick Kempe (Parkswatch)

MSPs: Finlay Carson MSP; Fergus Ewing MSP; Stephen Kerr MSP

Representatives from interested parties including:

Sandra Barclay; Jamie Blackett; Denise Brownlee; Debbie Carmichael; John Carmichael; Mhairi Dawson (NFUS); Robert Graham; Andrea Hoban-Todd; Angela Jamieson; Kat Jones (APRS); Brian McAllister; Alison McAllister; Norman Milligan; Christine Milligan; Beatrice Morrice (NFUS); Janis Strachan; Skye Strachan (No More National Parks); Gabrielle Taylor-Harrington; Stephen Varney.

The Chair, Jim Morrison, opened the event and invited the event sponsor, Pam Gosal, MSP, to speak.

1. Pam Gosal MSP, Event Sponsor

Pam Gosal gave the introduction to the event and introduced the MSPs who were attending the event and gave apologies from MSPs Brian Whittle, Tim Eagle, Sharon Dowey and Jackie Baillie.

Loch Lomond & Trossachs National Park (LLTNP) is in my region and I receive comments on the park. There has now been a consultation for Galloway National Park (GNP). This is an opportunity for understanding what a national park means, accountability and transparency – is there anything else we can do as MSPs.

The Government minister could not be here, I will put comments from today in a letter to the Minister.

2. Sally Page, Event Organiser

Sally Page thanked all for coming and outlined the purpose of the roundtable event.

I live in the LLTNP, have been a locally elected councillor, Community councillor and sit on the Local Place Plan Committee.

We are here to ask for your help to request that a thorough review of Scotland's two National Parks is carried out. National Parks have brought an extra layer of centrally controlled governance and expense. A serious look must be taken to justify this against the perceived benefits. What indeed are the benefits over having local Councils managing all areas?

We would like to give you an insight into the realities of living and working within a National Park. People are very frustrated at the level of interference, which is totally at odds with the partnership working and community building that the National Parks have pushed as part of their agenda.

Communities in rural areas, small towns and villages have evolved over generations, hefted to the land around them. The new National Park way of 'managing' communities is intrusive and disturbing. LLTNP spent over 2 years setting-up Community Development Trusts in each of the 17 villages in LLTNP. These Trusts now over-shadow the previously established voluntary groups, as Trusts can apply for grant funding that is not available to other entities. This causes friction within communities.

In Gartocharn, our Local Place Plan (LPP) was steered by the National Park with their agenda coming through. An example of this would be the National Park's desire to see multi-user paths built along the A811 – when there are numerous 'C' class roads, the John Muir Way and National Cycle Route 7, that already lead to Drymen and Croftamie, but they do not fit with National Park plan for a 'linked-up place'. In the LPP farm roads have been designated as 'paths' on new maps produced by the National Park, in one case going directly through a farmyard, 22 emails later the farmer is still contesting this.

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Economic benefit? The population of LLTNP has remained the same since the National Park was formed 23 years ago at 15,000 people. Little has been done to improve the infrastructure to cope with the increase in visitors. Many villages are struggling suggesting that the increase in visitors has had little benefit to the local economy. The A82, A85 and A811 are the main arterial roads, all too small for the volumes of traffic. There is a desperate lack of toilet facilities and litter bins, causing damage to the natural environment, and left for residents to clear-up the mess. There are currently only two facilities within the LLTNP that take chemical waste from camper vans.

Planning. LLTNP are the planning authority for the National Park area, a power that was taken away from elected local Councillors. Planning decisions taken by the National Park have put tourism and commerce before the environment, for example, the Gold Mine at Tyndrum, with thousands of tonnes of peat bog dug-up, heaps of spoil left draining into burns and a lack of qualified LLTNP personnel to monitor the planning conditions. The operator, Scotgold, is now in administration and operations have been halted.

