

Evaluation of the Cairngorms National Park Plan - Interim Report

1. The paper provides an overview of the development of the Cairngorms National Park Plan to date - therefore it presents a one year snapshot of a long term process of cultural change. The research is funded through the Scottish Government's five-year Environment and Rural Stewardship Programme to support the adaptive management of the Park by creating a dialogue between researchers and stakeholders.

Why do this Research?

2. Cairngorms National Park is an example of the new approach to planning and management that: integrates many different issues; works with many different partners in delivering the desired outcomes; and functions at the local, national and international level.
3. National Parks and the model of an enabling National Park Authority are new. However, they share the challenges faced by many other processes (e.g. community planning). These challenges can be defined as the need to balance four issues:
 - a) Inclusion: involving all those who can affect, or are affected by, the Park
 - b) Integration: coordinating different actions to achieve a unified set of objectives
 - c) Delivery: illustrating that the Park makes a difference
 - d) Efficiency: utilising limited resources most effectively
4. Achieving any one is relatively easy but it is difficult to balance all four. For example, including all interested stakeholders often means more issues to integrate, more resources to support this integration. However, the actions should be delivered more effectively in the long run.

How has the research been done?

5. The **research questions** are:
 - a) Who is involved in developing and implementing the Park Plan?
 - b) How is the integration of the various issues managed within the overall Park Plan?
 - c) Are there changes in those involved, and the issues raised, over time?
6. This paper reports on research undertaken between April 2006 and September 2007. The data consist of:
 - a) Semi structured interviews (total of 15 people)
 - b) Field notes from Meetings (total of 16 meetings)
 - c) Field notes from meetings, phone calls and emails with Park Authority staff (14 interactions)
 - d) Field notes from published documents (total of 17 groups of documents)
7. These different data provide multiple perspectives on the development of the National Park Plan. The data are mainly qualitative in order to explain why certain trends might be occurring rather than 'proving' relationships using statistical analysis. The framework was designed to collect data over time with minimal requirements from stakeholders and within a modest research budget.

What are the results to date?

8. In general participants in the interviews were relatively happy with the process of developing the Park Plan and praised the commitment and professionalism of the staff involved. There was more ambivalence with regard to the content of the Park Plan, particularly concerning the strategic nature of the Plan and the lack of detail regarding implementation. The data also illustrate different understandings of the aims of the National Park, and therefore the role of the CNPA and its Board.

Who has been involved?

9. I perceive a hierarchy of involvement in the Park Plan process: ‘people like the CNPA’ having most access through ‘people CNPA needs’, ‘people CNPA ought to have’ to ‘the (unorganised) public’ (my words).
 10. *People like the CNPA* are the representatives of public agencies e.g. Scottish Natural Heritage. These organisations not only have a duty to take account of the Park Plan, but share a similar culture of service delivery and understand the constraints to developing such a Strategic Plan. These organisations seem willing to commit resources to engage in an ongoing dialogue and partnership building – partly due to organisational priorities supporting joined up government. There are important distinctions within the group between national organisations with focussed remits and local organisations with diverse remits. This group are presented on the Strategy Group, Delivery Teams and Forums.
 11. *People CNPA need* are those that do not have a statutory duty within the Park but without whom the Plan can not be delivered. This encompasses businesses, land managers and membership organisations. Of note is the fact that many in this group believe in small government and the autonomy to manage their affairs as they wish, making them distinct from the first group. The Cairngorms Chamber of Commerce is the ‘key partner’ from this group involved in the Strategy Group, some are involved in the delivery teams but most of the others are restricted to an advisory role via the forums.
 12. *People CNPA ought to have* are the non-governmental and voluntary organisations representing public interest in the National Park. These groups tend to have less resource and therefore are less able to support intensive partnership building processes. They are also more likely to represent a particular view on issues that reflects their remit and/or their membership. The Association of Cairngorms Communities, representing communities of place, and Scottish LINK, representing a community of interest, are ‘key partners’ attending the Strategy Group and some of the delivery teams. Most others are restricted to an advisory role via the forums, which are generally only attended by locally based organisations.
 13. The *public* have been given the opportunity to be involved (61 individuals responded to the consultation period and 209 individuals attended consultation meetings). However, the public were not directly involved in ongoing deliberation in the run up to the launch of the draft plan or in the discussion afterwards. To some extent, the local public were represented by the elected members of the Board, although the mechanism by which citizens outside the Park boundary are represented was less clear. It is difficult to engage the ‘unorganised’ public, although the schools forum and the drop in event were very successful. The need for greater engagement with local communities, individuals visiting the Park and taxpayers throughout Scotland in planning and managing the Park was raised by interviewees, particularly those representing ‘people we ought to have’.
- 14. For the Next Park Plan:**
- a) Undertake a stakeholder analysis and clarify to all concerned where efforts are being targeted and why?
 - b) Capture views from other ongoing processes and build on these during formal consultation periods.
 - c) Clarify the purpose and degree of empowerment within consultation process so choices can be made about when and to what extent to engage with processes.
 - d) Ensure representatives recognise their duty to facilitate knowledge exchanges within their organisations.

