Sustainable tourism in Scotland’s National Parks: the search for effective frameworks for planning, action and evaluation

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Abstract

The paper reviews the current situation facing the implementation of sustainable tourism in Scotland’s recently constituted National Parks. It examines the background and unique characteristics of the national park model in Scotland and discusses alternative approaches to achieving sustainability through tourism. The paper argues that the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism provides a useful framework, in particular for The Cairngorms. The research is based on a combination of published literature, official reports and consultation with key National Park partners and interest groups. To reap the benefits of sustainable tourism development whilst ensuring that the natural and cultural heritage resources are enhanced and protected, the Cairngorms National Park Authority has sought an effective framework for planning, action and evaluation of sustainable tourism. It has sought to select a process that encompasses the many sustainable tourism initiatives and programmes that already exist in the area. As part of this process the park authority has established a private sector led Tourism Development Working Group that includes representatives from all key organisations with responsibility for tourism in the Cairngorms. The process of working towards Charter status raises several interesting issues, including sequencing, as it is hoped that the National Park Plan could be launched with the area having first achieved European Charter status.

Keywords: protected areas, National Parks, sustainable tourism, Scotland, European Charter for Sustainable Tourism.
1 Introduction

The links between protected areas and tourism are long established but problems associated with increasing demands of tourism are testing park management to the limit. Reconciling the core environmental protection aim with social, cultural and economic pressures, often tourism related, becomes ever harder to achieve. Conflicts arise over contested space, issues of costs and benefits and increasingly who foots the bill. Transport congestion, regulations, controls and draconian pricing threaten to diminish the intrinsic qualities of protected areas and their enjoyment by the public. The sustainable development paradigm applied to tourism offers frameworks that may help. Scotland provides an interesting case study for three reasons: first, it has adopted a broad interpretation of the National Park designation, similar to the established UK model of multiple owned, ‘lived in’ parks; second, the parks are very recent and as such are still evolving; third, they purport, from the outset, to incorporate sustainable development objectives. This last point is demonstrated by the extent to which sustainable tourism lies at the core of park strategies.

2 Tourism, sustainability and National Parks

Sustainable development theory is based on the concept that environmental protection and economic growth can be compatible objectives [1]. Tourism has been gradually incorporated into this concept. The goal of sustainable tourism is to include all tourism activities, regardless of scale or location, in the sustainable development agenda. Many principles and guidelines have been developed for sustainable tourism in attempts to include environmental, cultural, economic and social goals within the context of tourism. For example, the acronym VICE represents four sustainable tourism aims: visitor satisfaction; industry profitability; community acceptance; and environmental protection [2]. Sustainable tourism has particular resonance for a National Park where nature is fragile and ecotourism or nature based tourism (NBT) relies on the long term well being of the environment [3]. Furthermore, the concept offers great utility in how parks may be planned and managed for tourism [4].

2.1 Sustainability and protected areas

Throughout history there have been examples of efforts made by governments and landowners to protect areas with special natural attributes for their intrinsic value and recreational qualities. Government involvement and responsibility for landscape protection has become the norm and government is now seen as the primary delivery vehicles of protected areas. Some argue that this involvement has gone too far in terms of complexity and number of protected area designations [5]. However it is the growth of National Parks over the last ten years that has been remarkable. Eagles [6] estimated there were 30,361 parks and protected areas in 1996 and in 2002 the number of National Parks alone had risen to 3386 worldwide. National Parks are viewed as the top tier designation...
and their scale and attractions have always acted as a magnet for tourism activities, resulting today in the search sustainable solutions to reconcile tourism and conservation demands.

The majority of National Parks follow the American model and come under category II of the IUCN classification where land is largely uninhabited, publicly owned and access is controlled. This model is representative of areas where ‘human activities are prohibited or closely regulated in order to protect the natural environment’ [7]. Despite this conservation priority, from an early stage National Parks had a clear connection with tourism and recent growth has tested category II parks to the limit [8]. Britain, on the other hand, is unusual in that areas designated as National Park come under category V of the IUCN classification mainly because areas are populated, privately owned and arguably require a holistic, or sustainable, approach based on social, environmental and economic issues. Category V is ‘where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological or cultural value, and often with high biological diversity’ [9].

