China Eco Forum Global Guiyang 'Mountain Biodiversity and Our Lives' forum

Gordon Watson - UK National Parks: Restoring Nature for People and Planet

Intro Slide

Good Morning

I am Gordon Watson, CEO of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park which is Scotland's first National Park and I am delighted to be here to talk about the role National Parks play in the UK to benefit both our people and the planet.

In the UK the first National Parks were designated in England over 75 years ago with the Peak District in the north of England being the first.

The historic driver to designate National Parks was two fold. Firstly to protect and conserve some of the UK's most valued landscapes, but secondly to promote the recreational enjoyment of these landscapes by people. Increasing demands from people in our towns and cities to enjoy our best landscapes meant National Parks were needed to help manage and promote responsible access while protecting and improving theses special places. Decades on, the benefits that National Parks can deliver has broadened considerably, particularly in the context of the twin climate and nature crises. Today I'm going to give you a little background to the work of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park but then focus, particularly on how we link our nature restoration work to wider societal benefits.

Slide 2 – UK Map

The UK has 15 National Parks covering 10% of the GB land area – 10 in England, 3 in Wales and 2 in Scotland

In Scotland we have only had a National Parks Act since 2000 with Loch Lomond and the Trossachs the first in 2002 and Cairngorms in 2003.

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs is on the West side of Scotland if you can see at the North End of that UK map.

Slide 3 – IUCN Category

In the UK the landscapes we have designated are where people have lived and managed the land over many centuries.

Under the International Union for Conservation of Nature categorisation the UK National Parks fall under category V to reflect this as

"areas where the **interaction of people and nature** over time has produced an area of **distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value**

and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values".

This means that we are both trying to restore and expand our habitats and eco-systems while at the same time celebrating the cultural heritage of these landscapes, supporting the communities that live within them while delivering benefits to people and society. A very tough balancing act!

Slide 4 – Scottish Aims

In Scotland the 4 aims of our National Parks were set in law 25 years ago and sought to relfect this balance of benefits;

- firstly to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area.
- Secondly, to promote the sustainable use of the natural resources of the area.
- Thirdly, to promote understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Park by the public,
- and finally, to promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities.

While broad in scope, the act requires that greater weight is given to the first conservation aim if there is conflict. This ensures that natural and cultural heritage has primacy in our National Parks. We protect and conserve nature with people and for people.

Slide 5 – LLTNP Background

Loch Lomond & The Trossachs has a small population of 15,600 people. We are within one hour's drive of 50% of Scotland's population, that nearly 3 million people. And we receive about 4.8 million visitors per year, both from the UK and from overseas. This supports a £580M tourism economy. We play host to some very important habitats and natural features such as the Great Trossachs forest, one of the UK's largest natural nature reserves, and Loch Lomond itself in the centre of the map there, it is the largest freshwater lake in the UK mainland and we host about 300 national priority species.

Slide 6 – Climate Impacts we are already seeing

As we all know the opportunity for international efforts to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels is fast dissappearing unless we take significant action now. At the same time we also know that globally biodiversity is declining faster than at any other time in history.

We can see the effects of these trends in our National Parks.

Changes that are already impacting on our communities, local economy and our nature.

- More extreme weather events - storms and rainfall
- Lengthier dry spells leading to water scarcity and heightened wildfire risk
- Rainfall saturated hills and mountains causing more frequent and dramatic landslides impacting on infrastructure
- More frequent and dramatic flood events
- Warming temperatures bringing new pests and diseases
- Warming water temperatures are impacting on our native wild fish stocks and water quality

Slide 7 – Why is our Nature in Trouble

Even though the state of nature is better in our Bational Parks on the whole, nature is still in trouble in our best landscapes

- We need to expand and regenerate our native woodlands – some in poor condition and are fragmented ecosystems
- Over 50,000 hectares of peatlands may currently be degraded, releasing greenhouse gases, and contributing towards climate warming
- Invasive non-native species remain widespread
- Approximately 20% of Designated Sites, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest, are in an unfavourable condition
- Approximately 50% of water bodies may not be in good ecological condition

Slide 8 – It is no longer enough

From all of this it is clear that is no longer enough just to protect what we have. We must proactively and vigorously re-build and restore a richer nature that will continue to yield us and our world benefits for long into the future

Slide 9 – Scottish Government Expectations

In this context the role and contribution that National Parks can make as large scale landscape areas is being acknowledge and supported by our Governments.

