



### Winter 2011-12

#### The Inspiration of John Muir – and how we should use it.

It was a long shot but it paid off. I penned an article in response to a *Scotsman* piece by Keith Geddes, Chairman of Central Scotland Green Network Partnership Board, hoping to raise the profile of the national parks cause and John Muir's place in it. Once dispatched, it was then a matter for the Editor as to how the *Scotsman* treated it. In the event there was a bit of re-phrasing and omission, but on the whole it shows SCNP up in a good light. Unfortunately the title chosen would have been better with the words 'National Parks' inserted, and the last paragraph omitted my punch line. For us committed ones, here is the full text of what I said, with the omitted pieces in bold type.

*'I welcome the timely reminder from Keith Geddes about Scotland's forgotten hero, John Muir and the need for an identifiable legacy with which to celebrate his life in 2014, the 100th anniversary of his passing. Whilst recognising that his real contribution was to be found in his philosophical approach to wilderness, Keith's suggestion that we should have a trail from Dunbar to the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park to mark his life is laudable but hardly lives up to the importance of the man. Admittedly, East Lothian Council are also proposing a John Muir Day and Keith does raise the need to think inspirationally in the way that Muir would have done about the whole business of man's unsustainable use of our environment, but I would like to suggest that as the country of his birth we could do so much more. John Muir almost achieves sainthood amongst conservationists in his adopted country. His idea that areas of America's finest natural heritage should be set aside and protected for all time gave rise to a whole system of national parks which to this day is widely regarded by Americans as the best idea they ever had, deeply loved by them and admired all over the world for the leadership they have given in the field of protected areas. It is that kind of inspiration I would like to advance as a starting point in thinking about how Scotland should celebrate one of her own.*

*Scotland the brand has many dimensions but there is no doubt that her scenery of coast and mountain is spectacular in any language and together with her cultural heritage, the reason why visitors flock here. It is ironic that the country which gave birth to John Muir was one of the last to join the world family of national parks, and having joined it, did so very tentatively. Of course, as a relatively crowded country, compared to the American mid-west, we do not have the opportunity to live the John Muir dream of setting*

*aside large areas of unspoiled wilderness. But what we can do is ensure that we maximise the opportunity to identify and protect the best of our landscapes, which many people are belatedly finding out are not altogether safe from untrammelled development.*

*Such aspirations have to be advanced in the face of many conflicting pressures. Scotland's two existing national parks, for instance, present many difficulties for conservationists. I am sure John Muir would join us in viewing the current park authorities almost as pseudo-development agencies, such is their willingness to allow major developments which should have no place in a national park. Cairngorms National Park Authority, for instance is planning a new town of over 3,000 people and Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority is allowing large scale industrial mining in one of its glens. Both authorities describe this as sustainable development, not in conflict with their primary responsibility to conserve the environment of the national park, but both are happening at the expense of the environment of the two national parks.*

*Likewise, the race to have Scotland achieve a target of 100% renewable energy by 2020, while admirable from a Climate Change perspective, should not be done at the expense of our finest landscapes. What would John Muir think of many of the wind farm schemes that have passed muster with planners at local and national government level? While the Government stresses that the planning system for wind energy is under control, we still get many vexatious proposals which could be avoided by more rigorous guidance from the centre. Scottish Natural Heritage has recently assessed the visual effect of the onward march of wind turbines, amongst other development. We are now looking at a Scotland where the area unaffected by any form of visual intrusion from human development has declined from 41% in 2002 to 28% by 2009, largely due to wind farms. Will tourists, expecting the breathing spaces and open landscapes of the Highlands and their ever changing land forms, be impressed by identikit wind factories wherever they go? I think not. The SNH work demonstrates all too clearly what happens when development is allowed to progress without coordination and strategy. We need a vision of where we want to be and how much the country should be protected from such intrusion.*

*In 1947, the Ramsay Report identified eight areas of the country which merited the status of national parks. By contrast, since Devolution in 1999, Governments in Scotland have been determined to avoid such strategic thinking as far as national parks are concerned, instead relying on local authorities and local communities to accept or reject proposals. We even have the ludicrous situation where the community of Harris organised a plebiscite on whether it should seek national park status. 70.5% of them agreed to seek such an accolade. The local authority were not convinced, but nevertheless asked the Government to*

*take it to the next stage. The Government refused on the basis that there was no local agreement! The Scottish Campaign for National Parks together with the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland are jointly putting together a strategy which will argue the case that Scotland deserves more national parks and that those that we have should be better resourced to carry out their work. Despite our difficulties with some of the management decisions of the existing parks, there is no doubt that national parks represent an investment in our future, well beyond the small sums of public money that is their lot. In fact, economic analysis in the American park system, shows a return of 400% on public investment. The situation in Scotland will be no different, making a strong economic case for more and better national parks in Scotland.*