Although these parks share many tourism pressures experienced by their more ‘pure’ category II cousins it could be argued that they are better placed to deal with twenty first century pressures. Today everybody wants a piece of the park. Increasing visitor numbers and diversity of visitor expectations and behaviours exerts pressure on protected area management. The growth in emphasis on wider stakeholder involvement complicates policymaking: ‘The management of protected areas must increasingly contend with the philosophical debate of use versus preservation, as urbanization, modernization, population mobility and international tourism growth continue to impact diminishing and fragmented green spaces’ [10].

2.2 Nature Based Tourism: costs and benefits

The growth of specialist tourism segments, such as nature based tourism (NBT), often takes place in National Parks and despite its benign image, the volume and specialised activities still manage to exert environmental pressures [6, 8, 11]. This movement raises many questions relating to funding, access, transport, carrying capacity, visitor management and pricing [12]. The issues of willingness to pay for access to parks and community costs and benefits become acute with rapid growth and associated impacts. While measuring costs and benefits is more commonplace in the clearly delineated and closely controlled North American parks their structures are less adaptable to change. The category II model has multiple objectives built in and recent studies have adapted similar methodologies. Liston-Heyes and Heyes [13] use the travel cost method in Dartmoor, England to evaluate benefits users derive from access to the park.

Yet solving funding issues in current parks remains elusive as visitor numbers grow disproportionately to the levels of funding, visitor fees and user charges, creating a situation where increased maintenance and refurbishment requirements influence the quality of services [14, 15]. National park authorities need to review their pricing policy, which affects entrance fees and other charges, and reflects the true ‘willingness-to-pay’ [11]. Much of the literature
also indicates the importance of implementing a pricing framework consisting of a mixture of regulation and incentives, ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ [6, 7, 14, 15]. The situation in Scotland presents an opportunity to examine a, perhaps, more holistic approach to resolving these issues.

3 Scotland’s National Parks

As discussed, Britain’s late adoption of National Parks in 1949 is attributed to the predominance of humanised landscapes so the model chosen lacks coherence with the IUCN category V. Parks are characterised by a high degree of privately owned land, living communities and neighbourhoods. The opportunity to exploit land for consumptive practices such as tourism is hence much greater. The majority of conflicts in British National Parks can thus be linked to this [16]. Success in attracting tourists, the majority in private cars, has led to problems of congestion, pollution, erosion, litter, and land use conflict leading to calls for more sustainable tourism development [17, 11].

Scotland shares similar land ownership characteristics with the rest of the UK however National Parks were rejected in 1949 due to a combination of opposition from landowners fearing land nationalisation and local authority concerns with further depopulation evoking memories of the ‘highland clearances’. In addition, economic development through the in vogue hydro electric schemes was given top priority [18]. Finally, the need for public recreation was less urgent than in England [19]. So, despite having natural heritage characteristics more suited to IUCN category V National Parks, for fifty years Scotland remained one of the few countries without any form of National Park. By the late 1980s, the weak land management arrangements were straining under a series of highly publicised tourism related conflicts, resulting finally in recommendations for four National Parks to include ‘independent planning boards comprising local and national members’ [20].

Public support was overwhelming however the government of the day thought National Parks unsuitable, suggesting alternative voluntary partnership arrangements. Partnership boards for the two high profile areas were set up but arguably without the necessary powers or funding to cope with growing development pressures. The true sustainable development credentials of these policies may be judged against international criticism such as a World Conservation Union report which condemned Scotland for: ‘operating one of the weakest management arrangements for vulnerable areas in Europe’ [21].

Campaigns for National Parks continued however the change came abruptly with a new government in 1997. Two announcements came in quick succession from Donald Dewar, Secretary of State for Scotland: first devolution for Scotland; secondly the establishment of National Parks: ‘I believe that National Parks are the right way forward for Scotland. The major gap we have identified in the current system of natural heritage designations relates to the management of a small number of relatively large areas of natural heritage importance.’ [22].

The detail in the announcement is significant. After years of consultation and debate over alternative designated area models for Scotland, in one political
gesture, the die was cast: ‘Instead of proceeding logically from problem to
diagnosis to prescription the political decision that Scotland must have National
Parks came first, and only then was attention given to what their form and
function should be.’ [18].

