

# Centre for Rural Economy Policy and Practice

BRIEFING PAPERS: National Parks in England



# National Parks in England

Nicola Thompson, Centre for Rural Economy

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## Introduction

The coalition Government's deficit reduction programme is bringing into question the future of a wide range of public agencies with rural responsibilities. National park authorities (NPAs), the institutions with the lead responsibility for the care of England's national parks have survived the review of public bodies. However, in the context of the comprehensive spending review NPAs are facing spending cuts of up to 30%. This will mean that the NPAs have to face difficult decisions on which areas of work they are going to cut back on. Defra is also currently undertaking a review of governance arrangements including an examination of the extent to which the authorities are accountable to the national park communities. Both these developments are likely to result in changes to the management of England's national parks over the coming years and months.

This briefing paper is prompted by this current scrutiny of NPAs. It is based on a series of research projects undertaken since 2000 on the governance and management of national parks. The paper outlines why national parks as designations continue to be of value and significance to individuals and communities in twenty first century England. In doing so it also considers why NPAs are critical institutions to the current and future management of national parks. Finally it considers what changes may assist in making NPAs more relevant and effective bodies.

## National Parks in the Twenty First Century

National parks are an invention of the immediate post war years. Created in an era of austerity by a Labour Government keen to signal commitment to enabling access to the countryside they have attracted support from across the political spectrum throughout their sixty year history. Different aspects of the national park concept are of appeal to a diverse range of social and political interests. The idea of designating landscapes for their scenic value and recreational potential continues to attract widespread societal support.

There were three notable developments in central government policy for national parks during the New Labour era:

- 1) A gradual increase in funding for NPAs including the provision of special funds administered by the Authorities for the promotion of sustainable development;
- 2) The designation of new national parks in the New Forest and South Downs and;
- 3) A review of NPA governance aimed at ensuring that Authorities could more effectively pursue their purposes and duty.

However, despite these developments New Labour failed to articulate a coherent vision for the future of the national parks system. Moreover, national park issues had a markedly low policy profile in central government with the result that they were poorly integrated into wider agendas on reform of rural land use and rural development policy. Hence the last decade has been characterised by a failure, on the part of national government, to tackle questions of the relevance of the national parks system or to express a vision for its future. This task has been left to the NPAs themselves working through the English National Park Authorities Association and voluntary sector organisations, such as the Campaign for National Parks. Only in the last year has this work been incorporated into Defra policy through the national parks vision and circular of 2010. The result is a growing need for national government, as well as the NPAs and wider communities of residents, visitors and users, to further examine the multifarious contribution of England's national parks. This brief paper presents a perspective on what that contribution might be.



The contribution of national parks is usually understood in terms of the extent to which NPAs effectively achieve the two purposes of designation (conservation and recreation) as set out in the founding legislation of 1949 and most recently revised through the 1995 Environment Act. Historical accounts, as well as the recently published Lawton review on England's ecological network, suggest a mixed picture in terms of the efficacy of designation if this is to be judged solely in terms of the two purposes. In recent years increasingly sophisticated systems of reporting and the identification of targets and performance indicators have enabled a detailed analysis of the extent to which park authorities are achieving the purposes. Management plans, now integral to the way in which the NPAs work, also facilitate detailed understanding of future strategies to achieve conservation and recreation objectives. Achieving statutory purposes, however imperfectly, is part of why national parks remain important and valuable. Conservation and recreation 'outcomes' continue to be valued by the public and to be recognised as important public goods and services.

However, achieving the statutory purposes alone is only part of what makes the national park designation of continued value and societal significance. While detailed analysis of the work of individual NPAs reveals a continued focus on conservation and recreation some of the most interesting and innovative approaches relate to the pursuit of the socio-economic duty. Authorities have worked on wider rural development concerns since at least the 1970s but, following the 1995 Environment Act, have done so on the basis of the statutory duty to pursue social and economic wellbeing. This duty is secondary to the purposes, should be exercised to promote the purposes and comes with a caveat on the extent to which resources can be focused in this area. But despite these limitations the duty is the key to the growing trend of emphasising the promotion of integrated, sustainable development in national parks.

Studies on the economic impact of designation detailed in the 2006 Campaign for National Parks report 'Prosperity and Protection' have aided NPAs to become more confident in working proactively with local communities and businesses. The result is that in most parks today local residents and land managers have access to funding and advice channels over and above that available to people in all rural areas. Funds such as the Sustainable Development Fund provide small scale but often vital funding for socio-economic development that achieves the ultimate objective of the NPAs: achieving the purposes while also ensuring the livelihoods and wellbeing of the people who live there. There are, of course, still issues with local communities and businesses dissatisfied with elements of NPA policies but designation is increasingly recognised as bringing benefits as well costs.

The statutory purposes and duty have long structured the way in which policy makers and academics alike have reflected on questions of value and contribution. This briefing paper sticks with this tradition but argues that thinking on the relationship between these purposes and duty needs to be re-evaluated. What makes national parks distinctive, special and of continued relevance is the way in which they combine enabling the promotion of recreation and enjoyment by a 'national' public with a pro-active role in local social and economic development. The symbolism of designation, the understanding that people have that national parks are places where they can go and be welcomed, is important to the nation as a whole. In a society where it is increasingly difficult to own a home in the countryside national parks play a critical role in ensuring that people feel they still have a place in the countryside.