Developing the Plan with Stakeholders

15. The constraints created by the Scottish elections shaped how the process unfolded and the time table in which the Plan was developed. Interviewees understood the process of developing the plan up until the submission to the Minister. Most seemed happier with the process of developing the plan than the content of

the plan. In other words, they felt they were given an opportunity to input but were less satisfied with how the input was used. Scores from the interviewees ranged from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 4.5 (between satisfied and very satisfied) with the median score being 3.5 and mode being 4.

16. Data from the interviews and meetings indicate that there is ‘consultation fatigue’ in communities of place and of interest, whereby representatives are struggling to keep up with all the demands placed on them by the number of processes in which they could be involved. This was compounded, in 2006, by a suspicion that their comments were not listened to, making them less inclined to contribute to processes in the future. A few felt that the CNPA set the agenda at the forums and were not as open to opposing views as they claimed to be. The communication strategy adopted, including the publication of the consultation report, should help to illustrate to what extent their concerns were considered and how their views swayed the final plan.
17. The Park Plan was developed from 2003, with some of the key partners having been involved to some degree over a long period. Therefore many interviewees were unclear when the process of developing the Plan actually began. Furthermore, there were ideas and views on a strategic planning circulating prior to the Park being formally designated. It has been difficult to disentangle the engagement of stakeholders (including the public) in the Park Planning process from other processes ongoing at the same time such as the development of the Local Plan. There was additional confusion when issues not in the Draft Park Plan, such as residency criteria for housing, were informally aired during the formal consultation period.
18. There was some confusion over whether stakeholders could influence how the Plan was altered in response to the consultation. Some stakeholders were more actively involved in these discussions than others, although the mechanism of tabling the draft consultation report at the Board meetings and writing to all interested parties did offer an opportunity to all concerned. Because the CNPA has the statutory duty to prepare the plan but the Plan is delivered in partnership with others, there was a discussion over how to synchronise the endorsement of the Plan by both the CNPA board and the other partners. This was resolved by the Board approving the plan on 1st December subject to approval by the Joined Up Government Board (now Strategy Group) which met on 4th December 2006. The Chair of the Strategy Group (also the Chair of the CNPA board) was given the mandate to act on behalf of the CNPA Board should any further changes be requested at the meeting on 4th.
- 19. For the Next Park Plan:**
 - a) Explicitly acknowledge the influence of previous or parallel consultation processes on the development of the plan and build on these expressed views rather than starting with a blank sheet.
 - b) Ensure draft material is not so ‘polished’ that people assume decisions have already been made.
 - c) Allow sufficient time to consider and agree changes after the consultation period ends.
 - d) Be transparent about the process, and who can have access to this process, of finalising the plan.
 - e) Consider writing collectively, using seconded staff and paid volunteers from the private sector.

