

No space for parks

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Marion Shoard explains why Scotland lacks National Parks

Almost alone among the developed nations of the world, Scotland is without national parks. Today even Third World countries pride themselves on devoting scarce resources to safeguarding their scenic heritage by reserving large stretches of country as national parks. But there are no signs that Scotland is about to acquire this particular symbol of conservation. Ironically, however, it was a Scot who gave the idea of the national park to the world more than a century ago.

During his boyhood in Scotland, John Muir came to develop a passion for wild places and creatures. Had he remained in Scotland, this passion might have borne fruit in his homeland, but his family emigrated in 1849 to the USA. There, Muir became concerned at threats to the American wilderness and encountered the ideas of Henry George, who made much of the evils of private land ownership. Muir went on to develop the idea of the national park which was put into practice at Yosemite. This was followed by other parks throughout the USA and later in countries as different as Poland, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Spain. In the vast majority of countries national parks are, as Muir intended they should be, substantial stretches of wild country devoid of commercial activities and owned by the state.

The reason Scotland did not adopt Muir's ideas was not lack of concern for its wild places. Indeed, Scotland was the scene of Britain's first campaign for a public right to walk freely over uncultivated moor and mountain. The Liberal MP for South Aberdeen in the 1880s, James Bryce, had travelled and climbed throughout the world. In the Alps, he found that walkers were welcomed. In Scotland, access was barred to vast areas in case walkers might disturb the deer or their pursuers - the landowners themselves or the rich from the South. These privileged few were prepared to pay Highland lairds large sums simply for the right of the kill. So vast were the lands guarded against trespass by armies of ghillies that even in the 1920s, 450 of the 543 Munros (peaks above 914 metres in height) were forbidden territory. From 1884 onwards, Bryce presented 12 private member's bills seeking to overturn the law of trespass in the hills by giving people the right to the land and removing the right of landowners to turn them off. But Bryce's campaign died with him, and when a campaign for access surfaced in England decades later it took a much more aggressive form.

In the 1930s, walkers began to demand the right to enter the vast and then inaccessible grouse moors of the Peak District. This time parliamentary action was backed by mass rallies and trespasses which bore fruit in Clement Attlee's 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. This gave local authorities a new power to secure a right of access over specific stretches of open country through making access agreements, access orders or acquiring land themselves. It also made provision for national parks - but only in England and Wales. So why was Scotland left out?

The 1949 legislation grew out of the reports of government appointed committees established to consider what should be done. One committee looked at England and Wales and a separate one looked at Scotland. It was the Scottish committee which came up with the more radical proposals. The Ramsay Committee on National Parks in Scotland proposed state-owned national parks in its report in 1947. Five areas were put forward for immediate designation: Loch Lomond and The Trossachs, Glen Affric with Glen Cannich and Strath Farrar, Ben Nevis with Glen Coe and Black Mount, the Cairngorms, and Loch Torridon with Loch Maree and Little Loch Broom. These amounted to a total of more than 5180 square kilometres or six per cent of Scotland's land, and would have cost £1.3 million in acquisition alone. The Committee urged a legal right to roam over all uncultivated moor and mountain within the national parks.

In contrast, the Hobhouse Committee on National Parks in England and Wales, also reporting in 1947, proposed a parks system which left the ownership of the land involved and the public's rights of access to it quite untouched. It proposed a National Parks Commission to select the parks, and relied on the newly created planning system to conserve the parks' scenery and on government grants to encourage the provision of access and other facilities for visitors. All this was to be administered by specially created national park authorities. one-third of whose members were to be appointed by the government to represent the national conservation and recreation interest.

Because the Hobhouse plans were so modest, they aroused relatively little opposition and were implemented more or less as they stood in the 1949 legislation. So today England and Wales have 10 national parks, though they are not of course national parks as Ramsay (or Muir) envisaged. Only one per cent of the land in the English and Welsh parks is owned either by the park authorities or by the Nature Conservancy Council. The remainder is largely in the hands of individuals who may or may not pay attention to conservation and access needs.

Ramsay's calls for public ownership of national park land was undoubtedly a serious obstacle in the eyes of a government which, though radical, was not prepared to upset landowners too much. It would however have been perfectly possible to take on board all of Ramsay's recommendations apart from public ownership and the right to roam, and to set up parks on a more limited pattern. This would have entailed the creation of a National Parks Commission for Scotland and, to plan and administer each of the proposed parks, a special authority with two-thirds of its membership drawn from the relevant local authorities but the remaining one-third appointed by government to represent the national conservation and recreation interest. Instead, however, the government set in motion a number of inquiries.