The idea of a special place in which a welcome to all is extended has been increasingly used by the Authorities in recent years. Indeed the tag line used by the Association of National Park Authorities is 'Britain's Breathing Spaces'. The idea of the national park as collective national property is, of course, in many respects a myth. The land itself, is, as it always has been for the most part in private ownership. Furthermore, there are few places more exclusive in residential terms than many of our national parks. However, the concept that the nation has an interest in the landscape and the effort that goes in to welcoming visitors and providing opportunities for recreation is critical to their value. Many people continue to see them as places in which everyone has a stake and a right to visit. A proactive approach to socio-economic wellbeing complementary to the purposes of designation can be combined with providing 'breathing space'. In summary the relevance of national parks to twenty first century society lies in the integration of recreation and enjoyment purpose with the opportunities for socio-economic development that this purpose creates and enhances.

This is not a case for abandoning the first purpose. Conservation and the natural environment remain critical to the national parks and their appeal. However, this first purpose is important to the way in which all land is managed, an increasing reality of European and national policy as more emphasis is placed on the 'greening' of farming and forestry. Furthermore, national parks are special and important not simply because the landscapes within them are exceptional or iconic (although in many cases they are) but because they offer opportunities for integration between the conserving the environment, promoting enjoyment and socio-economic development.

## The Future Management of England's National Parks

The management of national parks has always been quietly controversial and, since the 1970s, been the subject of a series of reviews. The review process has resulted in minor reform to form and function. Two related issues have proved especially difficult to address:

- 1) which level of government (local or central) should pay the costs of designation and the appropriate arrangements for funding NPAs as part local, part national agencies.
- 2) how to ensure effective local representation while continuing to recognise the national status of the designation.

The current funding system means that national government effectively meets the additional costs associated with designation. NPAs also have a strong track record in attracting external grant income, generating income through retailing etc and in using partner and voluntary contributions 'in kind'. Northumberland National Park Authority's overall budget for 2009/10 was £5,124,700 of which one third was made up of external grants and earned income. The level of activity that the Authority achieves with this modest budget is striking, a point made by several local residents at the most recent community forum event.

However, issues of representation and local accountability remain current especially following the controversies surrounding the designation of the new parks in the south east. Governance issues are likely to remain thorny and difficult especially where there is organised local resistance to designation. But there is also a danger that governance issues become a distraction from a more significant question: what have NPAs achieved and what enables and prohibits these achievements?

To take the achievements of the NPAs first. What is notable to an outsider looking at the policies and approaches of the individual NPAs is the diversity of the challenges that the Authorities face. Management plans and other documents are based on the realities of the practical problems and opportunities 'on the ground'. The NPA as an institution is flexible enough and locally rooted enough to cope with the needs of the Parks as particular, distinctive localities. One characteristic is, however more general. That is the ambition of the Authorities and the number of projects and areas of work delivered given relatively low budgets. Also consistent is a willingness to address broader policy agendas. Hence while the core of activity remains conservation and recreation NPAs have also linked achieving these with health, social inclusion, education as well as activity to enhance economic opportunities for local communities. Furthermore, the popular appeal of the national park concept has enabled many authorities to develop significant volunteer programmes. The NPAs are already doing 'Big Society'.

Addressing the question of what enables NPAs brings us back to the type of institution that they are and the benefits of the way in which they are structured. The way in which local and national representation is combined within one public body is unique in England. The result is often that different member types bring something distinctive to the table and are able to work together to a set of commonly agreed objectives. Generally harmonious relations within the Authorities is the norm in many of the established parks. Every Authority is, of course different in terms of how well the governance arrangement work, but in many cases it is not fundamentally broken. It is difficult to see how the national interest can be meaningfully represented other than by a transparent and competitive appointments process. There are healthy numbers of well qualified and experienced people applying to become 'national' members of NPAs. The quality of the national members often enhances the capacity of these small organisations to effectively deliver ambitious programmes of work. Purely local representation would miss the very point of designation and not necessary make authorities any more responsive or accountable to local communities. Perhaps the most promising opportunity to improve local accountability on the NPAs lies in strengthening the role of the parish council members to support these existing 'local voices' in being more effective representatives of park communities.

In concluding this brief paper two areas for potential improvement and reform are highlighted. The first is the imperative to promote the socio-economic duty to the status of a purpose. This was recommended in the recent Commission for Rural Communities Uplands Inquiry report. A reform of the purposes on these lines would enhance the ability of the NPAs to achieve integrated and sustainable development within the parks. It would also express a growing reality – the park authorities actively work with their communities to promote social and economic wellbeing in a multitude of ways. It is also important that a third purpose is properly resourced to allow the Authorities to build on this existing work and adapt to a funding climate where working through the 'Big Society' will be more important than drawing in grants from other agencies. The second relates to how NPAs can further their achievements in this area of work. It is the need for NPAs to more effectively work together to share knowledge on working with communities. This is important to improve the quality and efficacy of this work so that communities themselves, as well as policy makers and visitors, get the message that central to the future of the national park is the future of those who live and work within it.

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Centre for Rural Economy  
School of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development  
Newcastle University  
Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU

Tel: 0191 222 6623  
Email: [cre@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:cre@newcastle.ac.uk)