Content of the Plan

20. Unlike the process of developing the Park Plan, most interviewees were unclear about the choice of content, particularly the Priorities for Action. Most interviewees were happier with the longer term vision than the priorities for action. Scores ranged from 1 (very unsatisfied) to 4 (satisfied) with the median and the mode score being 3. Note this is lower than for the process scores, although some interviewees felt the content had improved by the submission of the final draft in December. At the heart of concerns was the inability to perceive a clear rationale for why the Priorities for Action were chosen, despite the rationale being stated in the plan, and the perceived lack of a framework that brought the objectives, principles and priorities together and illustrated their interactions. The ability to see the ‘big picture’ and the use of systems thinking is

integral to delivering all four aims of the Park. The revised structure of the final Plan makes these relationships clearer.

21. There were a number of comments regarding issues that stakeholders wanted to see prioritised or addressed differently. These issues include wanting more emphasis on the special natural qualities of the Park; managing demographic change in the Park (including pressures created by immigration, widening gaps between rich and poor and aging populations); and more strategies for transport, waste, renewable energy, economic development and provision of services/facilities. There were also several comments about the need to place the Park within a changing national and international context (with regard to economic trends and climate change for example). Furthermore, there was confusion about how the Plan worked alongside existing and future strategies, plans and policies. Finally, there was a lack of information on how to monitor progress in the draft. The final Plan responded to many of these issues although there were no changes to the topics within the Priorities for Action. The consultation report shows whether stakeholders were ignored as they had feared, and if so, why.
22. **For the Next Park Plan:**
 - a) Make the choice of content transparent and reinforce reasons for choices throughout the document.
 - b) Set the plan within an explicit framework that highlights how sections link together **and** how the Plan works alongside other plans, policies and strategies to deliver the four aims.
 - c) Clearly state how responses will be dealt with and decisions regarding final content will be made at the start of the consultation process.

Implementation

23. Implementation was the issue seen to be most important and most challenging by interviewees and in meetings. There was more uncertainty about the implementation process in the summer of 2006 than in Spring 2007 suggesting that the communication strategy had been effective. Whilst the 2007 interviewees knew about the mechanisms set up, they were unsure how things would work in practice (clarifying specific roles, responsibilities, remits and resources required).
24. A key aspect of getting the Plan finalised involved signing up partners and agreeing action plans. One criticism is that there were no priorities set within the action plans. Those who will be implementing actions were eager to see costed SMART action plans (SMART meaning Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Realistic and Time-limited). They feared that signing up to actions without ensuring the means to do them might create unrealistic expectations. The counter argument, made by CNPA officers, was that it was too early in the partnership building phase to tie down explicit commitments, something that won't apply in future planning cycles.
25. The issue of resources (human as well as financial) permeated the data. The 'enabling' approach adopted by the CNPA uses persuasion rather than commands to change behaviour. Financial incentives are a useful catalyst for voluntary action but the CNPA has limited financial resources, relying instead on leveraging finance from other streams. However, there is a belief by some that the CNPA will pay for many of the actions in the Plan. Secondly, many partners have responsibilities out with the Park and therefore may choose to spend scarce resources elsewhere. Any cuts in the forthcoming public spending review will exacerbate this tension.
26. **For the Next Park Plan:**
 - a) Clarify the detailed mechanisms for implementation, including roles and responsibilities for organisations and individuals; including how these might change over time.
 - b) Identify expected resources for delivery, including building capacity in the community/voluntary sector.

- c) Bid for resources during the finalization of the plan, including aligning with organisational operational plans, so that when approved delivery can commence.
- d) Use implementation of the plan to continue to learn collectively and build relationships.

What might this mean for the future?