The statutory agency responsible for implementation had to catch up fast. In
1998, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) launched the main consultation paper
‘National Parks for Scotland’ and the Government formally accepted this report
in 1999. The Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park formally opened on

The details of the enabling legislation are worth closer examination. Section 1 of
the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 lists the core aims of Scotland’s National Parks as:

a) to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area;
b) to promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area,
c) to promote understanding and enjoyment (including enjoyment in the
form of recreation) of the special qualities of the area by the public, and
d) to promote sustainable economic and social development of the area’s
communities [23].

It is clear that these aims go beyond traditional objectives for National Parks
and are based on core sustainable development themes of social and economic
aims in addition to environmental. Aims (c) and (d) illustrate two main
differences with this model and explain why Scottish National Parks comes
under category II of the IUCN protected area classification and not category V.
The ability to promote National Parks is highly unusual and is not part of
comparative English and Welsh legislation. The responsibility for the economic
and social development of park communities is also unusual and linked to the
British tradition of designating National Parks in populated areas.

The Government was heavily criticised for aim (d) and decided to include the
Sandford Principle to strengthen the conservation aspect. Section 9, point (6),
states: ‘In exercising its functions a National Park Authority must act with a view
to accomplishing the purpose set out in the subsection (1); but if, in relation to
any matter, it appears to the authority that there is a conflict between the
National Park aim set out in section 1 (a) and other National Park aims, the
authority must give greater weight to the aim set out in section 1(a)’ [23].

A pivotal issue in the debates in the Scottish Parliament related to the balance
between conservation aims and social and economic development. Responses to
consultation highlighted concerns that social and economic issues were to take
second place to conservation. Drawing park boundaries to include populated
rural communities exacerbated this. Consequently, the bill was amended to
ensure that the National Park authorities accept an integrated approach in order
to reconcile competing interests. It was established that a National Park
Authority would only be required to give greater weight to conservation after
failing to resolve a conflict. The emphasis placed on sustainable development
indicates they: ‘are not intended to be preserved areas in which all development
is fossilized; instead, they are intended to be places that set an example of how to
integrate the rural economy with the protection of the natural and cultural heritage’ [20].

It is still too early to judge whether this represents a modern, innovative framework for National Parks or a watered down designation based on an already weak British interpretation of a National Park.

3.1 Linking sustainable tourism with the new model

Tourism has been identified as a critical factor in securing environmentally and socially sustainable development for areas within the two National Parks. The onus is therefore on park authorities, together with their partners and stakeholders, to avail themselves of good practice in sustainable tourism. Whilst it would appear that sustainable tourism should contribute most to the delivery of the all-important fourth aim ‘to promote sustainable economic and social development of the area’s communities’, the development and management of sustainable tourism has the potential to contribute to all four primary aims. As noted earlier, Schedule 3 of the Act sets out specific powers for the National Park Authorities (NPAs) with respect to tourism. This includes the provision of information, education and interpretive facilities as well as services to promote the enjoyment of the parks’ environments. Importantly and significantly, the NPAs are able to provide tourism facilities in the National Parks and encourage persons to visit the National Parks (paragraph 4, Schedule 3 of the Act). This ability to directly provide, manage and intervene creates interesting opportunities to be proactive, especially in partnership with other stakeholders, to provide sustainable tourism programmes. Unlike NPAs in England and Wales, the Scottish NPAs will be able to “encourage persons to visit the National Parks rather than service demand once within the parks. This additional power gives the Scottish NPAs the chance to engage in creative destination marketing to promote sustainable tourism.

In addition, SNH sets out a vision for parks that includes the following key elements relevant to sustainable tourism development:

- National Parks should engender trust between national and local interests in the delivery of conservation and community objectives; and
- National Parks should be pioneers of techniques for achieving sustainable development [24].

4 Combining sustainable tourism strategies within the Cairngorms National Park Authority

Partnership working and research into sustainable tourism strategies for Scotland’s National Parks began before the parks themselves were established. Scotland was keen to devise unique models and draw on international best practice. For example, prior to the setting up of the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) a tourism forum, the Tourism Development Working Group (TDWG) was convened, comprising representatives from all tourism interests within the Cairngorms NP area. Two important and highly relevant pieces of
research were drawn on: ‘Sustainable Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas’ [25] and ‘The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas – A Prospectus for Action in Scotland’s National Parks’ [26].

