

Social and Economic Benefits of National Parks



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Introduction

Scotland's two National Parks are special places where Scotland's natural beauty and cultural richness is highly valued and where nature is given a high priority. These special landscapes are working landscapes, home to communities and are the backdrop and foundation for many types of businesses. Many people look towards our National Parks as beacons of good practice where community development, socially responsible business and nature restoration can and do work hand in hand. While nature conservation has not always driven land management decisions, in general terms, Scotland's National Parks are where nature protection and restoration are fundamental, where communities enjoy a high quality of life and where visitor infrastructure investment is prioritised. The potential they bring not just for nature, but for communities too, is significant.

This short report shows some of the social and economic benefits National Parks bring to Scotland. At the start of the debate around Scotland's third National Park, now is a good time to reflect on their potential for nature, for local communities and for future generations who are yet to benefit from Scotland's landscape, wildlife and cultural traditions.

Deborah Long - Chief Officer, LINK

Some Key Statistics

- Scotland's National Parks regularly generate over £700 million of economic impact per annum, more than 30 times the investment from the Scottish Government.
- Scotland's National Parks are exceeding the Scottish Government's affordable homes target (25%). In the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park 62% of homes built between 2018 and 2022 were affordable.
- 2019-23 the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NPA approved an average of 94.3% of planning applications and the Cairngorms NPA 94.7%, against a Scottish average of 94.1%
- At least 60% of National Park Authority board members must be local people, either directly elected or local Councillors
- National Parks have brought in significant external funding for projects supporting community development, sustainable transport, landscape restoration, health and well-being and visitor infrastructure as well as conservation.

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National Parks

1. 'National Park' is the leading designation recognised across the world for places of the highest national importance for natural or cultural heritage – including landscape, wildlife, recreation, historic environment and cultural traditions. There are over 3,500 National Parks in the world including 15 in the UK, of which two are in Scotland:
 - Cairngorms National Park
 - Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park
2. Some are truly wild places; many, including those in Scotland, are working landscapes, where some of their special qualities derive from the ways in which land managers have cared for the land over the centuries.
3. The [National Parks \(Scotland\) Act 2000](#) gives National Parks in Scotland four statutory aims:
 - 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
 - d) to promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities
4. The National Park authorities (NPAs) responsible for managing National Parks are required to ensure that these aims are collectively achieved in a co-ordinated way. If there is a conflict between the first aim and other aims, the NPA must give greater weight to the first aim. In addition, Scottish Ministers have recently made clear that National Parks have a leading role in addressing the climate and nature crises. Much of the work of the NPAs therefore relates to conserving and enhancing the landscape and environment. However, this report focuses on their work in support of the fourth aim, local economic and social development.

Public opinion

5. A nationally representative [opinion survey](#) of the Scottish adult population, carried out for NatureScot in 2022, showed that 89% of people in Scotland either strongly support (44%) or tend to support (45%) the creation of one or more new National Parks, with only 3% opposing. This survey was of 1010 individuals stratified by age, gender, socio economic group and region of Scotland.

Value for money

6. National Parks make a significant contribution to the local economy in and around their areas, primarily through the spending and employment opportunities generated by the visitor economy. Outdoor activities such as walking, cycling and wildlife watching also promote visitor spending and National Parks regularly host large-scale events. For example, the overall value of the visitor economy in the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park was [£418.5 million](#) in 2018, and [£308.5 million](#) was generated within the Cairngorms National Park economy through visitor and tourism business expenditure in 2019. This means that Scotland's National Parks regularly generate over £700 million of economic

impact per annum in their visitor economies alone, more than 30 times the [£22 million](#) invested in them by the Scottish Government each year.

7. These figures were produced by Global Tourism Solutions through its widely-used [Scottish Tourism Economic Activity Monitor](#) (STEAM) model. STEAM is a tourism economic impact modelling process which measures the local economic impact of tourism through analysing a variety of inputs, including visitor attraction numbers, accommodation tariffs, occupancy levels, visitor expenditure, transport use and tourism-specific economic multipliers. It has been adopted for use throughout the UK and overseas by tourist boards, local authorities, regional development agencies, NPAs and many other public and private sector organisations.
8. The [Valuing Wales' National Parks](#) report in 2013 found that the three National Parks in Wales accounted for [£577 million](#) of Gross Value Added (GVA)¹, representing 1.2% of the Welsh economy. The [Valuing England's National Parks](#) report in 2013 found that the 10 English National Parks contribute between [£4.1bn](#) and [£6.3bn](#) to the UK economy.
9. The US Government reports that visitor spending in US National Parks [returns over \\$10 to the economy for every \\$1 invested](#) by the US Government in the National Park Service. When Metsähallitus (Parks & Wildlife Finland) invests €1 of taxpayers' money in the hiking services of National Parks, the [local economy benefits](#) over €10 on average.