On the National Nature Reserve at Gartocharn, the building of a 1.3 km road through Ancient Woodland and protected bog required local people to raise the alarm about the flows of silt into Loch Lomond, the 17 planning conditions imposed by the LLTNP going un-monitored. This is not enhancing or protecting a designated area.

The planning application for the proposed Tom Hunter Global Leadership Centre at Ross Priory, on the banks of Loch Lomond, passed through the whole planning process without an Environmental Impact Assessment or any other rigorous assessment. FoI requests showed the National Park planners had guided the applicant to avoid standard planning controls. Then there is Flamingo Land at Lomond Shores in Balloch....

I set up and Chair a charity to regenerate Balloch Castle Country Park. Balloch Park has 1.2-1.4 million visits per year, is accessible by train from Glasgow. There has been no tangible support from the National Park which has in previous Partnership Plans supported regeneration of this important tourist asset. Hotspots such as Balmaha and Luss are totally overwhelmed by visitors, the National Park has been looking for somewhere else to relieve the pressure, this is an obvious place.

The increased burden on the public purse of a National Park, the burden on Councils in having to deal with a National Park and the dissatisfaction many feel living in a National Park must be explored through a thorough review prior to further designations.

3. Gareth Bourhill, Loch Lomond Angling Improvement Association (LLAIA)

The LLAIA is the oldest in Scotland, in existence for 125 years. It is run by its members, there are 1,000 full members, 500 associate members. We have 3,500 visitors from the UK and the rest of the world – it sells itself in Scotland.

23 years ago, we believed there would be benefits from being within the LLTNP, but the opposite is true. Since its inception, the LLAIA has had 14 meetings with park authorities, indications were provided as to how the park will organise the fishing, but the LLAIA own the riparian and fishing rights, there has been nil engagement with the park except if they want something. The LLAIA employs water bailiffs, salmon is a protected species, we provide employment. There 18 retail outlets where people can buy a fishing permit alongside other goods they need. This is lost on the park.

Previously there was a public consultation for a pier development where the slipway facilities were used by anglers. We were told we would receive an invite to development discussions, no invite was received. We had been struck off from the list as the pierhead was on land so not to do with fishing. This was disappointing. Launch facilities have been shut and as the only public launch facility is in Balloch therefore all traffic is focused on Balloch causing a blockage for watercraft. The pierhead was built with public money, people pay a launch fee, but it is closed for a week each year for a swimming contest. LLAIA offered an alternative site at Balloch, but publicity for Lomond Shores was more important.

The planning side is challenging, an objection to a proposed salmon farm at Loch Long was rejected, three months before that there was another consultation on the release of beavers, this was allowed, despite the same objections being raised for both proposals. It is difficult to engage with LLTNP, there is so much more they can do.

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4. Jamie Williamson, Alvie & Dalraddy Estates

My family has owned and managed the estate since 1927, which covers 7,550 acres with "trees, turnips, cows, sheep".

In 1990, there was a proposal for the creation of the Cairngorms National Park (CNP). In 1992, the Cairngorms Partnership was formed. In 2003, the CNP was designated, with no referendum held, a review had concluded that it was not appropriate. Residents believe they have been disenfranchised, the CNP board is not representative. Five years ago, the CNP authority was made up of 52 people, now it is 110. The cultural and natural heritage has changed, there is more tourism, less land management and economics. Demographics have changed to retirement, commuting, holiday letting, there has been a 9% increase in over 75s over the years.

We have raised concerns regarding consultations for plans to the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA). For each one we have sent a response based on forty years plus of experience but never seem to receive a response. It has transpired that the CNPA does not read individual submissions as these are sent to a third party which summarises them, so the CNPA only reads a summary of submissions for consideration when decision-making. The feeling is that consultations are not fit for purpose and more recently it appears CNP-friendly people are picked based on the extent that their views align with the views of the CPNA staff and Scottish Government, rather than on their local knowledge and expertise on the issues.

