

Time for Action on Cairngorms National Park

What should be a celebration has turned into apprehension in anticipation of the Scottish Executive's final version of the Draft Designation Order for the Cairngorms. The likely casualty is the national park vision that the majority of respondents to consultations argued for and the one that made sense whichever way you cared to cut it.

I am sure there will be minor changes here and there but don't be surprised if the Minister, Allan Wilson, does not shift from his position of giving the local authorities the whip hand in control of development and of reducing the area by half, all designed to exclude two whole local authorities. Why exclude two whole authorities? Because to have maintained a five-authority Park would have been to complicate the Park administration to a degree where the Executive would have had to acknowledge the wisdom of granting the National Park Authority the ability to determine planning applications based on its own Park-wide plan. This principle already operates in the English and Welsh national parks, even in Scotland itself. The powers of the newly established Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Authority allow it to maintain that vital link between Park-wide plans and the development control function, so why not the Cairngorms? So, where did it all go wrong? The problem appears to be the different emphases placed on the National Park Plan by SNH and the Executive. SNH assumed that getting everybody to sign up to an overarching plan called The National Park Plan was a way of taking the contention out of the planning process. Unfortunately, neither the Executive nor SNH carried this idea forward to a stage where the relationships between the various statutory plans could be defined. As a result the old linear model of Structure Plan/Local Plan/Development Control remains the basis of the planning process until such times as the change is made to Unitary Plans.

However, SNH, in its elevation of the National Park Plan to something that would underscore all other statutory plans, assumed that authorities, which had never knowingly co-operated in the past, would somehow do so now. Somehow, the theory goes, this approach would, in time, yield Park-wide plans with consistent development control decisions across the board. Strange, that despite the theory, in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, with long years of voluntary co-operation between authorities, the Executive still required the National Park Authority to step in and create its own suite of planning policies and to have the responsibility for exercising them on the ground.

Anybody who has ever sat through a local authority planning committee will recognise that decisions at variance with development plans are quite normal, especially in Highland Council which recently received heavy criticism from the local government ombudsman for one of its Area Planning Committees. Fully 85% of departure applications-those that contravene planning policy were approved by this committee in 2001. Complicate that by having to integrate such decisions from three separate planning authorities, working to their own policy priorities, and you get a measure of why a national park, based on such assumptions is designed to fail. A more realistic principle on which to base good planning would have fundamentally recognised that he who produces planning policies should be responsible for ensuring their delivery. Applied to a national park with its need for

integrated and consistent planning across the area it means only one thing, and that is a National Park Authority producing Park-wide plans, consistent with its purposes and the ability to determine all planning applications in the light of those plans.

What we have here is a political decision to ensure that Highland Council stays on-message when it comes to establishing more national parks, most of which will be entirely within the Highland Council area. But who would want national parks on this basis of weak management? The real loser in this whole affair is the conservation message. When our focus should be fixed firmly on producing the highest international standards of environmental management for the Cairngorms, to make it a showpiece for the nation, the National Park Authority will be operating in a climate of contention and short termism. It will have to steer a course, first, through the different policy directions of three independent planning authorities and then it will have to defend against the maverick decisions by councillors who are semi-detached, perhaps even antipathetic to the national park ideal.

We will have fingers of blame pointing in all directions when everything goes wrong. The soft target will of course be the National Park Authority, which tries to make sense of its mission to create a climate of appropriate sustainable development to protect its natural and cultural heritage. But it will fail because the international message is that all such fudges fail. What we need is leadership, first from our national politicians and then from a Park Authority which is confident in stating its vision and imaginative in achieving it.

Is it too late to do anything about it? Nearly, but not quite. We have one last chance to influence the Parliament and in particular the First Minister. Anybody, from anywhere who cares deeply about the future for national parks in Scotland, the home of John Muir, should write to the First Minister, Jack McConnell stating his/her opposition to the present proposals by the Executive. International best practice demonstrates that protected areas such as national parks need to have strong management bodies with control over land use decisions. They also need to be big enough to meet the requirements of wildlife management and to offer sustainable systems of access for recreation. Neither of these two elements are available in the present proposals. They are the points we should attack.

If you are resident in Scotland, also write to your constituency and list MSPs. If you are resident in England, write to Michael Meacher MP, Minister of State in DEFRA as well as Jack McConnell...and so on.

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