Affordable housing

10. The need for more affordable housing has been identified as a clear priority in the Partnership Plans for both Scottish National Parks. The Scottish Government requires 25% of all new houses across Scotland to be affordable. Both of the existing National Parks are exceeding this target. In the [Cairngorms National Park](#) 45% of housing in new developments in four key settlements are affordable, and 175 affordable homes were built during 2016-21. The [National Park Partnership Plan](#) has set a target of 75% affordable housing by 2030. In the [Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park](#) 207 homes were built during 2018-22, of which 62% were affordable.
11. Relatively high house prices and shortage of affordable housing are familiar issues in many parts of rural Scotland with beautiful landscapes. This is widely understood to result partly from the high proportions of empty houses, second homes, retirement homes and holiday lets in such areas. However, these issues apply to many areas of attractive countryside and coast, not just to National Parks. Unpublished [research by SCNP and APRS](#) suggests that recent house price rises in other attractive areas such as Argyll, the Borders, coastal Fife or Galloway have been similar to those in the National Parks.

¹ GVA is a measure of the total value of goods and services produced by an economy; it measures the value of economic outputs less the cost of intermediate inputs

Case Study [Ardgeal](#) community housing, Kincaig, Cairngorms National Park

Kincaig Community Council worked with Communities Housing Trust to build ten low-cost timber homes for local people, with a legal agreement to ensure permanent affordability. The work was carried out by local contractors, providing employment and training opportunities for local apprentices. Sustainable design principles reduced the carbon footprint of the development and running costs for residents. Local materials were used wherever possible, including timber felled on site. The homes helped to keep the local primary school open, following earlier concerns that it might close.

Employment

12. The two Scottish NPAs employ approximately 250 staff directly, and also stimulate indirect employment through the ‘multiplier effect’ of sourcing goods and services from businesses based in and around the National Park. National Park status can attract more visitors, increase average spend per visitor and lengthen the visitor season, thereby increasing tourism-related employment and sustaining small-scale tourism businesses. National Parks tend to attract greater levels of inward investment, particularly for tourism, outdoor recreation providers and leisure developments. The Scottish Government has given National Parks a leading role in tackling the climate and nature crises. This means that they are increasingly likely to support the wide range of new types of rural jobs and skills required to undertake this role, such as in woodland or peatland restoration.
13. Many of the staff employed in National Parks require professional qualifications and experience, such as countryside rangers, planners, archaeologists or education officers. These types of jobs can retain young people in the area or attract young well-qualified professionals from elsewhere, which can help to revitalise rural communities. National Parks generate work in countryside management and interpretation, providing opportunities for local businesses and individuals to secure employment in, for example, path construction, woodland management, drystone dyke repair or explaining the special qualities of the area to interested visitors.

Case Study [The Sill Landscape Discovery Centre](#), Northumberland National Park

The Sill is an iconic new building in the Northumberland National Park that reflects the distinctiveness of the Northumbrian landscape in both its shape and the materials used in its construction. It results from an innovative partnership between the National Park and the Youth Hostels Association, and is the most significant initiative undertaken in rural Northumberland in a lifetime.

The Sill is a rural enterprise hub, housing new and emerging rural businesses and acting as a driver for the Northumberland rural economy. It houses a café and shop which provide significant markets for local produce, a base for learning from early years to higher education, a tourist information centre and an 86-bed Youth Hostel. At its heart it celebrates the landscape and emphasises the importance of its care.

External funding opportunities

14. Core Scottish Government investment in National Parks is regularly and significantly enhanced by external funding brought in by the NPAs themselves. For example, the CNPA is currently leading the [Cairngorms 2030](#) £43m partnership programme, supported by £12.5m from The National Lottery Heritage Fund. This funding is being used to run projects supporting community development, sustainable transport, landscape restoration, health and well-being.
15. This kind of external funding leverage is achieved through the ability of NPAs to convene relevant partners, including landowners and other public agencies, to submit joint funding bids. The relative permanence of National Parks and the well-known National Park brand gives confidence to grant-giving bodies that projects in National Parks are likely to achieve their stated objectives.