- 27. The data suggest that there is considerable good will and commitment to achieving the vision contained in the Act and the Park Plan. However, this is still a very fragile foundation and the implementation phase can strengthen or weaken it. There has been a loss of momentum, as some interviewees put it, between submitting the plan and starting delivery. The lag between adopting action plans and securing resources in annual budgets may have delayed delivery. Demonstrating progress can reassure partners that outcomes will be delivered.
- 28. Interviewees recognised that the Park Plan is a symbol of collective intent and is an opportunity to practice joined up governance. However, partnership working raises many complex questions. Put crudely, the transaction costs involved in partnership must be seen to be worthwhile. Therefore, there needs to be considerable effort invested in demonstrating the benefits to the partners' own organisations as well as the overall benefits to the Park and to Scotland. Building relationships and achieving a cultural change is a long term process with few short term 'wins'. Therefore it is crucial to focus on, and celebrate where the Plan has delivered visible benefits, particularly as (a) many organisations prioritise delivery over deliberation and (b) have conservative attitudes to risk and innovation. This is not an 'either/or' situation but a 'both/and' – delivering concrete improvements will build confidence in the idea of a National Park and illustrate the benefit of working together.
- 29. There are still considerable differences in how stakeholders perceive: the role and rationale of a National Park; the balance between the four aims; and their own responsibility to help deliver these aims. This affects what counts as success. There is still confusion over:
 - a) to what extent the National Park requires to do the same things differently or to do new things?
 - b) to what extent should the National Park restrict delivery to issues that are exclusive to the national park and allow generic nation-wide issues to be resolved by existing nation-wide solutions?
- 30. Sustainable development is at the heart of the Park Plan, and being a holistic concept, means almost everything can be interpreted as pertaining to the aims of National Park. This confusion is understandable but suggests that resources need to be invested in relationship building, clarifying expectations and creating a shared vision for the National Park. In other words, creating the first plan was just the beginning of an ongoing process.
- 31. The data suggest that there is increasing awareness, at least amongst organised stakeholders, of the difference between the National Park and the CNPA, which has been helped by the use of two different brands. The CNPA promote themselves as facilitators yet many of the interviewees felt that the CNPA were in control of, rather than facilitating, the development of the Plan. This can be explained by the statutory duty on the CNPA and the pressing timetable to deliver the first plan. The staff are aware of a tension between 'doing' and enabling others to 'do'. Ideally, there will be an evolution from the former to the latter but the early 'doing' role may have raised expectations and make this transition more difficult. Conversely, there were fears that the CNPA were either duplicating the role of existing organisations or adding additional complexity to existing partnerships. Either way, continuing to communicate the role, function and benefits of the CNPA will be important.
- 32. Returning to the tension outlined at the start of the paper between inclusion, integration, delivery and efficiency, it is not possible to do everything. In the longer term, inclusion and integration should make

delivery more efficient – the ‘both/and’ situation. However, in the short term, if resources are scarce and delivery is important to shore up partnership working, the degree to which integration and inclusion can be achieved may be curtailed. How should the National Park serve local interests whilst also fulfilling its National remit? Trade offs will be required, made using clear principles, and communicated in ways that allow everyone to understand how and why certain decisions have been made.

33. Making difficult decisions requires leadership. It is unclear to many who are responsible and accountable for the overall National Park as opposed to the Park Authority. If the Board is accountable for the Park, they do not have the authority to command the partners yet managing the Park can only be achieved through the collective actions of many individuals, groups, organisations and communities. Traditional models of authority relying on statutory ‘sticks’ or financial ‘carrots’ are not available to the CNPA or its Board. And those to be ‘led’ are highly competent individuals and organisations that often value their autonomy and wish to be treated as equals as they are often leaders in their own particular fields.
34. Therefore, inducing voluntary commitment to the objectives, principles and actions in the plan will be dependent on:
 - a) the extent to which the plan really reflects the priorities of those doing the delivery and
 - b) on the CNPA demonstrating the added value derived from having a National Park and a Park Authority.

What next?

35. The research will continue to assess the implementation stage and further feedback will be offered in 2008.

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