*Of course economic potential was far from John Muir's mind when he looked out over Yosemite Valley. He was simply concerned that those wonders of nature should be protected for their own sake and the benefit to us would be in the magnificence and awe of it all. **In celebrating John Muir in the land of his birth in 2014, could we at least begin collectively to dream of a Scotland where our best landscapes are securely protected and even perhaps to extend our national park family? That would be a fitting legacy to a work that started a world-wide movement.***

**Bill McDermott**  
Chairman

### **Affordable housing for local people**

*Michael Dower, SCNP Hon. Vice-President, writes :*

"I warmly support the plea made by Bill McDermott, in his Chairman's leader in the Autumn 2011 Newsletter, that the two National Park authorities should 'organise their planning policies around addressing the actual need for housing'. He referred correctly to the Peak Park's policy to achieve affordable housing for local people not by cross-subsidy on other more expensive homes, but by an exceptions policy which secured that land at lower prices was used only for affordable housing.

As one who worked with Bill in the Peak Park, allow me to add that the Peak Park's approach to this was not passive, in the sense that we simply waited for others to propose such affordable housing. We realised that the local economy and social structure needed young people and key workers living locally.

We encouraged and helped parish councils to do surveys to find out the scale of need for such housing. We directly approached landowners in the relevant villages to see whether they would put land forward at low price. We found Housing Associations who could build the houses. We urged the Housing Corporation, then the main

funder for such Associations, to put money into small schemes. We influenced the design of the schemes so that they fitted into the grain of the villages and the National Park landscape. The housing thus created is still, twenty years later, owned by the Associations and houses low-income people in a rural area where wealthy people compete for any other property that comes on the market.

This proactive approach to meeting social and economic needs is, in my view, absolutely appropriate for a National Park authority. It sustains the crucial triangle that Sir Patrick Geddes called 'folk, work and place'. It strengthens the support of local people for the national park idea. It appears to chime with the current political priorities in Scotland."

### **Loch Lomond & The Trossachs NP**

In February the Park Authority issued the planning consent for the controversial Cononish goldmine covering a ten year period of extraction and restoration works. Announcement of the conclusion of three months of negotiations on financial and legal agreements with Scotgold Resources Ltd was heralded as a success story by the Park Authority in a news release and strangely the Park's Planning and Rural Development Director, Gordon Watson was quoted congratulating his team on dealing with this in a short timeframe to enable the work to start this summer. This PR spin is disappointing given the Park Authority has 'temporarily' set aside the Sandford Principle which gives primacy to the special qualities of the Park.

We await with interest to see whether or not there are any breaches of the 60 or so planning conditions attached to the consent and we sincerely hope all the pledges are honoured and the development delivers all the community benefits that the developers and supporters claim will arise from this major industrial works in such a sensitive scenic part of the Park.

Consultation on the Loch Lomond byelaws review is due to get underway before the end of March and while it is anticipated only minor changes are planned covering the management of the loch waters we understand there will be some radical options to tackle management issues on the islands which are coming under increasing visitor pressure. The introduction of a tougher management regime on some of the most heavily visited islands is to be welcomed as the conditions on the ground are appalling with heavy littering, toileting, an increasing number of wild stag parties and growing conflicts between different types of island visitors.

On the subject of toilets we are pleased that the Park Authority is currently investing over £100,000 in much needed new toilets in Luss which is the most popular lochside village with over 600,000 visitors a year. This comes at a time that Stirling Council is closing a number of public toilets in the eastern half of the Park

as a budget saving exercise. Fortunately they have entered a series of agreements with local hotels and other businesses to introduce a 'comfort scheme' whereby for small annual contributions to cleaning and toiletries the public are encouraged to use the toilets in these premises. It remains to be seen if the scheme will work in some of the honeypot locations. Ironically this is happening at a time that a new Park Authority visitor survey has highlighted the provision and availability of public toilets as the number one concern amongst visitors interviewed.

Disappointingly, the Breadalbane Folklore Centre, which is housed in a converted mill beside the Falls of Dochart in Killin, has been closed as a budget saving by Stirling Council. This Centre housed imaginative displays on the rich heritage of the Breadalbane area and has been enjoyed by over 1 million visitors since it opened in 1994. This is the fifth visitor centre in the National Park to either close or to lose its information and exhibition roles in the past five years and it is apparent there is no clear joint information services strategy for the Park involving bodies such as the Park Authority, Forestry Commission and VisitScotland and this needs to be urgently addressed as the recent Park visitor survey confirmed that two thirds of visitors are seeking information on arrival in the National Park. Some ad hoc investments in upgrading a cluster of 3 Centres in Balmaha and the Aberfoyle area are currently underway with each facility being upgraded by different agencies who appear to be working in isolation from each other. The new Park Plan should address the future information services strategy properly as this is a major deficiency in the consultation draft and the shortcomings of the current uncoordinated approach are sadly evident on the ground.

The Friends of Loch Lomond & the Trossachs have recently produced a stunning DVD film which celebrates and showcases the special qualities of the National Park and features original music from Phil Cunningham. Copies of this new 48 minute DVD are available to SCNP members at a special discounted price of £8.99 (normal price £11.99) from the Friends offices in Helensburgh. Tel 01436677733.