Sustainable development

16. National Parks seek to guide and manage change in the public interest. The principal mechanism by which they do so is by bringing together all relevant agencies and other interests to agree and implement a shared National Park Partnership Plan. They then actively promote developments which support the objectives of the Partnership Plan and which are sustainable, meaning that they secure environmental and social as well as economic benefits. The convening power of the NPA may be used to facilitate delivery involving multiple partners if necessary.
17. The National Park Partnership Plans set out how all those with a responsibility for a National Park will coordinate their work to tackle the most important issues. The development of these management plans by the NPAs involves extensive dialogue with a wide range of partners and a public consultation. The Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NP [Partnership Plan](#) runs from 2024-2029 and the current Cairngorms NP [Partnership Plan](#) runs from 2022 to 2027.

Planning

18. In terms of planning applications, NPAs are no more restrictive than other planning authorities. For example, in 2019-23 the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NPA approved an average of 94.3% of planning applications and the Cairngorms NPA 94.7%, against a Scottish average of 94.1%².
19. The planning system generally operates in the same way in National Parks as it does elsewhere. In the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, all planning applications are submitted to the NPA, which then determines all planning applications. In the Cairngorms National Park, all applications are submitted to the relevant local authority and most are determined by them; the NPA can call in for its own determination applications of particular importance to the National Park's purposes. This means that from the applicant's perspective there is still one application and one decision.
20. Planning regulations are identical within and outwith National Parks, with two exceptions relating to wind farms and agricultural buildings:

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/planning-applications-statistics-2022-23-annual-quarterly-october-2022-march-2023/documents/>

Wind farms: The Scottish Government's [National Planning Framework 4](#) published in 2023 states that development proposals for wind farms in National Parks will not be supported (Policy 11b, page 53).

Agricultural buildings: Since National Parks were first established in Scotland there have been Permitted Development Rights (PDRs) for agricultural buildings with a ground area of up to 465m². However in 2021 the Scottish Government increased this threshold to 1,000m² outwith National Parks, National Scenic Areas and some other designated areas. In other words PDRs remain as they were in National Parks, but have been partly relaxed elsewhere. The full wording of the current guidance is in the Scottish Government's [Consolidated Circular on Non-Domestic Permitted Development Rights 2021](#) (Annex E, page 7).

At [one meeting of the Cairngorms NPA Planning Committee](#) in November 2023, planning applications for a variety of developments were approved including a new distillery, an active travel path and affordable housing and staff accommodation. Eleanor Mackintosh, Deputy Convener of the Cairngorms National Park Authority Board said: "It is really great to see such a variety of projects coming forward for planning consent, from whisky to walking as well as an affordable homes boost where it is needed most."

Sustainable tourism

21. Tourism is Scotland's largest industry, and is particularly important to the economies of the two existing National Parks. For example, tourism accounts for around 60% of the economy in the Cairngorms National Park and supports 6,200 jobs in the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park. Around 6 million people visit Scotland's two National Parks each year, generating major opportunities for local businesses such as cafés, hotels, restaurants, self-catering properties and outdoor activity providers.
22. However, National Parks aim to promote sustainable development, so these economic benefits must not come at the expense of local communities or landscapes. This is why much effort and funding has been invested into infrastructure in National Parks for visitors, including walking and cycling networks, camping provision, parking, visitor centres and sustainable travel initiatives. For example, the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NPA recently commissioned a [Sustainable Travel Options Appraisal & Modal Shift Report](#), to assess the options available for improving sustainable transport coverage and usage for both visitors and local residents. Any new National Parks will be able to learn from this kind of experience, and are likely to have sustainable tourism and transport as a key focus from the start.

Case Study [Trossachs Explorer](#) shuttle bus service, Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park

The dominance of car travel is one of the biggest sources of carbon emissions in the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park. It puts pressure on popular locations and their communities, through parking and traffic congestion. The Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NPA therefore introduced the Trossachs Explorer shuttle bus service for Summer 2024, in a bid to tackle these issues.

The bus runs between the towns of Aberfoyle and Callander seven days a week, stopping at popular visitor locations including Loch Katrine, Queen Elizabeth Forest Park and the access points for popular hills Ben A'an, Ben Ledi and Ben Venue. The timetable ties in with bus services from Stirling and Glasgow, so visitors from those cities can make entire journeys without a car. This service aims to reduce emissions by providing a convenient alternative to car travel, to benefit residents and local people by making it easier to reach some of the National Park's most popular locations, and to support local businesses by providing public transport options for staff.