Had Attlee's Government lasted longer, national parks would very probably have come to Scotland. But before there was even a foot in the door, Attlee was replaced in 1951 with Winston Churchill heading a government laden with landowners and destined to last 13 years. All this government was prepared to do was to designate Ramsay's five proposed park areas as 'national park direction areas'. Within these, special consultation with the Secretary of State for Scotland was to be required before any planning applications for development could be approved. For several years, people in Scotland believed that these areas would at some stage become full-blown national parks, but this has never happened.

The hopes of the national park enthusiasts were raised again when the Countryside Commission for Scotland was set up in 1967, the first national organization charged with responsibility for looking after conservation and recreation in Scotland. The Commission did not however throw its weight behind the idea of national parks. Concerned above all that any system of national park designation in Scotland should fit in with the international scene, it rejected the idea of national parks for Scotland on the grounds that if they were established on the English and Welsh model, they would not fit the international definition of a national park. In 1974 what the Commission proposed instead was a string of 'special parks'. In practice, these would have been exactly the same as the national parks of England and Wales. But the term 'special park' failed to fire the enthusiasm of the Scots or anybody else and it was soon forgotten.

The national park direction areas were finally abolished in 1980, and two new designations have emerged in their place: the 'national scenic area' and the 'regional park'. Today, Scotland has 40 national scenic areas covering 13 per cent of the land. Like the direction areas, the scenic areas rely entirely on development control to conserve natural beauty.

There are two main consequences of scenic area designation. Firstly, if a local planning authority intends to grant planning permission for a development to which the Countryside Commission for Scotland objects, the case is notified to the Secretary of State for Scotland who may call in the application for his own decision. Secondly, development control is marginally extended within the scenic areas to embrace estate tracks rising above 300 metres and all buildings over 12 metres in height. But in the national scenic area as elsewhere in Scotland, most landscape change wrought by agriculture and forestry is outside the scope of planning control.

Regional parks lack even the puny planning safeguards applying to the national scenic areas. They are simply extensive areas of land over parts of which there is provision for outdoor recreation via country parks, access agreements or footpaths. By April 1987, Scotland had two regional parks, Pentlands Hills and Fife, and two more in the pipeline, ClydeMuirshiels and Loch Lomond.

What could be achieved by introducing national park instead of or as well as these? There is no doubt that the expression 'national parks' has cachet in itself and designation might improve tourism prospects. In the Cairngorms, one area where national park status is sought, this has been one of the main reasons. But more tangible benefits would also flow.

The main threats to the attractions of Scotland's countryside arise from agricultural and forestry intensification and expansion. Although national park designation would not in itself bring these activities under full planning control, there are three ways in which it would help. Firstly, the extra resources available to park planning authorities would help them secure management agreements with landowners to protect some of the most important stretches of open moor against ploughing for agriculture or conifer afforestation. Secondly, all estate roads at whatever height they were constructed would be expected to come under planning control within the parks, since a special development order introduced by Secretary of State Nicholas Ridley in 1986 has brought this activity within full planning control in the national parks of England and Wales. The construction of estate roads, often bulldozed across wild hillsides to ease access for deerstalkers, can cause unsightly scars: for example 1149 km of new road were laid across the countryside of Grampian region alone between 1960 and 1981. And thirdly, conifer afforestation, which is swallowing up 21,000 hectares of Scotland's open land every year, might be held back in park areas. Park authorities have to prepare maps of specially important moor and heath, and national parks are one of the few categories of area within which the Forestry Commission is required to consult planning authorities over planning applications for forestry grant. These factors help explain why within the national parks of England and Wales only 15 per cent of land suitable for conifer planting is actually under trees - compared to 44 per cent outside.

If Scotland is to have national parks, where should they be? The Ramsay Committee based its selection 40 years ago not just on scenic beauty and recreation opportunities but also on ease of acquiring the land involved. What is needed now is a completely new committee to look into the feasibility and desirability of national parks for Scotland and to put forward proposed areas.

There are signs that the day of the national park in Scotland may soon be at hand. The new chairman of the Countryside Commission for Scotland, Roger Carr, acknowledged in a speech in March this year that the regional park model might not be adequate in areas like Loch Lomond and the Cairngorms and that the Commission intended to 'look again at the need for Scottish national parks as the best way in which the conservation and development of key areas of Scotland's land resource can be assured'. Next is the 150th anniversary of John Muir's birth. It would be a fitting tribute to this important Scot if 1988 saw a commitment that his dream of national parks would be realized in his native land at last.

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