4.1 Sustainable Tourism Development in Scotland’s National Parks

The first of these reports [25] had three objectives: to identify the key principles for sustainable tourism in Scotland’s National Parks; to illustrate these principles with a number of case studies; and to make recommendations on arrangements for collaborative working. It reviewed, analysed and evaluated best practice in respect of two aspects: the current guidelines for tourism in protected areas in Britain and elsewhere; and management best practice in terms of policy and planning; monitoring and review of impacts; use of facilities provided by managing bodies and the range of strategies, tools and techniques for promoting sustainable tourism.

The report provides both specific examples of sustainable tourism in action and highlights the importance of appropriate policies within the NPA to enable and facilitate sustainable tourism development. The various options (guidelines, tools, codes of conducts) to manage sustainable tourism were considered, and the TDWG felt that the Charter provided the most appropriate framework to the National Park Authority at that time. In particular, the principles and background information could provide valuable guidance to the relevant National Park Working Groups (for example, Access, Parks for All, Park Gateways and Information Provision) in advance of the strategy being developed and finalised.

4.2 The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas
– a prospectus for action in Scotland’s National Parks

Thus, the second study [26] was jointly commissioned by Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, the Cairngorms Partnership (responsible for management of the Cairngorms area prior to CNP) and SNH. All partners were familiar with the Charter and felt further research into the potential suitability for Scotland’s future NPs was worthwhile. A joint approach would also build on existing collaborative Visitor Survey work. The Charter, part of the Europarc Federation, umbrella organisation of protected areas in Europe, reflects worldwide and European priorities as expressed in the recommendations of Agenda 21 adopted at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and by the European Union in its 5th Environment Action Programme and Strategy for Sustainable Development. The underlying aims are:

- to increase and support Europe’s protected areas as a fundamental part of our heritage, that should by preserved for and enjoyed by current and future generations;
- to improve the sustainable development and management for tourism in protected areas, which takes into account the needs of the environment, local residents, local businesses and visitors [26].
The Report [26] identifies the structures and activities relating to sustainable tourism at that time in each park area and looks at ways in which these might be strengthened in order to meet the requirements of the Charter. It identifies seven benefits for the parks including: raising the profile of the parks and sustainable tourism; providing an opportunity to align the policies to current international thinking and practice; networking with other Charter Parks; and helpful internal and external assessment. The Report notes the importance of not losing momentum for this area of work in the setting up of the NPAs.

The Charter is useful in that it outlines a process and provides guidance to ensure that a park authority is able to manage sustainable tourism effectively and innovatively through a set of principles. It provides a framework specifically for protected areas to create a structure and context for working in partnership on sustainable tourism so that a sustainable tourism strategy can be developed which includes a 5 year action plan. It also places a commitment on the park authority to undertake on-going consultation with the private sector; and to devise a means by which targets are set and progress is evaluated. Through core principles, the Charter covers all the key areas that should be considered for sustainable tourism development and linked activities in a protected area:

- protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural heritage;
- understanding and meeting visitor needs and ensuring quality;
- communicating the special qualities of the area;
- encouraging tourism products relating to the protected area;
- training relating to the protected area and sustainable tourism;
- maintaining the local quality of life;
- increasing benefits to the local economy;
- monitoring and influencing visitor flows.

5 Cairngorms National Park Authority

The CNPA was formally established on 25 March 2003 and took on full operational powers on 1st September 2003. As a statutory Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB) the CNPA is directly funded by the Scottish Executive. In the longer term, the CNPA objectives will be mainly determined by the National Park Plan, the statutory strategic plan for the whole National Park area. However, prior to the CNPA becoming fully operational, the first corporate plan outlined the National Park Board’s early thinking in both operational and policy terms for the CNPA as an organisation, and the long and short term priorities for the Park.

Four policy themes encapsulate the statutory aims of the Park. These themes will be refined as the National Park Plan develops, but they represent current priorities to drive and guide the work of the CNPA. The four priority themes are: to foster a ‘Park for All’; to encourage widespread enjoyment, understanding and appreciation of the special qualities of the area; to develop clear, cohesive strategies for stewardship of the natural resources in the Park; and to encourage and support balanced, thriving, stable communities. The last theme notes:
“Tourism- the CNP is a large area with tremendous tourism potential. The CNPA aims to establish, working with tourist boards and local businesses, a co-ordinated park-wide approach to sustainable tourism through the preparation and implementation of a sustainable tourism strategy including a marketing strategy and brand for the whole Park, based on the special qualities and attractions of the area and the establishment of a hallmark of quality.”