Visitor management

21. Most visitors to the countryside behave responsibly, but a minority cause problems for the local community and landscape, for example through irresponsible parking, camping, fires and litter. These issues became particularly apparent during the Covid pandemic of 2020-21, when the number of visitors to the countryside increased. National Parks played a key part in the response to this, investing for example in toilet facilities, campsites and recycling provision. The most important element of this response was the employment of additional countryside rangers, who engage directly with visitors to promote responsible behaviour through advice and information. These visitor management issues are still apparent in some places, but National Parks remain at the forefront of best practice in addressing them.
22. National Parks have brought significant investment into visitor infrastructure. The [Loch Lomond and The Trossachs](#) National Park and the [Cairngorms National Park](#) have identified visitor infrastructure investment as a key priority. Scotland's two National Parks have secured a total of £1.79 million of investment over the last six years from the Scottish Government's [Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund](#), administered by VisitScotland. This fund aims to improve visitors' experience in parts of rural Scotland that have seen large increases in visitor numbers, address pressure on local infrastructure and reduce negative impacts on communities. Projects in the National Parks have included improvements to car and motorhome parking and toilet facilities, waste disposal provision, new paths and improved signage.
23. [Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NPA](#) has employed a team of approximately 30 countryside rangers throughout its existence. [Cairngorms NPA](#) initially focussed on co-ordinating and supporting the [thirteen existing ranger services](#) within the National Park, including those run by private estates, non-governmental organisations, local authorities and government agencies. Since the Covid pandemic, it has also directly employed its own team of seasonal rangers to complement the work of existing ranger services, so that there are now nearly 50 full-time equivalent rangers working across the National Park.

Local accountability and control

24. [Schedule 1 of the National Parks \(Scotland\) Act 2000](#) specifies that at least 20% of the members of a NPA must be local residents directly elected by the local community, 40% local Councillors appointed by the local authorities any part of whose area is within the National Park, and 40% national experts appointed by Scottish Ministers for their relevant knowledge or experience. This arrangement delivers local democratic accountability for the management of a nationally important area, with an in-built majority for local residents regarding decisions made by the NPA. Local residents can stand for direct election to the NPA, and can vote both in these elections and in local elections for Councillors who may be appointed to the NPA.

Well-being

25. The [World Economic Forum](#) has reported positive links between visiting protected areas such as National Parks, and improved mental health and well-being. For example, researchers from Griffith University in Queensland, Australia, looked at how much people are likely to spend on healthcare combined with statistics on National Park visits. Their argument is that poor mental health imposes major healthcare costs on economies, but that exposure to nature improves mental health and well-being. Therefore, National Parks have an additional economic value through the improved mental health of visitors.
26. The research team interviewed visitors to two Australian National Parks, using the personal well-being index (PWI), which looks at seven criteria: standard of living, health, achieving in life, relationships, safety, community connectedness, and future security. They compared visitors' PWI scores with data on the general Australian population and estimates of how many people visit National Parks each year. From this, they determined that visiting a National Park lifted people's PWI by 2.2% on average. They concluded that this improved mental health and well-being translates to a substantial economic value through reduced future healthcare costs.
27. A [2018 study, by researchers at the University of York](#), estimated that for every £1 invested, the North York Moors National Park generates approximately £7.21 of health and well-being benefits for visitors and volunteers. The study added to a [growing body of evidence](#) about the benefits of outdoor recreation and connecting with nature. The researchers felt the figure calculated for the social return on investment (for benefits in terms of the impact upon health and well-being of people using National Parks) was likely to be an underestimate as the scope of the study didn't include school children or activities funded through other grant schemes.

Added Value from a National Park Location

28. Designation as a National Park highlights the attractiveness of an area as a place for people to live and work as well as to potential visitors or customers. This recognition can help attract some of the increasing number of geographically mobile businesses and the professionals required to staff services essential for community wellbeing.
29. National Park status brings international-level recognition of the quality of the area, generating promotional benefits in terms of marketing and branding of products ranging from food and drink to arts and craft. Many producers reference the National Park and the quality of the environment and landscape in their own [promotional materials](#). NPAs can

support collaboration through advisory groups, business networks, forums and partnerships and publicise new opportunities for producers in their areas.

30. More than 200 businesses in the Cairngorms use special [National Park branding](#) materials, and the NPA supports the [Cairngorms Farmers Market](#) and the [Creative Cairngorms](#) artists' and craft workers' association. Loch Lomond and The Trossachs NPA actively promotes several local producers on the [Producers in the Park](#) page of its website.

Conclusions

31. This report presents evidence that National Parks are popular with the public and deliver significant value for money. They support affordable housing and create high-quality jobs. National Parks attract substantial external investment and promote sustainable development, particularly relating to tourism and transport. They demonstrate clear local accountability and deliver improved public well-being for residents and visitors.



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