

Delivering the Living Wales programme: realising the potential of National Parks

1. Introduction

The Campaign for National Parks (CNP) is the charity that campaigns to protect and promote National Parks in England and Wales as beautiful and inspirational places enjoyed and valued by all. It has been in existence for over 75 years. CNP's work in Wales is informed by CNP Cymru, which includes representatives from each of the National Park Societies and other bodies such as CPRW and the National Association of AONBs. The National Park Authorities (NPAs) in Wales and National Parks Wales have observer status.

National Parks are the finest landscapes which have been granted the highest level of protection. The statutory purposes of National Parks are:

- To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Parks
- To promote opportunities for the public understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Parks

In those cases where there is a conflict and reconciliation proves impossible, the first purpose should take precedence. In pursuing these purposes, NPAs also have a statutory duty to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of communities living within the National Park.

The contribution of National Parks to Wales' economy

Protected landscapes represent significant economic assets in their own rights. Not only does the high quality environment in these areas make a significant contribution to tourism and economic development in Wales but it also contributes to a wide range of other objectives by acting as a source of health, well-being and spiritual inspiration. Recent research by National Parks Wales found that nearly 40% of jobs within National Parks in Wales are dependent on the environment. In addition, the 12m visitors to Wales' National Parks and surrounding areas each year spend £1bn between them. There are also further indirect economic benefits to suppliers and to the economy of Wales as a whole through the strong brand image for Welsh goods and services that the Parks provide.

In Wales, National Parks comprise about 20% of the country's land mass and therefore have a vital role to play in sustainable development. They contribute significantly to the well-being of the nation, through protection of the landscape, wildlife and key environmental resources and services, like water provision and carbon storage in peat soils and forests, which can mitigate the effects of climate change. National Parks will therefore have a crucial importance in national management of natural resources.

National Parks are inspiring spaces for people to enjoy and improve their health and well-being, whilst making a significant contribution to the economy of Wales through tourism, farming and other related businesses. CNP believes that the nationally designated landscapes of Wales should be maintained as distinctive and unique tracts of countryside, which are also adaptable and resilient to future pressures such as climate change.

This briefing has been prepared in consultation with the wide range of voluntary and public sector interests represented on CNP Cymru. As a result it represents the views of a diverse network of organisations with a particular interest in the protection and future of the three National Parks in Wales. All share a desire to recognise and promote the unique role of National Parks in protecting and providing natural resources, and in contributing to the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the people and communities in Wales. Although CNP's work focuses on National Parks, the issues covered in this briefing note are equally applicable to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

The Welsh Government is in the process of introducing a new approach to the management of Wales' natural resources, known as the Living Wales programme. It is also currently reviewing its policy statement on National Parks and the contents of this statement will be critical in ensuring that protected landscapes are at the heart of the Living Wales programme.

This new approach provides a number of challenges and opportunities for Wales' protected landscapes which are discussed in this briefing note. The briefing begins by setting out a vision for protected landscapes in Wales which is based on the one agreed by the Wales Landscape Partnership¹ and finishes with proposals for the way forward, particularly with regard to actions the Welsh Government should take to ensure that this vision can contribute to the implementation of the Living Wales programme.

2. A vision for protected landscapes in Wales

They should be places recognised and supported as:

Robust environmental shock absorbers. Where priority is given to safeguarding and conserving biodiversity, clean water, carbon in peat, soils and woodlands.

One Planet spaces. Where the backdrop of their high quality landscapes inspires low carbon lifestyles, construction based on progressive design and low impact building techniques, sustainable travel patterns and responsible local renewable energy generation; all of which collectively ensure their transition to areas with a low carbon footprint.

Promoters of rural distinctiveness. Where celebration of the cultural heritage, the quality of the environment and ways of living create prosperity and opportunities for self supporting local economies to prosper. Where strong social networks, innovative partnerships and collaborative action provide an effective way of overcoming the challenges of living in rural areas.

Resources for public well being. Outdoor arenas of enjoyment and inspiration where the benefits of contact with the natural world, physical activity and appropriate

¹ Wales Landscape Partnership, An agenda for Wales' Protected Landscapes

unobtrusive leisure experiences are promoted because of the health and personal benefits they provide to all sectors of society in an inclusive and appealing manner.

Refuges of peace and quiet. Places where people can find, experience and enjoy solitude.

Places where the defining associations between adjacent areas of land and sea are managed seamlessly and in an integrated and inclusive manner.

Ambassadors of the European Landscape Convention, at the centre of the debate about public well-being and demonstrating the virtues of well managed landscapes and the benefits of public investment in them.

The new approach to resource management in Wales offers a number of opportunities to help secure this vision but there are also a number of challenges which must be addressed if the vision is to be achieved.

