



SUMMARY REPORT

REGIONAL PARKS IN SCOTLAND – A REVIEW

Graham Barrow for the Scottish Campaign for National Parks (SCNP) and the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland (APRS)

In 2018 a review of the three regional parks in Scotland was carried out for SCNP and APRS. A draft report was produced in early 2019 and a workshop with staff from the parks and other interested parties was held at SNH's Conference Centre at Battleby, Perth in May 2019. This short paper summarises some of the main points from the full report.

The regional parks in Scotland were established through the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967 and modified by the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1981. Their origins can be traced back to the work of the then Countryside Commission for Scotland (CCS) and formed part of the Park System for Scotland published in 1974. Regional parks were intended to provide part of a comprehensive national system of public access to countryside. They would be substantial areas of countryside having areas of nil or low recreational use to sites used intensively, including picnic sites with possibly one or more country parks, and linked by footpaths or wider areas over which access agreements could be negotiated. They were to be relatively accessible to the majority of the population of Scotland's central belt. A Regional Park Plan was to be prepared for each park and core staff including park rangers were grant aided to the local authorities by the then CCS.

Four regional parks were established in the central belt of Scotland providing a regional park within one hour's drive of 70% of the Scottish population. The Loch Lomond Regional Park became part of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park in 2002. All of the parks had relatively wild upland country which provided a range of outdoor recreational opportunities in fine landscape settings. The regional parks today are Clyde Muirshiel (108 sq miles), Lomond Hills (25 sq miles) and Pentland Hills (35 sq miles) totalling 168 sq miles or 0.5% of the Scottish land area.

The main findings of the review were:

- Since their establishment the budgets and staffing of the parks had been significantly reduced

- The Lomond Hills Regional Park was no longer operating as a separate management unit with dedicated staff
- Much of the original recreational infrastructure was old and in need of refurbishment or replacement
- The original grant aid to the local authorities from CCS/SNH for senior staff and for rangers has been withdrawn placing the whole costs on to the local authorities
- The local authorities were finding it increasingly difficult to fund the parks and their financial support has been reducing
- There is a large and increasing backlog of maintenance work required on the recreational infrastructure and woodland management
- The country parks within the regional parks were generally well managed and very popular
- The parks were well used and receive over 2 million visits per annum but use by lower socio-economic groups and those without access to a car were less than desired
- Visitor satisfaction was generally high from those who use the parks
- On the whole the landscape of the parks has been reasonably well protected but there have been some unsympathetic developments, particularly in the Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park where new wind farms and coniferous forestry has been permitted.
- The parks had been designed when Scotland had Regional Authorities and with reorganisation of local government, they lost their natural champions
- Volunteer groups have been established and operate in two of the parks with the Friends of the Pentlands being particularly active
- Two of the parks still have functioning Management Committees but the regional parks as a whole lack either local or national champions
- In 2014 the UK Committee of the IUCN recommended that the regional parks were removed from the international list of category 5 protected landscapes due to a lack of emphasis on nature conservation and biodiversity policies and actions

The Regional Parks in Scotland are at a cross roads – some would say are in crisis. Designed in the 1970s and developed and reasonably funded during the 1980s and 90s they have suffered steady decline in funding and staffing in recent years, yet their original purposes of outdoor recreation provision and landscape conservation remain as relevant today. Two major national issues related to public health (particularly obesity and diabetes) and climate change amelioration, make them potentially even more important in the future.

Some strategic decisions are urgently required if the regional parks in Scotland are to survive. Three main options are:

- a) Continuing with the present slow decline in local authority funding which will probably result in the eventual de-designation of the Regional Parks in Scotland.
- b) Increased funding from a combination of the local authorities and central government, but retaining the same historical objectives for the parks.
- c) A re-launch of the regional parks in Scotland with re-defined objectives and funding.

The third option offers the best future for the parks and opens up the possibility of adding further regional parks if new objectives, funding and management approaches can be agreed.

The future for regional parks could be to:

- a) Strengthen their nature conservation/land use co-ordination role, to protect and enhance the provision of ecosystem services and contribute positively to climate change amelioration, sympathetic to the landscape
- b) Further increase their use for recreation and tourism as a contribution to public health and well-being and as a contribution to their local economies. Enhancing transport links between the parks and their major nearby cities could be a further strategic objective.

The Scottish Government's Land Use Strategy for 2016-2021 includes a proposal to scope the potential to develop a strategic vision for the uplands, exploring the multiple benefits they provide and how they can contribute to climate change targets. The regional parks of the future should be a significant part of this vision and action.

The full report explores a number of specific suggestions for the future of our regional parks and possibly the designation of additional new regional parks. These are:

- Diversifying the core funding and management of the regional parks to include both health and climate change/land-use funding and personnel
- Closer working between the three regional parks with some new national initiatives
- A role for the Central Scotland Green Network in helping to champion the parks and coordinate bids for new initiatives and a new central belt regional parks campaign
- More involvement of *Paths for All* in the work of the regional parks
- An enhanced role for the voluntary sector in providing services in the parks
- Creating links between the regional parks and our two National Parks, including exchange and secondment of staff

The Scottish Government and Scottish Natural Heritage should take an urgent look at the regional parks and help to chart a new way forward for them. They are national resources that have been allowed to decline and deserve urgent attention and a fresh impetus.

December 2019