How has this affected the area? There has been increase in residents, an influx of retirees, commuters, etc. There is a decrease in residents with local knowledge plus in ancillary occupations. More people coming in reduces the environmental benefits. For example, capercaillie numbers are reducing and disappearing, the numbers of predators are not kept down and there is disturbance during the nesting season. There is a danger of damaging these designated areas with over-tourism during peak periods.

Badenoch has less than 2% of land suitable for cultivation with the most productive land being the haughlands alongside the water courses. The reintroduction of beavers in Tayside has caused millions of pounds of damage to flood embankments, riparian woodlands and farm crops. There is a concern they may make much of the most productive land in Badenoch unviable.

Promoting the national parks as a nice place to live in, to retire or own a holiday home has increased demand for domestic accommodation and reduced the supply of affordable houses for long term rent or buy.

The overall concern is that consultations are now looked at properly. Can we get a review of national parks to see if they are fit for purpose?

5. Nick Kempe, Parkswatch

Nick Kempe explained he has been past president of Mountaineering Council of Scotland and is chair of a working group with Scottish countryside and wildlife links.

He provided some history into national parks: NGOs signed up to Scottish National Parks. In 1949, national parks in England were created post-war. In 1951, National Park Direction areas were set up including the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond. In 1990 a review comprising two working parties for CNP and LLTNP was set up. There was a huge history of local engagement, GNP has had relatively less engagement. The National Park Act has four statutory aims which combine and work together.

The original zoning plans never happened, therefore causing local conflict. Landownership in Scotland was not dealt with; powers and financial resources are not in place for landowners. Policy in the national parks is the same as elsewhere in the country. All planning is the same except for windfarms in the national parks. There is the same deer density in LLTNP as in the rest of Scotland. National parks cannot do anything differently. National parks have not delivered on fundamentals.

Conservation has been done in conjunction with landowners, not with parks. The aspirations of local communities have not been realised; it is down to individuals not the national park. Nothing has changed for enabling environmentally managed farming, etc.

Governance – the CNP is more democratic and better run than LLTNP. Locally elected people and boards have not happened. Staff are under the control of Edinburgh. There is an

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undemocratic electoral system. Plans disappear, for example, the Glen Mor plan disappeared, a complete failure of planning with no accountability. Scottish ministers used to chair an annual review; have become centralised parks with very little local democratic control. Scottish Parliament did conduct a review of national parks beginning with Part One in 2009/10 regarding a reduction in the size of boards; Part Two was to focus on what difference have national parks made – this has never happened.

6. Questions

The Chair invited questions and comments from the audience.

Finlay Carson, MSP, Galloway & West Dumfries

The Rural Affairs & Islands Committee has asked two chief executives of the two national parks and head of planning for Argyll & Bute to look at new legislation [Natural Environment (Scotland) Bill]. It appears that there is not a lot of change in the new legislation, the definition of the aims is very wide; the list needs to be looked at more closely. This work will continue until July, then the report will be published in September. Then it will be possible to bring forward amendments, I will bring forward the amendment to request the Scottish Government carries out a review as there has not been one for 25 years. We are aware that some late amendments came for other bills that were last minute changes.

Fergus Ewing, MSP, Inverness and Nairn

Thank you to the speakers for the interesting talks

I have lived in both national parks, mostly the CNP for 22 years. No reflection on individuals, but it is an unmitigated disaster. People come to me with problems with the park, very diverse, for example, Johnny Grant who wanted to create a new town, but the park insisted a new bridge over the Spey was included. There are many more examples.

The rural economy would say we gave it a try, it has failed, therefore there is a case for an independent review. Deborah Carmichael asked for a review, but the Government said it had provided annual reports. We need someone like Jamie [Williamson] to do the review. There is no sign of a review.

I fear for the future of farming and dairy farming in Galloway as there will be national park people who will not understand farming. We have heard from Gareth how people do not understand. Opinion is divided, need to bring everyone together, the Cairngorm partnership worked.

Would anyone notice if the national park was not there. No one has listened to Dumfries and Galloway communities.

A poll was held recently in the Aviemore community, 444 votes were cast, 95% said 'No' to the question: Do you think the national park is doing well?

I am happy to work with people to generate a review. We need an independent review.

Stephen Kerr, MSP, Central Scotland (Region)

I am familiar with national park issues from the casework that has come across my desk. Should we be reviewing the legislation? Yes, we should. Outcomes matter as do the experiences of people as a result of the legislation.

I agree with Fergus and Finlay on the need for an independent review.

Denise Brownlee, representative from Galloway

I was a ranger with LLTNP and now live in Galloway.

We were sold by the group GNPA (Galloway National Park Association), a park for the people run by the people, and they keep stressing this. We are suffering, the roads and infrastructure are suffering. It is being sold as a Disneyland experience. Getting the bureaucracy of the national parks, not the facts. We are pushing for a referendum within the proposed national park boundary and before a fully independent review of other parks. A survey of 190 people was undertaken which the Government took as evidence of extensive public support.

Thank you to the visitors from Galloway who have come today.

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Representative from Galloway

Disappointed that the Minister is not here, please pass this on and ask her to engage with us.

Pam Gosal, MSP, confirmed she will pass on this comment to the Minister.

Representative from Galloway

We need to see the strengths and weaknesses sorted out first in national parks before getting to Galloway. Decision being made for political reasons before an assessment of parks. This is coming from being a resident of Newton Stewart, so right in the middle of the proposed area and how this will affect daily lives. The situation cannot be compared to sites in Australia due geographical reasons.

The A75 needs to be fully duelled, this is not going to happen. Tourists are coming into the area with no infrastructure to support their needs.

In respect of the care sector, it will be a struggle to get carers as they will go to other jobs generated by the park; there will be lots of elderly who will not have access to carers.

Brian McAllister from Galloway

My background is in farming and forestry. There has been a complete lack of credibility through the process. I have read virtually everything, listened to people in the two other parks, none of this has come back via NatureScot. There is a lack of credibility that NatureScot will do a full review.

Representative from Galloway

I volunteered at the Kirkcudbright tourist office which was closed down. Kirkcudbright Information Centre was set up and is now run by volunteers. Visitors value the friendliness and activities and also the lack of oppressive commercialism in the area, they like it because it is different from other national parks. Even without the national park designation there is an increase in tourists and vehicles. Existing facilities are stretched to breaking point. The Kirkcudbright bridge is down causing difficulties, it is awaiting repair with no indications when this will be.

There is a need to carry out an inventory of what is required. Did you consider in the designation, the current preferences for mobile homes which head for the coast on coastal routes leading to small villages with dead ends? Did you plan for the facilities needed for these visitors?

Angela Jamieson from Galloway

I am a neurodivergent adult. I have found it very difficult to engage with the consultation process as there are no facilities for engagement. For example, at one event there were sticky notes with different colours which was made it very difficult for me. There have been certain areas of the process where we have found it difficult to engage.

Representative from Galloway

With reference to a comment from another contributor, I would like add that whilst dairy farming is important in our area, so too is livestock beef production.

There has been a shocking amount of tree planting, the trees are coming down the hill reducing access to farmland. We are squeezed into an industrial unit to produce milk. Doves of people coming through the land will also make it difficult.

7. Summing up and thanks from the Chair

The Chair thanked the speakers and contributors and invited Pam Gosal, MSP to close the event.

Pam Gosal, MSP

I would like to thank the speakers and contributors for coming today, it has been very informative. The MSPs have been listening too and Finlay will take back comments, etc., to the Committee.

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It is important to push for an independent review. Disappointment has been expressed that the Minister is not here. I will write a letter to the Minister with points raised and a request for an independent review. We can also bring up the points in Parliament as written questions. I do think parks need fixing and constituents have been complaining to me.

Thank you to the speakers, to Sally for organising the event and to the MSPs for coming.