3. The opportunities

- **The potential contribution of landscapes and seascapes to the new approach.** Landscapes and seascapes are resources in their own right and offer a range of natural features and forms, spaces, habitats and experiences, which are expressed through a unique legacy of inherited human traditions, skills and endeavour. Access to land and sea is important to our health and well-being and makes a fundamental contribution to the economy and to the culture of local communities.

National Parks contain Wales' finest landscapes and, as recognised in recent Government consultations, are successful in conserving them. Furthermore two of the Parks – Pembrokeshire Coast and Snowdonia - have substantial lengths of coastline and derive many of their special qualities from the seascapes adjacent to them. National Parks, therefore, have a key role to play in delivering the new ecosystem approach to the management of natural resources and in securing integration between land and sea.

The development of the Living Wales programme is an opportunity to ensure that the resources of National Parks are used effectively in the management of ecosystem services and that the distinctive character of all Wales' landscapes and seascapes continue to be cared for in a way which future generations will thank us for. However, this will only be achieved if the significance, value and role of Wales' protected landscapes and seascapes, particularly National Parks, are fully recognised in the new approach.

- **Providing greater protection for nationally important seascapes.** Currently there is no means, as there is on land for landscapes, by which the national importance of seascapes can be recognised and given the necessary framework for their long term conservation. Further, there is no statutory basis for recognising the marine dimension of National Parks or AONBs. With the imminent arrival of marine planning in Wales, there is an urgent need to rectify this situation, so that marine plans are fully informed of the importance of the seascape adjacent to National Parks and AONBs and that policies and actions are geared towards their long term conservation.

To ensure that the land and sea dimensions of coastal National Parks are treated equally provision needs to be made in legislation to:

- enable the extension of their boundaries out to sea to embrace the area of sea from which the National Park derives special qualities and its associations with the marine environment - the precise area to be included in the seaward extension would need to be the subject of detailed studies and consultations, in the same way as for the designation of a National Park on land;
 - extend their management plans to cover the defined marine area and for that part of the plan to form part of the Marine Plan for the area;
 - give the National Park Authority the duty and powers to manage water based recreation within the defined area – there is no organisation with such duties at present; and
 - enable the creation of a committee of the National Park Authority to have particular responsibility for the management of the marine environment with membership drawn from key stakeholders in the marine environment including fishing, water recreation, marine conservation and shipping.
- **Facilitating greater access to, and understanding of, the environment:** One of the functions of the new body is to improve and increase access to, and use of, the environment for outdoor recreation. As one of the statutory purposes of National Parks is to promote opportunities for the public understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities, they already play a key role in encouraging outdoor recreation and increasing understanding of the environment.

The three NPAs in Wales are also now working with the CNP Mosaic project to extend these opportunities to groups currently under-represented among visitors to the National Parks. This project targets ethnic minority communities in Newport, Cardiff, Swansea, Bangor and Wrexham and aims to introduce thousands of new people to the physical and mental health benefits that National Parks offer. With the right enabling mechanisms and support available, the National Parks offer lots of opportunities for other similar initiatives in future to ensure that under-represented groups of people, especially from disadvantaged and urban communities, can gain greater access to, and understanding of, the natural environment and the benefits this can bring.

- **Recognising the contribution that National Parks make to Wales's economy:** Protected landscapes represent significant economic assets in their own rights. Recent research² found that nearly 13,000 jobs within the three National Parks of Wales are dependent on the environment (almost 40% of the total). In addition, the 12m visitors to Wales' National Parks and surrounding areas each year spend £1bn between them. There are also further indirect economic benefits to suppliers and to the economy of Wales as a whole through the brand image for Welsh goods and services that the Parks provide.

Development of the Living Wales programme provides an opportunity to do more to publicise these economic benefits to ensure that the value of

² Valuing Wales' National Parks, November 2013, commissioned by a partnership of the Welsh National Park Authorities, Natural Resources Wales and the Welsh Local Government Association (<http://www.nationalparkswales.gov.uk/npw/policy/national-parks-wales-open-for-business>)

National Parks is more widely recognised by the public and the importance of protecting them better understood.

- **The role of National Park Authorities as leaders in facilitating sustainable use of the natural environment**

(a) Through intensifying and extending partnership opportunities: Each NPA prepares a statutory National Park Management Plan (NPMP) which provides the basis for the Local Development Plan. NPMPs are underpinned by the periodic production of State of the Park reports which provide information on a wide variety of environmental, social and economic indicators. Together these two documents have broadly the same scope as the new local natural resource planning process which is proposed. NPMPs are developed in partnership with local stakeholders and there is an opportunity to build on these existing partnerships and arrangements. This would ensure that the new process is integrated with, rather than adding to, existing planning and would avoid duplication of effort.

