

Debate, Wednesday 24 May 2017

## Motion S5M-03832: The establishment of new national parks

### Summary

Since their foundation, our two national parks have been influential in supporting the health, economy and natural heritage of their areas – and the country as a whole. We believe the Scottish Government can build on this success by exploring the potential to create new national parks in some of Scotland's iconic landscapes. As a first step, we want ministers to lead a strategic review of our existing parks to evaluate their performance, identify best practice for the future and set out the criteria for new national parks to be established.

We are particularly interested in investigating options for 'lighter touch' models in new areas, tailored to fit local circumstances within the framework of the national parks legislation. Where there is strong local support, we believe new national parks could help boost jobs, promote sustainable development and enhance tourism within rural communities, as well as bringing higher levels of protection to our natural and cultural heritage and promoting outdoor recreation opportunities.

### Introduction

Ramblers Scotland welcomes this debate on the establishment of new national parks in Scotland. Our organisation was heavily involved in developing the Scottish national parks legislation which was enacted in 2000, and we have long called for more national parks to be established in Scotland.

We were pleased to support the *Unfinished Business* report produced by the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (SCNP) and the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (APRS) in 2013.<sup>1</sup> We have also supported the more recent reports<sup>2</sup> from SCNP and APRS setting out the benefits of national parks in terms of volunteering, tourism and socio-economics, as well as the options for differing governance models in future national parks as compared with those of the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond & the Trossachs national parks.

### A national parks strategy group

We continue to be disappointed at the failure of the government to establish a ministerially-chaired National Parks Strategy Group as promised in 2009.<sup>3</sup> This group's role was intended to include setting criteria for any future bids for national park status, and we fully support this proposal. We also believe it is important for the government to assess the performance of the two existing national parks. This would help to identify areas where the national parks can improve their performance and also develop best practice. A strategic group would be well placed to take on this role.

### The benefits of national park status

National parks bring significant social and economic benefits, directly through the work generated in park planning and management, but also indirectly through tourism. Our two national parks have shown they are playing an integral role in boosting the Scottish economy. A report by VisitScotland in 2011<sup>4</sup> showed that over a million UK residents visited Scottish national parks, spending £240 million, while a further VisitScotland survey from 2015<sup>5</sup> demonstrated the popularity of national

<sup>1</sup> SCNP/APRS Unfinished Business, a national parks strategy for Scotland, 2013

<http://www.scnp.org.uk/News/Docs/2013/Unfinished-Business-a-national-parks-strategy-for-scotland.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.scnp.org.uk/publications.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government, National Parks Strategic Review Recommendations: Consultation Report, 2009

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2009/08/17105408/0>

<sup>4</sup> VisitScotland Scottish National Parks Sector Review, 2012.

<http://www.visitscotland.org/pdf/Scottish%20National%20Parks%20Sector%20Review%202012.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> VisitScotland, Scotland Visitor Survey 2015,

[http://www.visitscotland.org/pdf/Final%20\(external%20use\)%20Scotland%20Visitor%20Survey%202015%20updated%208%20March%202016.pdf](http://www.visitscotland.org/pdf/Final%20(external%20use)%20Scotland%20Visitor%20Survey%202015%20updated%208%20March%202016.pdf)

parks with 17% of all visitors to Scotland going to Loch Lomond & the Trossachs and 12% to the Cairngorms National Park. International visitors are especially alert to the location and opportunities provided by national parks as they recognise that these areas encompass the best scenery, wildlife and facilities for enjoying the natural environment.

As the leading internationally-recognised designation for our natural and cultural heritage, national parks status brings higher levels of protection to our most treasured landscapes and wildlife, improved opportunities for the restoration of damaged habitats and also more opportunities for influencing wider land management practices to be more sustainable in approach.

Scotland's natural heritage is widely recognised as a national asset and a magnificent setting for outdoor recreation. Our landscapes, mountains, ancient woodlands, rugged coastline, lochs and rivers all attract millions of visitors each year and nature based tourism is estimated to be worth around £1.4bn to the economy<sup>6</sup>. Outdoor recreation brings recognised benefits for our health and well-being and our two national parks have led the way in supporting more people to enjoy these benefits by producing comprehensive core paths plans, creating excellent materials to promote recreation and taken a positive, firm stance on protecting threatened access, including via court action. Infrastructure and promotion are particularly important in engaging new audiences not traditionally associated with recreation to enjoy the outdoors – for example, despite the obvious draw of the Cairngorms plateau, just 14% of visitors to the Cairngorm National Park take part in high level walking, while 44% of visitors are walking down in the straths<sup>7</sup>, where pleasant, signposted paths and interpretation are particularly important.

### **Where should new national parks be established?**

Where there is strong local support, national park status could be the key to restoring job prospects, promoting the aims of sustainable development and enhancing tourism opportunities. We are particularly interested in investigating options for 'lighter touch' models in new areas, tailored to fit local circumstances within the framework of the national parks legislation, as set out in the report by SCNP/APRS on different governance models mentioned above.

We have long called for Scotland's third national park to be established in the Western Isles, centred on Harris, which we believe would provide an appropriate level of protection to the famous coastal and upland landscapes of the Western Isles, as well as bringing significant social and economic benefits. We also believe that a strong case can be made for a national park in Galloway, which would help to balance development/environment pressures in the area and bring considerable social and economic benefits. It would also be excellent if Scotland could demonstrate through a Galloway National Park that fine landscapes and recreational opportunities are to be found in areas away from the more famous Highland and Islands landscapes.

We believe that leadership from a national parks strategy group, along with strong local support, are key aspects to the establishment of new national parks in Scotland.

Ramblers Scotland helps everyone, across Scotland, enjoy walking and protects the places we love to walk. We are the representative body for walkers in Scotland, recognised by **sportscotland** as a governing body of sport. We have over 6,500 members in Scotland with 54 local walking groups entirely run by volunteers. Over 1,200 of our members are active volunteers, organising thousands of led walks and social activities for their groups each year.

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<sup>6</sup> Scottish Natural Heritage, Valuing nature based tourism in Scotland, 2010 <http://www.snh.gov.uk/docs/B720765.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Cairngorms National Park Authority, Active Cairngorms, 2015 <http://cairngorms.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/150812ActiveCairngormsFINAL.pdf>