### **Cairngorms National Park.**

We will shortly know, courtesy of the Court of Session, whether the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) was exercising due diligence in adopting its Local Plan in 2010 or whether it was flying by the seat of its pants and riding roughshod over the precepts of sustainable development to allow the building of 950 houses, mostly in Badenoch and Strathspey. The appellants to the Judicial Review (Cairngorms Campaign, Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group and the Scottish Campaign for National Parks) certainly feel strongly that the CNPA's primary duty to uphold the

conservation value of the National Park was set aside in its determination to support its other duty to promote the social and economic development of the area, even though the legislation expressly states that where there is conflict between the two, the conservation of the National Park must come first.

Renewable energy projects are very much to the fore in and around the Park with Highland Council recently rejecting a windfarm on the eastern edge of the Park near Kincaig and the Scottish Government nodding through 20 giant turbines (126m high ) near Moy to the north of the Park without a public inquiry or inviting written submissions on the scheme. Power bosses have also announced the first of 600 new towers has now been erected as part of the controversial 220km long Beauty-Denny powerline which will weave its way through the south west end of the Park.

It is also interesting to see the National Park Convener, David Green championing renewable energy following the Park Authority's approval of two small-scale hydro schemes proposed by Pitmain Estates to generate enough energy for 600 homes. More worrying is his 'admiration' of the Scottish Government's (and what some would contend is an unrealistic) ambitious plan to have 20% of total energy use from renewable sources by 2020. While he states 'we will do what is appropriate for the Cairngorms to support this target,' he has ruled out 'large' windfarms and places great emphasis on wood fuel, small-scale hydro schemes and 'small-scale' wind turbines.

The much heralded new £24 million water supply system serving the Strathspey & Badenoch part of the Park that is drawing water from a massive underground reservoir under the River Spey rather than Loch Einich, has come in for much criticism as the water quality is poor. This new system went live last month and serves a population of 10,000. It is also due to serve the controversial An Camus Mor new town.

### **Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park.**

The full horror of local planning authority, Scottish Natural Heritage, Reporter and Scottish Ministers decisions on windfarms in the Regional Park is now becoming readily apparent. 28 turbines have been built on four sites with three sites adjoining each other, with another 13 turbines on the fourth site straddling the park boundary. The affect from the A737 trunk road at Beith is to show an almost continuous bank of turbines from Ardrossan in the west to Kilbirnie in the east. Sign posting to the 108 square miles of park is not great but now you can just tell people to head for the turbines!

At the end of last year one of the turbines immediately adjoining the park, burst into flames and self-destructed.



Funny things to put in a park where you encourage people to go in increasing numbers for a true countryside experience!

### **Easy Fund Raising.**

A few additional people have signed up to the easyfundraising website to support SCNP through their online purchases.

*Thank you very much.*

To others who may be hesitating, remember, it doesn't cost you any more money to nominate us as the charity you wish to support. If you don't do it, the money just stays in the pockets of the retail industry.

### **Annual General Meeting.**

The 21st Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday 27th April 2012 at 10.30 a.m. in the Smith Art Gallery & Museum, Dumbarton Road, Stirling. The meeting will continue after lunch and will close at 3.30 p.m. Coffee will be available from 10.15 a.m.

After lunch **John Thomson** will give a talk entitled: ***"Let's hear it for natural beauty: reflections of a repentant bean-counter"***.

John retired last summer after a public service career which took him from the Treasury, DOE and Scottish Office to the Countryside Commission and SNH, involving policy-making and implementation in the fields of economic development, land use planning, energy and transport, the environment and outdoor recreation.

In addition **John Mayhew** will present ***a draft forward Strategy for National Parks in Scotland***. John is the Project Manager for the joint SCNP/APRS Scottish National Parks Strategy Project; he is also the Director of APRS.

Please try to join us - it promises to be a stimulating meeting.

### **Executive Committee.**

The Executive has met on 4 October, 15 November, 17 January, 14 February, and 27 March. There was no meeting in December. A further meeting is scheduled for 15 May.

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### **NOT YET A NATIONAL PARK!**

*(Photograph courtesy of SNH - Beinn Eighe )*

### **HELPING SCNP PROTECT SCOTLAND'S FINEST LANDSCAPES AND HABITATS.**

We are very keen to increase our membership and get as many as possible of the thousands of people who have expressed their support for more national parks in Scotland, involved in our work.

Please talk to your friends and relatives who have concerns about the wider environment and encourage them to join with all of us involved in this important work. Remember it only costs £10 per year and £16 pounds for a couple.

### **Urgent Message from our Hon. Treasurer:**

In order to fight the onslaught of windfarms and other inappropriate developments in our wonderful scenery, we desperately need new members otherwise by 2013, we shall be in a very difficult place financially. PLEASE help us to grow – **we need many new members to support us** - so that we have the funds to protect the environmental heritage which our grandchildren deserve.

**Sybil Simpson**