We understand that discussions are already underway with regard to the piloting of this approach to natural resource planning and would be keen to see one of the National Parks in Wales included in this pilot. There is an opportunity to use the NPMP and State of the Park Report as the basis for local resource management planning as discussed above and investigate how the existing documents would need to be expanded and refined in order to obtain the full advantages of the ecosystem approach to environmental management. The pilot would need to be accompanied by appropriate resources to allow the NPA for the pilot area to implement any changes required effectively. CNP Cymru would be happy to assist in the process of selecting an appropriate pilot area.

(b) Through an integrated approach to planning and management: In National Parks landscape is used as an integrating mechanism to bring together the wide ranging concerns that must be reconciled such as nature conservation, heritage, recreation and development. Working at a landscape scale approach rather than to traditional administrative boundaries can bring many benefits – landscape is a concept that relates to people’s understanding of an area, and often provides a close fit with natural systems such as habitats and water catchments. This would also contribute to delivery of the European Landscape Convention³ which focuses on landscape protection, management and planning, and is mirrored in the policies and strategies that guide decision making by NPAs.

(c) Through valuing ecosystem services: as guardians of a substantial part of Wales’ natural resources National Park Authorities are uniquely placed to develop a national approach towards valuation, to provide baseline data and to test and monitor the impact of the new approach.

(d) Through delivery of agri-environment schemes: National Park Authorities could play a key role in the management and delivery of the Glastir agri-environment scheme within their areas, as has already been successfully piloted in Snowdonia. They could also contribute towards land management practices that provide specific environmental goods with

³ Natural England, 2010, Valuing our landscapes The European Landscape Convention in action: Making a difference in places that matter

rewards to the farmers that reflect the full societal benefits of their effort. There is an opportunity to integrate Glastir with local and national resource management planning.

- **Recognising the role of National Parks in delivering wider objectives:** Not only does the high quality environment in these areas make a significant contribution to tourism in Wales but it also contributes to a wide range of other objectives by acting as a source of health, well-being and spiritual inspiration. This ranges from tackling climate change and enhancing biodiversity to enhancing Wales's cultural heritage and encouraging physical activity by promoting access to recreational networks.

There is increasing recognition of the physical and mental health benefits that the landscape and outdoor recreation provides, for example, a 2012 publication from the National Trust⁴ highlights the profound impacts that nature deficit disorder has on children's health, especially with regard to obesity caused in part by a significant reduction in time spent playing outdoors. National Parks play a key role in making the benefits of engaging with nature available to people who might not easily be able to access them, for example, through the CNP Mosaic project and other initiatives such as "walking for health". National Park Authorities now also contribute to the Welsh Government's child poverty and social inclusion objectives.

There is an opportunity to recognise, and support, the work of NPAs in delivering all these objectives, not only through the Living Wales programme, but by properly recognising and embedding the full range of public benefits that National Parks provide in other relevant Welsh Government policy, such as the forthcoming Future Generations Bill.

- **The potential to deliver efficiency savings:** There is an opportunity to transfer the management of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and National Nature Reserves within the National Parks to the NPAs. This would ensure that any possible duplication of effort in wardening and monitoring of these sites is avoided and local management arrangements strengthened, as well as improving relationships with local communities and facilitating changes in management at a landscape scale. Such an arrangement has already been successfully piloted in the Snowdonia National Park.

4. The challenges

- **Ensuring existing critical environmental protection is not eroded:** Some of the discussion around the proposals for delivering the Living Wales programme (for example in Sustaining a Living Wales) has implied a need to review and reconsider existing landscape designations, without offering any real justification for such a review. It is critical that existing environmental protection is not weakened by unnecessary rationalisation if the opportunities that these designated landscapes could make to delivering A Living Wales are to be achieved.
- **Long-term protection vs. short-term goals:** The proposals for a single environmental body focus too much on its role with regard to the *use* of Wales' natural resources as opposed to *their protection and responsible stewardship*. There is a danger that this will result in its work being driven

⁴ National Trust, 2012, Natural Childhood by Stephen Moss

primarily by the provision of services arising from the use of landscapes and seascapes, rather than an approach based on sustainable principles. The challenge is to ensure that the protection and value of the National Parks are not eroded in pursuit of short term economic and societal goals.

- **A loss of funding for the work of the third sector in National Parks:** The third sector plays a vital role in delivering environmental, recreational and sustainability objectives in the National Parks of Wales and could make a significant contribution to developing new and innovative approaches to the delivery of natural resource management. The third sector is also critical for developing a sustainable approach to encouraging community engagement and facilitating a better understanding of the countryside and the environment, both of which will be vital to the success of A Living Wales.

