



# Scottish National Parks Strategy Project



## Leading The Way

Protected Landscapes and Rural Recovery

### Introduction

National Parks and our other protected landscapes have built up expertise over the years in healthy outdoor recreation and sustainable economic and social development. They are therefore ideally placed to lead the recovery of rural Scotland following the coronavirus epidemic. Also, new National Parks would provide exactly the type of stimulus needed to lead remote rural areas out of the current crisis towards future prosperity.

### Natural Beauty

Recent weeks have shown how much people value the natural beauty of our rural landscapes and the right to access them responsibly. For example, people flocked to the beaches and hills in mid-March, knowing that restrictions on movement were clearly imminent. At the same time there was a real sense of sadness at having to close Scotland's five ski resorts, just as deep snow and long settled spells of sunshine arrived in mid-March.

### Essential Exercise

The value of daily exercise in fresh air and green space to people's mental and physical health has been clearly recognised by both Scottish and UK Governments, in their acceptance that this is an essential activity even during lockdown. Spending on nature recovery returns value to the public health system through the avoided costs of chronic illnesses such as depression and anxiety. Most of this exercise has taken place in urban greenspaces – parks, hospital and university grounds, canal and river banks, old railway lines – and in Green Belts and other countryside around towns. However, these are the very areas where funding cuts have resulted in reduced levels of active management – fewer countryside rangers, less maintenance of paths and bike routes. Also there have been saddening reports of conflicts between the reasonable demands of land managers and of urban populations – mostly farmers and walkers.

### A Better Scotland

Yet despite the terrible impact of the virus, many urban dwellers have had glimpses of the sort of cleaner, greener and quieter world more familiar to rural residents, due to reduced noise and pollution from cars and planes. It has been easier to hear birdsong and there have been many reports of urban wildlife extending its range – foxes in the gardens, hedgehogs in the streets. For example, in a [recent YouGov poll](#) 51% of respondents had noticed cleaner air and 27% more wildlife during lockdown. Surely we should aspire to move forward to a better Scotland, not just back to normal, whatever that means. The same poll revealed that 85% want to see some of the personal or social changes they have experienced continue after the pandemic, and only 9% want everything to go back to how it was before.

### Protected Landscapes

Our National Parks are living, working, accessible landscapes with great potential to educate and influence wider way of life in a positive way. They are ideally suited to leading the recovery of rural Scotland. Initiatives such as Cairngorms Connect and the Great Trossachs Forest are leading the way. And it's not just our National Parks which could have this role, but our whole

family of protected landscapes – Green Belts, Country Parks, Regional Parks, National Nature Reserves and National Scenic Areas. Crucially our protected landscapes could benefit Scotland even more if linked together with landscape and habitat corridors. That’s why so many environmental groups have proposed a national Nature Network and a National Walking and Cycling Network.

### **Nature Recovery**

Protected landscapes could be at the heart of the habitat restoration and targeted species recovery initiatives required to tackle the nature crisis. National Parks and other protected landscapes could be used to demonstrate ‘greenprints’ for better systems of public support for land management, in which public money delivers public benefits such as clean water, healthy soils, biodiversity and public recreation as well as food and timber production.

### **Climate Emergency**

Major initiatives are required to store and sequester carbon in peatlands and other soils – again protected landscapes are already showing the way and could do much more. We need to make walking, cycling and public transport cheaper and more convenient than travel by car to change how people arrive at and travel around protected landscapes. Surely there is an opportunity to harness some of people’s recent positive experiences of cleaner, quieter neighbourhoods to tackle the climate emergency and the nature crisis as the threat from the virus recedes.

### **Education, Inclusion and Well-being**

Protected landscapes have great potential to get all of these messages across to visitors through effective education, interpretation and communications efforts, magnifying their effect across society. The recent Glover report on protected landscapes in England argued convincingly that they should become more inclusive, accessible and responsive to all parts of society.

### **Outdoor Recreation**

The 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak revealed just how dependent the rural economy was on outdoor recreation. That revelation helped to trigger, for example, investment in the 7stanes network of mountain biking centres across the Borders and Galloway by the then Forestry Commission Scotland. These not only provide healthy exercise but also generate direct income for rural businesses such as accommodation providers, catering outlets and bike hire. Protected landscapes and long distance paths and bike routes could help to lead rural areas out of the current crisis through similar initiatives with multiple benefits for society and rural economies.

### **Public Sector Employment**

The Index of Multiple Deprivation has shown a marked deterioration in the fortunes of many remoter rural communities, and the fate of even the most rural areas is tied up with that of their local towns. One of the key sources of economic vulnerability in rural areas is dependence on public sector employment at a time of austerity. This has often meant not just job cuts but also retrenchment to the main centres at the expense of smaller outlying settlements.

### **More National Parks**

National Parks and other protected landscapes have the potential to counter this effect. More National Parks, including in the Borders and Galloway, and greater levels of support from the Scottish Government and all of its agencies for protected landscapes across Scotland, could deliver so many benefits to Scotland’s rural environment, society and economy as we emerge from the current crisis.

John Mayhew  
Project Manager  
Scottish National Parks Strategy Project  
2 June 2020