



Winter/Spring 2014

Thinking globally and acting locally

We have often featured the issue of sustainability in our newsletters, and it is certainly an ever-present topic in our discussions with the Park Authorities and Government. Just a little while ago we met with Paul Wheelhouse, the Minister for the Environment and Climate Change who again stressed the importance of sustainability in the Government's approach to environmental issues (see the separate follow-up correspondence with the Minister in this issue).

We could debate at length the different interpretations that many put on the definition of sustainable development, and it is clear that we as an organisation are at the other end of the spectrum from the enterprise agencies and government when it comes to highlighting the need for environmental sustainability as opposed to "*sustainable economic growth*" in the rural environment.

Wearing another hat, I have been engaged in helping to develop the concept of energy independence for rural communities in my own patch in the Highlands. I have been taking my cue from a small town in Austria which, over a period of twenty odd years, has completely changed its circumstances, becoming a world leader in green energy. It is the small town of Güssing, in south-east Austria, which recognised that, if it was to continue as a viable community, it would have to reorganise around its strengths, and play to them. Rather than exporting its capital, it would have to find ways of retaining this within the community. Having no great river resource, nor wind, it turned to its 60% cover of trees, mostly in small, privately-owned parcels, to develop combined heat and power and district heating schemes, and thus it can now claim to meet 80% of its energy needs from local sources. Not only has this stabilised energy prices for the local community, in stark comparison to the exponential rise of fossil fuel energy prices, but it has created 150 jobs in the local economy and, like many National Parks, has developed a new paradigm of integrating several objectives to achieve multiple benefits for the environment and local communities. Its work has even earned it the title '*The Güssing Model*'.

The situation in the Highlands is rather different. At base, its energy resources are both enormous and varied, but its benefits have not been realised locally.

Take the example of wind farms, which are typically foreign owned and large in scale. The community benefit usually amounts to what is in effect a bribe for putting up with them. However, with developments in micro-hydro, and particularly in local biomass, that is about to change. And that change, in the case of biomass, comes courtesy of an unexpected source.

In the Great Glen, Forestry Commission Scotland is changing its planting policy, in certain circumstances, when it comes to areas of former native woodland. Combined with difficulties over steep slope harvesting, and keeping main road networks safe, it has abandoned any thought of clear felling and re-planting with conifers, (most of which go for fibre board or pulping anyway), and it is moving towards the concept of coppiced native woodland for energy biomass. This is great news for wildlife, and it augurs well for the re-birth of traditional woodland management, which so happens to chime with communities seeking to move away from costly heating oil to find ways of using their natural resources sustainably. It could also be part of the recycling agenda, as local authorities are required to close down their landfill sites. Why don't we use all those roadside and garden clippings, and produce bio-gas from local anaerobic digestion? Güssing has done it, and they are now producing their own road fuel!

The slogan '*think globally and act locally*' originated from the work of the great Scottish biologist, planner and practical thinker, Sir Patrick Geddes. This year we commemorate another great Scottish environmentalist, John Muir, as the father of the National Park movement. Wouldn't it be fitting if John Muir was also commemorated in his country of birth by following the example of Güssing?

Bill McDermott
Chairman

SCNP 23rd Annual General Meeting

*Our AGM will be held on Friday 25th April 2014 at 10.30am in the Smith Art Gallery & Museum, Dumbarton Road, Stirling. Roger Clarke, member of Council of the Campaign for National Parks, will speak on **National Parks and Environmental Policy south of the Border.***

Dear Minister

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: Meeting with Scottish Campaign for National Parks, 5 September 2013

We and our colleagues from SCNP and APRS were most grateful for your time earlier this month; it was good to have the chance to renew our dialogue with Ministers after a lengthy break. Even though we do not at present see eye-to-eye on future policy towards National Parks, we greatly welcomed the interest that you clearly took in the issues that we raised, as well as the frankness and open-mindedness that you brought to our exchanges.

We recognise that, despite your enthusiasm for the work of our two existing National Parks, you are reluctant to commit the Government to extending the National Park family in Scotland at a time when the public finances are tightly constrained. Naturally we regret this, especially as experience over the past decade has in our view demonstrated that the modest revenue funding involved would soon pay dividends, and that overall the economic benefits would far outweigh the costs. Furthermore, as we explained, we believe that there are ways in which the extra expenditure involved could be minimised. Against this background perhaps we can take this opportunity to clarify some of the points that arose in our discussions and to set out why we remain convinced that it is in Scotland's national interest to embark as soon as possible on a process that could in due course lead to the establishment of more National Parks across the country. In doing so, we would of course only be catching up with most other nations across the developed world and indeed many more widely.

The first, crucial argument for creating more National Parks is as we see it their ability to attract attention and interest, both at home and abroad. This, along with the broad set of purposes enshrined in the relevant Scottish legislation, sets National Parks apart from other environmental designations. They are the gold standard, not so much as a mechanism for environmental protection, but as a means of managing and showcasing a country's natural and cultural assets. It is almost universally recognised that National Parks can play a major role in attracting tourists and in acting as a shop-window to the world, as well as in instilling national pride. From this perspective the fact that a country with Scotland's wealth of fine landscapes, eye-catching wildlife and

rich cultural heritage still has only two National Parks represents a massive missed opportunity.

Second, as you yourself stressed, the National Park model that Scotland has in place has much to commend it and is widely admired, not least for its flexibility and the importance that it accords to the involvement of local people. Whilst we question the way in which the current parks have in certain instances interpreted this remit, we are convinced that it is basically sound and that it makes it possible to devise forms of park governance that are appropriate to the wide range of differing circumstances that apply across a country as diverse as Scotland.