However, much of the funding for this work previously came from the Countryside Council for Wales and the creation of Natural Resources Wales could have a negative impact on the funding and support available to the third sector if the need to find efficiency savings means there is an overall reduction in the scale of funding available.

- **Ensuring inappropriate development does not have a negative impact:** As set out in ‘the opportunities’ listed above, National Parks make a significant contribution to Wales’ economy. Many of these benefits would be lost if anything were to detract from the special qualities for which National Parks are valued. The challenge is to ensure that the range of benefits that protected landscapes provide is not compromised by insensitive change, unsympathetic land use or irresponsible development. This means it is crucial that National Park Authorities maintain their planning powers.

The benefits of planning to the boundaries of protected landscapes was reinforced by research on this topic published recently by the Welsh Government⁵ which said that “the planning system needs to recognise the national importance of these statutory designated landscapes, pro-actively support their communities and businesses and have the evidence and policies needed to support sound decision-making.”

- **Recognising the true value of the environment:** The value of the environment cannot be considered purely in economic terms and it is very difficult to put a price on some aspects of the natural environment and the benefits it offers. In National Parks, adverse changes to the stunning natural beauty of the landscapes, the feeling of wildness and escape, or the deep-rooted cultural heritage, are notoriously difficult to cost. The challenge is to ensure that these kinds of values are considered as valid components in weighing up decisions about the natural environment when delivering the Living Wales programme.
- **Ensuring National Parks can continue to contribute to Wales’ economy:** With increasing pressure for the delivery of new infrastructure across Wales, particularly for the generation and transmission of energy, it is essential that protected landscapes continue to be recognised as significant economic assets in their own right. The challenge will be to raise greater awareness of the contribution that the National Parks make to Wales’ economy in order to

⁵ Delivery of planning services in statutory designated landscapes in Wales
(<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/planning/planningresearch/publishedresearch/statutorylandscapes/?lang=en>)

ensure that the value of designation continues to be recognised and supported and decisions take account of the potentially negative economic impacts of damaging protected landscapes.

- **Ensuring political support for National Parks:** There is a continuing need to recognise and promote the importance of protected landscapes and to ensure that their protection is not weakened by changes made in Westminster which could have a detrimental impact on the value of National Parks to the Welsh economy. For example, the UK Parliament's Growth and Infrastructure Act 2013 contains measures which could result in a significant degradation of these protected landscapes.

5. The Way Forward

Recommendations for Welsh Government

- Implement and fund a pilot of the proposed new approach to resource management in one of the National Parks in Wales, building on the existing National Park Management Plans.
- Confirm the role of National Park Authorities as local planning authorities.
- Recognise the full range of public benefits that National Parks provide and embed this in all relevant policy, such as the forthcoming Future Generations Bill.
- Ensure that Natural Resources Wales has appropriate powers and adequate resources to continue to protect and enhance the National Parks and to promote the statutory National Park purposes. Specifically, Natural Resources Wales should have the structures, resources and specialist expertise to ensure that the organisation is able to:
 - implement a landscape scale approach to nature conservation and enhancement;
 - support National Parks and AONBs in an integrated way across the organisation;
 - provide adequate support for both landscapes and seascapes;
 - monitor and enforce the statutory requirements relating to National Parks, such as the S62 duty to have regard to National Park purposes;
 - provide a dedicated team to support protected landscapes; and
 - realise the full potential of National Parks to contribute to other Welsh Government objectives such as health and well-being.
- Implement the legislative changes required to extend the boundaries of the coastal National Parks into the adjacent marine areas and to provide the relevant National Park Authorities with the necessary powers and duties to enable them to manage these areas effectively. This should be accompanied by additional resources for these National Park Authorities to reflect their increased responsibilities.
- Make clear to the UK Government that there is strong support within Wales for National Parks and that measures which potentially weaken their protection are not welcome.

6. Conclusion

The development of the Living Wales programme is an opportunity to ensure that the resources of National Parks are used effectively in the management of ecosystem services and that the distinctive characters of all Wales' landscapes and seascapes continue to be cared for in a way which future generations will thank us for. However, this will only be achieved if the significance, value and role of Welsh landscapes and seascapes are fully recognised in the new approach. Ensuring the continued protection and enhancement of these special areas is critical to securing the future asset value of the landscape and all the benefits it offers to the people, environment and economy of Wales.

It is clear that there are many opportunities for National Parks in the new approach and that they have a key role to play in delivering A Living Wales, particularly in terms of the effective management of ecosystem services and facilitating greater access to, and understanding of, the environment. However, the new approach also poses a number of challenges for National Parks and **it is vital that the protection afforded to these designated areas is not eroded, or undermined, by an overemphasis on short-term social and economic goals and a failure to recognise the true value of National Parks for both current and future generations.**

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