The Scottish Government has recently set out its expectations for Scotland's two national parks in the context of the twin climate and nature crises. They wish to see them as places that will actively demonstrate nature recovery and the transformational change needed in our approach to land use, providing leadership and showcasing a just transition to net zero in Scotland.

Slide 10 – National Park Partnership Plans

So how are UK National Parks rising to this challenge? In the UK we believe our National Parks are uniquely placed to show how better stewardship of our protected landscapes can help tackle climate climate change and lead the way in restoring nature at scale. By collaborating as a family of 15 National Parks we can deliver positive change at scale and contribute to wider UK net zero and nature targets.

The main vehicle for driving our efforts are our National Park Partnership Plans.. This is a plan that sets out our long-term vision for the National Park, but also the steps we will take to achieve that over the five years of each plan. Our current National Park Partnership plan sets a vision for 2045 for the National Park as being

“a thriving place that is nature positive and carbon negative.”

This plan includes achieving the National Park being a net zero place by at least 2035.

Slide 11 – What do UK National Parks Deliver 1

So what things do our National Park Authorities focus on in their National Park Plans?.

1. we seek to **sequester carbon** in the in the National Park landscape through **restoring our peatlands** or peat soils, which are carbon rich – many peatlands are eroded through overgrazing and emitting carbon into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change
2. we also sequester carbon by **expanding Woodlands and forest cover** across our landscapes – many of our historic upland land uses have seen formerly wooded landscapes cleared for livestock – these initiatives together can help many of our National Parks become carbon sinks for the nation.
3. We're looking to protect not only **protect our habitats and species**, but to expand them. Supporting **more extensive ecosystems** which are healthy and resilient to climate change.
4. we're seeing more extreme weather events, so **natural flood management** is an important part of our work to improve the management of wetlands and floodplains. To help manage floodwaters and reduce the risk of flooding in surrounding areas and in our communities.

Slide 12 – What do UK National Parks Deliver 2

5. We promote **sustainable tourism**, green tourism, which involves sustainable travel and encouraging our visitors to minimise their carbon footprint.
6. We use **education to increase awareness** in the public about the impacts of climate change and the nature crisis and we engage with local communities and businesses, working with them to support more sustainable living, climate resilience and a collective approach to climate action.

Slide 13 – Our Carbon Models

To guide our actions to reach Net Zero the UK National Parks have developed a common methodology to determine our carbon footprints as places and to use this as a basis to develop our route maps and action plans to reach net zero and beyond that to become carbon sinks.

Our methodology gathers data on current energy consumption, visitor travel, agriculture and other activities in our National Parks. We calculate the GHG emissions associated with these activities to determine the overall carbon footprint. This graph shows the carbon footprint for Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. Our overall emissions are over 300K tonnes p.a. As you can see visitor travel to and within the Park is by far the biggest emitter. The blue bar below the line shows the carbon currently sequestered in the land.

Slide 14 – Carbon Reduction Action

From this the two areas we feel we can make the most impacts on as National Parks are on visitor travel and on land use – reducing emissions and locking more carbon into the landscape.

Slide 15 – Our Glidepath to Net Zero and beyond

1. **National Park Partnership Plans**: Informing policies, initiatives and targets for reducing emissions and sequestering carbon
2. **Net Zero Places**: Allowing each National Park to set credible next zero dates with clear pathways to deliver
3. **National and Local Leadership**: Positions National Parks as leaders nationally and locally in driving change and working with partners and communities
4. **Increasing Understanding of the Value of Nature**: Allows us to demonstrate that investing in nature is critical to the future wellbeing and resilience of our society.

Slide 16 – UK National Park Commitments

1. **Carbon Emissions:** to drive action to halve carbon emissions within their landscapes by 2030, all reach net zero by 2040 and become significant net carbon sinks by 2050
2. **Natural Carbon Sinks:** going from 11.5 million tonnes of joint emissions in 2022, to 'soaking up' roughly 3.5 million tonnes instead by 2050
3. **Nature Restoration**: Transform 610,000 Hectares of land into nature friendly areas, restore damaged peatlands, encourage regenerative agriculture and create new woodlands
4. **Sustainability**: Promote sustainable travel, energy use reduction, local food sourcing and resilient communities.

These efforts not only contribute significantly to the UK's effort to achieve its climate targets but also support more climate resilient local communities and rural economies but most importantly significantly restore our lost biodiversity.

Thank you for listening.