

SCOTLAND'S NATURAL HERITAGE: ISSUE 14: EDITORIAL

TAILOR-MADE SOLUTIONS FOR SCOTLAND

As this issue of Scotland's Natural Heritage is published, I am sure that many readers are preparing for the Scottish Parliament. Without doubt this will provide organisations like SNH with many challenges and opportunities. For us the greatest opportunity will be to advise on policies and legislation, tailor-made for Scottish circumstances. In doing so we shall take into account information which we have gathered, the knowledge which we have acquired, and the lessons we have learnt from past experience and from the experience of others.

In this edition of our magazine we summarise our work and recommendations on National Parks and on Access, our responses to Government consultations on Land Reform and Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and our progress on developing advice on National Scenic Areas.

National Parks is certainly an issue for which Scottish solutions are possible in both a generic sense and for individual National Parks. Our proposals are for National Parks with a four-fold purpose, uniquely including social and economic development opportunities for local communities and recognising the importance of the sustainable use of natural resources. We are clear that where there is conflict between the purposes, resolution should be guided by a precautionary approach which favours the long-term conservation of the natural resources. There are several other unique features in our proposals. A National Park Plan, to be drawn up through wide consultation and approved ultimately by the Parliament or the responsible Minister, will provide the framework for delivering the purposes of the National Park. Communities should be involved in the identification, governance and management of National Parks. Criteria for identifying National Parks should be set out in legislation. National Parks should include the marine as well as the terrestrial environment. We also make recommendations for Loch Lomond & the Trossachs and for the Cairngorms, with variants which suit the particular needs and circumstances of each area: in effect we recommend a menu approach.

On Access, we have achieved nothing less than a break-through with agreement among the various parties on a new tailor-made approach. The key proposal is “a right of access to land and water, exercised responsibly, for informal recreation and passage”. There is recognition of the need for responsibility on the part of users, and for taking into account privacy, land management needs and the needs of conservation. These proposals are part of a package along with other elements, including a duty on local authorities to make access a higher priority, for SNH to define code(s) of practice, for the provision of well-marked and maintained footpath networks and for the provision of necessary funding from Government and other sources, including local enterprise companies.

The proposals, if implemented, will result in Scotland having one of the most modern approaches to access in Europe.

On Land Reform, we welcome the Government's proposals. We place particular emphasis on codes of practice of land management so that no one - owners, managers and tenants, funding bodies and the public - can be in any doubt about the standards of stewardship sought. We hope that during the course of debates on Land Reform in the Scottish Parliament our proposals for a statutory responsibility to be laid on all owners, managers and tenants, of wise stewardship of the land is aired, that a statutory code rather than a voluntary code is considered and that access to public funds should be restricted to those adhering to the duties and codes.

In our response to Government on Sites of Special Scientific Interest, we welcomed its intent to provide a system tailor-made to Scottish circumstances and therefore more likely to be effective than the present arrangements. We have argued for a more user-friendly system and hope that the proposals implemented will be cost effective and define very clearly the roles of all participants, including local communities. We welcome the stimulus for positive management arrangements and the shift away from automatic compensation, except in carefully defined circumstances. We support a new definition for the SSSI system along the following lines: “to safeguard for present and future generations a series of sites, which are individually of high natural heritage importance, and in total represent the diversity

and geographic range of habitats, species, geological and geomorphological features in England, Scotland and Wales". We agree that the guidelines for the series should maintain a commonality of approach with England and Wales. We also argued that there is no necessity for SSSIs to be designated for every site which is proposed and designated under the European Union's Natura 2000 Programme.

In response to a request from Government, we have been reviewing National Scenic Areas - the designation to safeguard Scotland's finest scenery. Our consultation paper, launched at the beginning of February, seeks to enthuse people about the importance of our scenic heritage and its proper protection. We set out proposals for improving the effectiveness of the NSA designation which is at present neither widely understood nor particularly valuable. We argue in favour of maintaining scenic beauty as the basis for designation but with a somewhat more systematic approach, aided by the landscape characteristic assessment described in the last edition of *Scotland's Natural Heritage*. In time, we hope there will be a more representative suite of National Scenic Areas representing the highest quality scenery of Scotland.

In all these exercises, what is best for Scotland from the three-fold perspective of sustainable development - environmental protection and enhancement, social well-being and economic prosperity - is the guiding principle resulting in tailor-made solutions which will put Scotland firmly in a leadership position if legislation is passed by the Scottish Parliament.

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