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What ails our National Parks?

Earlier this year the Campaign for National Parks published a [Health Check](#) report on National Parks in England and Wales. The report sets out the first full assessment of how well the National Parks of England and Wales are supporting nature recovery. The findings are not good news: **only 6% of the total land area of National Parks is currently managed effectively for nature.**

We asked **Ruth Bradshaw**, Policy and Research Manager at the CNP, about the reasons for this alarming state of affairs?

RB: The way the National Park model has been set up is that National Park authorities actually have quite limited ability to influence what happens in most of the land in National Parks. The majority of land is privately owned and there are very few mechanisms indeed to



influence what private landowners do, other than through agri-environment support. Their ability to influence public bodies is limited too, although hopefully that is changing now with the new duty under the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023.

What exactly is this new duty?

RB: Relevant bodies must now seek to **further** the purposes of National Parks. That includes everybody from local authorities to the water and electricity companies that provide public utilities. Before the new Act came in this used to be what's called the duty of regard. There was just a requirement for these bodies to have **regard to** National Park purposes, but that could be done in a way that didn't really have that much of an impact. The new duty that came into force at the end of December last year and which we at the Campaign for National Parks and other NGO's campaigned for, is a duty to seek to **further the purposes** of National Parks. It relates to all their decision-making which affects land in National Parks and National Landscapes.

Are there any other big issues National Parks are facing?

RB: There aren't enough mechanisms to influence what happens in a National Park. When the National Park model was first created, there was a big concern about the urbanisation of the countryside.

National Park authorities were given planning powers which are still a really important part of the mechanisms they have for influence. But that and their management plans are the only two instruments at their disposal. There are now real concerns about the intensification of farming and the way land is managed, but they have few opportunities to influence that.



83% of the public support Britain's National Parks being made wilder 90% said it was important that the abundance of wildlife in National Parks and AONBs increased.

So

What about budget cuts?

RB: That's a problem impossible to get away from. The fact is that over the last 10 years there have been cuts of 40% for National Park authorities. So they really are in a difficult situation. And the need to deal with that level of cuts has obviously been a big distraction in terms of them focusing more on things like nature recovery.

Can we talk about how to involve people more in the running of National Parks? The CNP is proposing Citizens' Assemblies. How would that work?

RB: Yes, one of the things we recommend in the report is there should be a citizens assembly for each of the National Parks. And this is something we recommended previously in our report on the climate emergency, which we published a couple of years ago. It certainly would include people who live in in the park, but as National Parks, these are places that are for the nation. So there is quite a legitimate interest from people who live outside the parks as well. There's a range of different stakeholders that you would want to involve, land managers and landowners as well to make sure that their voice is being heard.

One of the issues is that a lot of people maybe haven't got their head round the idea that these places are going to have to change if they are really going to be able to play their role in addressing the climate emergency and the nature emergency.

For example, a lot of National Parks, particularly upland National Parks, are quite open, treeless landscapes. And if we want to see a lot more tree planting we're going to have to talk to people about what that actually means and how places are going to change.

Then there are the challenges around people wanting different things in terms of recreational activities. That means talking collectively about what is appropriate in these places that are supposed to be protected for wildlife and nature as well as being places for people to go out and enjoy the countryside.

What's the CNP's position on off-roading, on the motorised use of fell tracks and forest tracks?

RB: In our response to the Government's consultation on the Glover review a couple of years ago we were very clear that there needed to be more legislation to crack down on motorised vehicle use of green lanes. The need for more legislation to crack down on damaging practices is something we highlight in the Health Check report.

How important do you think the whole notion of tranquillity is in National Parks, not just freedom from noise but also from visual intrusion?

RB: I think it's really important because one of the things about National Parks is the idea of having a huge expanse where you can really get away from things, from the visual intrusion as well as the noise intrusion.

And what's the role of rewilding in National Parks?

RB: There are already a growing number of examples of rewilding and nature-friendly farming initiatives being adopted in National Parks, but there is the potential for significantly more of this kind of activity. We want to see the historic intensive land management and damaging practices, such as the draining and burning of peatlands phased out to make way for the rapid expansion of regenerative agriculture and land management, including rewilding and the re-introduction of keystone species such as beavers.

Are National Parks better at planning issues than at focusing on activities that are already happening, off-roading for instance?

RB: It's probably harder to get the National Parks to focus on issues like these, particularly when their resources are so stretched. There are legal mechanisms such as TROs, but then that's something they have to do proactively themselves. Whereas in terms of planning, they're usually reacting to something that's been put to them and they have a statutory obligation to deal with planning applications and that's a big part of their statutory responsibilities. So from that point of view it probably feels like they're more focused on planning.

We are delighted to announce that we have just been accepted as a Member of the CNP Council. This is a great opportunity to work closely with the CNP and its members.

What are your views on the impact of tourism in general on National Parks?

RB: Overtourism is a big concern in certain locations. Most people accept that it's a good thing for more people to get to know the National Parks and to understand them and value them. But if we want that to happen without completely destroying them, then we have to have a way for people to get there and get around more sustainably. So that's one reason why it's important to protect green lanes.

[Editor's note: in the Lake District National Park the pattern of landownership is more favourable to conservation than elsewhere: although 50% is under private ownership, 25% is owned by the National Trust whose aims overlap to a large extent with those of the National Park. The LDNPA itself owns just under 5%. A substantial amount of land is under the ownership of the Forestry Commission and the rest is owned by bodies who should be expected to make common cause with the LDNPA.]