



Scottish National Parks – a Test Case.

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.

The question of the need for housing in the Cairngorms National Park is a vexed one, because it is accepted by all sides that we need thriving local communities in the National Park. By definition that means a good spread of age classes to maintain functioning schools and local services and the only way that young local people can buy into that is through affordable housing for sale or rent.

The problem is that the CNPA seeks to deliver such housing on the back of allowing large scale developers to build open market houses for large profits to enable a proportion of lower profit, affordable housing to meet local needs. In practice, that means providing a total supply of new housing amounting to at least three times more than is necessary for the maintenance of the rural population. What this policy actually amounts to is selling off the environment of the National Park to subsidise housing. In more urban situations this might be acceptable, but here we are talking about a national park which is expressly designated for its natural and cultural heritage. But equally, the policy adopted by the CNPA won't even solve the problem because very few of the open market houses will go to maintain the local population. Instead they will go to the second home, commuting and retiree market, all of which militates against the policies of sustaining local communities.

Yet Category V parks (cultural landscapes), in the definition set by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), should be at the forefront of humans coming to terms with a ravaged planet. All around we hear of declining biodiversity, overfishing, species extinction. Clearly we need to stabilise the situation with immediate effect and we probably can only do that through securing large areas which remain unexploited. But we also need to find new ways of living within the limits of our resources and maintaining and enhancing what we have of conservation value. This will require radical thinking, not business as usual.

If we are not careful, such examples as we have of the treatment of sustainable development in Scottish national parks risk bringing the whole notion of the Scottish model of national parks into disrepute. The idea that Scottish national parks should have, as one of their aims, the need to develop new paradigms of sustainable development was sound enough at the primary legislation stage, but clearly the definition of sustainable development, as currently used, is too vague to live up to the aims of the legislation. National park authorities, above all others, should be teasing out this issue of sustainability rather than acting as enterprise agencies, which, in the case of the CNPA, sees it actually advocating a new town of 1,500 houses at An Camas Mor. It would also help if they could stop describing damaging housing developments as enhancing the conservation value of the area! What nonsense!

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