Tourism is a vital part of the economy in the new Park. Local employment relies heavily on tourism and the area benefits from the income that visitors to the area generate. As with all tourist areas however, potential conflict exists between environmental, socio economic and cultural interests and the Cairngorms area is no different. It therefore follows that the resource base on which present and future tourism and tourist activities in the CNP are based must be sustained, since if the resource base is destroyed the tourism that it is based on will surely follow suit.

5.1 Sustainable tourism in CNP

The development of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy is seen as a priority by the CNPA to provide an effective framework for planning, action and evaluation to ensure that tourism is developed in a sustainable and sympathetic manner, whilst ensuring that the heritage and resources are protected. To oversee the development and implementation of this a Sustainable Tourism Officer and Business and Marketing Officer were appointed.

As noted earlier, the ability of NPAs in Scotland to directly provide, manage and intervene in tourism promotion, creates interesting opportunities to be proactive, especially in partnership with other stakeholders to provide sustainable tourism products, initiatives and programmes. This power gives the Scottish NPAs the chance to engage in creative destination marketing and to encourage and co-ordinate the marketing of appropriate activities in order to promote sustainable tourism. A key element is the TDWG, an industry based group, comprising private sector businesses, Area Tourist Boards, VisitScotland and other relevant public sector organisations involved in tourism in the Cairngorms. The purpose of the Group is to identify priorities for establishing improved co-ordination of tourism related activity in the CNP and to develop and implement CNP wide initiatives as appropriate. The TDWG recognises that tourism is all encompassing. Its January 2004 report to the NP Board identified seven key interlinked issues for tourism in the Cairngorms:

- successful co-operation, integration and encouragement of cross-sectoral working for all those involved in tourism in the area;
- development of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy and the successful application for, and implementation of, the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism;
- development and implementation of a Marketing Strategy & Action Plan for the Cairngorms;
- delivery of quality standards that build on nationally recognised standards which are specific to the Cairngorms;
• support for and continued development of quality assured products grown, made or available in the area;
• need for ongoing research, with easily accessible results, which assesses the needs, opinions and demands of visitors in order to be able to anticipate, meet and exceed visitor expectations;
• enhancement of visitors’ experience while in the area, through improved information and interpretation provision.

This is clearly at an early stage, and further research, analysis and development of actions plans is the next step for the TDWG. Whilst recognising the linkages between the issues it is important that a coordinated approach with partners and other working groups is maintained. It is also recognised that although the TDWG has identified these key issues, they may be driven forward by other Working Groups.

5.2 Relevance of Charter to the Cairngorms National Park Area

For the Cairngorms the ‘checklist’ of principles is particularly significant as it should help include all key areas or actions required in the early stages of strategy development. The Charter process also involves an objective assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the Park and requires a review and evaluation mechanism. The TDWG recognises that it is the process contained within this framework that is as important, if not more so, than gaining the Charter itself. To be successful, it is important that all the key stakeholders are involved in its development and implementation. The private sector will ultimately be a key beneficiary, though individual businesses are unlikely to see the full benefits until later in the process when the action plan is implemented. It is important nonetheless to involve them from the start, and make particular efforts to engage them in the development of the strategy. The TDWG is aware that this approach can bear fruits as demonstrated in the other UK Charter park, Mourne Mountains AONB, Northern Ireland, awarded the Charter last year.

6 Conclusions

Scotland’s approach to National Parks is firmly based on the principles of sustainable development, attempting to integrate the needs of local communities living and working in the park with the needs of heritage conservation and enhancement. The model seeks to avoid conflicts and reconcile competing interests through partnership working. The approach differs from the dominant international approach to National Parks, based on the primacy of protecting the natural environment. It could be argued that this is a modern model reflecting contemporary circumstances in a post industrial country. The robustness of this model will be closely examined in its ability to reconcile tensions between environmental protection and sustainable development for the benefit of communities within park boundaries. The TDWG emphasises the key role of the tourism sector in implementing sustainable tourism strategies and their role will
be critical. The worth of the European Charter as a guiding framework and the ability of the park authority to incorporate this within the park plan will both be tested in coming months. It is too early to judge the success of the Scotland’s National Park model or the specifics of sustainable tourism in the Cairngorms. However the uniqueness of the Scottish approach might offer some insights into issues of reconciling tourism growth with issues of park protection, stakeholder consultation and funding. Developments in the coming months should prove interesting for observers of National Parks in both Scotland and internationally.

References