Third, we would like to underline the fact that, as a national accolade, National Parks are an expression of a broader public interest in conserving the qualities of the area, which must somehow be brought into harmony with local needs and aspirations. This need to combine the top-down with the bottom-up is now recognised in the National Park community across the globe, and those running National Parks are proving increasingly adept at it. Indeed, very often National Parks and National Park plans provide a model for reconciling a multitude of potentially conflicting ambitions that is widely held up for emulation elsewhere.

Inevitably, achieving this marriage of ambitions takes time and can be a bumpy process. With very few exceptions, of which Loch Lomond and the Trossachs was the only British example, contention initially centred on the issue of planning powers. Local authorities are almost invariably reluctant to relinquish these, whilst many local residents fear that designation will bring with it much tighter control over development. We have no doubt that planning – and especially plan-making – powers are critical to effective National Park management. But despite the occasional controversial case, the statistics demonstrate that in practice the success rate for planning applications in British National Parks is not significantly out of line with that elsewhere and has indeed in most cases been higher. What National Park authorities bring to the process are expertise and resources to help developers and the wider park community to achieve the Scottish Government's own goal of the "right development in the right place".

We acknowledge in this context the importance of a decision-making regime that is properly

democratically accountable. In our view National Park boards made up of a mix of locally (whether directly or indirectly) elected members and others selected by Ministers to represent the national interest are entirely appropriate. We also consider that differing circumstances in different parts of the country may well justify variations in the precise make-up of the decision-making body, especially if (as we would hope) some of the areas had a marine as well as a terrestrial component. But so long as the staff who support such decision-making bodies are unequivocally answerable to them, we see no overwhelming reason why they have to be employed by them. Our perception on this matter is fundamental to the case that we put forward for at least considering the creation of a single National Parks service. Our intention would not be to centralise authority – far from it – but merely to ensure that the inevitably limited staff resources available to the parks were deployed as efficiently and effectively as possible in delivering activity on the ground. A degree of flexibility in deployment and the more rapid dissemination of experience and good practice would be further, though secondary, potential benefits.

We hope that these explanations will help you to understand more fully where we are coming from in our contention that more National Parks would yield rich rewards for a comparatively limited investment. We remain convinced that next year's anniversary of John Muir's death would provide the ideal platform both to reaffirm Scotland's commitment to the cause that he espoused and to announce the Government's intention to create more National Parks. Such a step would not of itself generate significant financial costs, as it would inevitably be several years before the new parks were up and running.

Political leadership of this kind is exactly what we see as being needed if Scotland is to seize the opportunities for both its rural communities and the nation at large that arise from its world-class environmental assets. We recognise, however, that you and your Ministerial colleagues would not wish to embark on such a course without investigating further both the pros and cons and the more detailed options available in areas such as governance and powers, as well as gauging the extent of need and community enthusiasm in different candidate areas across the country. It is for this reason that we would like to urge you, as a first step, to set up the Strategy Group that the Government proposed in 2009. By doing so you

would, without committing yourself to the eventual outcome, not only fulfil the expectations aroused then but also live up to the promise made in the SNP's 2011 election manifesto to "work with communities to explore the creation of new National Parks".

We thank you once again for taking the time to see, to listen to, and to debate with us.

Yours sincerely

Bill McDermott Chairman SCNP
Charles Strang Convenor APRS



Dear Bill and Charles

I am pleased that you appreciated the meeting and the candid nature of our exchanges, and a note of the meeting is attached. However, I do wish to reiterate that in the current economic climate there are constraints in terms of designating new National Parks.

*In your letter you also urged me to set up the National Parks Strategy Group that the Scottish Government proposed in 2009. The proposal at that time was for a short life group with a fixed term of no more than 18 months, with a remit to establish general principles involved in considering any boundary changes to existing National Parks or designating any new National Parks. The proposed Strategy Group which you are suggesting in your report **Unfinished Business** (page 33) appears to be for a permanent group with a much more extensive remit regarding future National Parks as well as current ones. However, as I explained at the meeting, I would not wish to embark on something, and this includes a National Parks Strategy Group, that could create expectations and lead to disappointment. Thank you once again for these exchanges.*

Kind regards

Paul Wheelhouse

STOP PRESS!

THE JOHN MUIR CONFERENCE 2014
National Parks and Protected Areas for the
21st Century – 12/13 May, Perth Concert Hall.

Scotland's National Parks and some of its conservation bodies have come together to create a one-off conference that will explore approaches to managing protected areas and National Parks in the UK and around the world: *are they delivering for 21st century society?*

SCNP/APRS are taking the opportunity to host an associated **FRINGE EVENT** on the theme of **'The Case for More Scottish National Parks – Unfinished Business'** for conference delegates, members of both organisations and the general public, on Sunday 11 May at the Royal George Hotel, Perth, between 6.30pm and 7.30pm. There will be a short presentation on the SCNP/APRS **Unfinished Business** report, followed by an open discussion. This is an event not to be missed in this special year when the contribution of John Muir to the worldwide National Park movement is being recognised



UNFINISHED **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

Notwithstanding the (perhaps not unexpected) cold shoulder experienced from officialdom (see above) SCNP/APRS aims to continue with the next phase of the Scottish National Parks Strategy project. Funds are therefore required, and if you are able to suggest any sources please do not hesitate to contact the SCNP Honorary Treasurer with details.

In the next edition of the Newsletter there'll be an article devoted to the forward programme of work required to progress our proposed seven additional National Parks in Scotland. Significant elements of this work will be raising the National Parks agenda with local communities, and taking opportunities to discuss matters with planning authorities in the course of Local Development Plan preparation.

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