

South Downs: National Park in Waiting

What is special about the South Downs?

The South Downs stretches westwards for more than 90 miles from the spectacular white cliffs of Beachy Head across Sussex and Hampshire to Winchester.

It contains some of the best-known and admired hill country in the United Kingdom. The rolling chalk downland contrasts with the countryside of the Weald, a more enclosed landscape of woodland and farmland which is rich in history. Together these two complementary landscapes form the majority of what will be the South Downs National Park.



The South Downs provides an excellent opportunity for many different types of **recreation** and the area is used and enjoyed by a large number of different groups. At the moment 39 million people visit the South Downs each year. The area is also rich in **archaeological history**, with historic market towns such as Lewes, Arundel and Midhurst adding to the cultural history of the area.

The South Downs and the Weald offer an exceptional variety of wildlife species and habitats. Few areas in England possess such a diversity of habitats of national and international importance in such close proximity. These include:

- Important downland woodlands – such as Kingley Vale and Rook Clift and beech woodlands of the Upper Greensand Hangers
- Some of the best clay woodlands in south-east England – including The Mens and Ebernoe Common;
- The upper reaches of one of the finest chalk streams in Britain – the River Itchen;
- Superb grazing marshes – Amberley Wildbrooks, the Arun valley and the valleys of the Rivers Cuckmere and the Ouse;
- Among the best areas of lowland heath in southern Britain – Woolmer Forest and the Greensand heaths of West Sussex;
- Chalk grasslands – Castle Hill, Lewes Downs, Harting Down, Old Winchester Hill and Beachy Head;
- Dramatic sea cliffs with offshore platforms and gullies around the Seven Sisters Heritage Coast – home to many important sea birds, rare plants and marine life.

The Designation Process

The case for designating the South Downs can be traced back to the 1947 report on National Parks by Sir Arthur Hobhouse. The report stated that the committee was “impressed with the importance of including at least one National Park within easy reach of London. There exists in the South Downs an area of still unspoilt country, certainly of less wildness and grandeur than the more rugged Parks of the north and west, but possessing great natural beauty and much open rambling land, extending south-eastward to the magnificent chalk cliffs of Beachy Head and Seven Sisters. We recommend it unhesitatingly on its intrinsic merits as well as on the ground of its accessibility”.

However it was only in April 2000 that the Countryside Agency began the designation process after being asked to reconsider the case for a South Downs National Park by the then Environment Minister, Michael Meacher MP.

The Countryside Agency ran a statutory consultation with all affected local authorities (including town and parish councils) and a widespread public consultation which received over 6,500 written responses from interested organisations and individuals.

The Countryside Agency made a designation order, signed in December 2002, which was placed on deposit for public inspection at all local authority offices and at the Countryside Agency's headquarters in Cheltenham. After due consultation the Secretary of State announced a public inquiry which began in November 2003 and ran throughout 2004.

The public inquiry has now closed. There were 5800 representations to the inquiry, mainly on the boundary of the National Park and requesting more land to be included. Of those that commented on the principle of the National Park, a staggering 94% were in support. The inquiry inspector will prepare a report and submit it to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who will make the final decision on whether to create a National Park.

A decision to exclude the Hinton Estate from the New Forest National Park due to its ‘limited naturalness’, potentially jeopardised the confirmation of the South Downs, primarily a human-influenced landscape. Because of this, Defra has put on hold the timetable for reaching a decision on the National Park until these uncertainties are resolved. Fortunately, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 has, in part, addressed this, clarifying ‘Natural Beauty’ to include landscapes influenced by man. Once the outcome of the parliamentary process and any appeal are known, the designation process will reconvene. The delay to the timescale is not yet known.

The South Downs Campaign

CNP is a member of the South Downs Campaign (SDC) which has led the debate since the 1990s, supports the principle of designation as a National Park and has been active at the public inquiry to improve upon the proposed boundary and encompass more areas of beautiful countryside in the South Downs area. The Campaign has massive support and is testament to how popular the move to create a South Downs National Park is. By co-ordinating the interests of the many national, regional and local organisations and parish and town councils supporting the National Park (now numbering around a hundred and ten), the SDC has been able to draw on expertise on landscape, wildlife, recreation, transport and land management in order to provide the inquiry with evidence on the

benefits that a National Park could bring. It also seeks to influence decision makers with the compelling arguments for the creation of a National Park.

To read more about the work of the South Downs Campaign and the work that has gone into the inquiry please go to www.southdownscampaign.org.uk

Why designate?

The South Downs provides a “green lung” for the region and yet its cherished qualities and environment are under threat like never before in developed South East. Although the area is currently protected as two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Park status will bring added protection for a multitude of reasons:

- Greater protection for beautiful countryside which currently lies outside the AONBs but is proposed for inclusion in the National Park (an additional 16% of land);
- Enhanced status, locally, regionally, nationally and globally;
- Additional funding which is desperately needed. A National Park Authority will have an estimated budget of £6 to £8 million a year from central government, at least 3 times as much as existing funds, which come mainly from local council tax.
- New and important powers on planning, conservation, and recreation management, with the ability to acquire damaged downland and help restore it.
- Consistency on planning – at the moment the Downs is covered by 12 Local Plans and 3 Structure plans which is a recipe for inconsistency;
- As a new planning authority, the National Park will have greater recognition at regional level, where planning decisions are being increasingly taken;
- A closer relationship with farmers - the new NPA will be able to offer farmers “first stop” advice on schemes and marketing their produce, making the most of the economic opportunities that a National Park offers;
- Secure long term direct funding and access to more funds such as the sustainable development fund. Park Authorities have the scope to be innovative and there are many examples of projects piloted in National Parks that have been rolled out to the wider countryside- e.g. environmentally friendly farm schemes; and
- Powers and resources to manage recreational pressures which arise from 39 million visitors a year and the ability to raise awareness of the importance of the Downs through education and interpretation materials.

CNP’s work on new National Parks, including the South Downs, has been generously supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. To find out more about the work of the Foundation go to www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk/