



8 FEBRUARY 2018

NATIONAL PARKS AND NATIONAL PARK CITIES

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Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, and a warm welcome to another of my environmentally-themed lectures. This is the fourth talk for this year, and I am, as ever, grateful to the Frank Jackson Foundation for sponsoring my Professorship.

Tonight, I would initially like to take us on a little journey into some of Britain's most scenic areas, to explore their particular characteristics and to consider how we are or are not protecting them through the mechanism of designating 'National Parks'. I will look at some of the controversies that surround the activities that take place within National Parks, and in the areas just beyond their boundaries. Then I will return us to London where thinking is now going on about whether a related 'National Park City' status for the metropolis would be advantageous. I hope that the photography, drawn from a wide range of sources, will brighten up a dark evening here in Holborn, and that my thoughts will also at least illuminate you a little. Some UK National Parks are truly extraordinary and wonderful, in many different ways.

The UK's National Parks include some of our most loved landscapes. Around 10% of England, Scotland and Wales (not Northern Ireland) has been designated as National Park, broadly for its scenic value – that heady mix of geology, climate, ecology, water and land use that makes for a memorable scene. It's almost a fifth of the land area of Wales. Here we see typical English countryside in Northumbria and the Peak District. These areas have also been designated in order to protect them from the pressures of modern life, to preserve them for future generations, about which I will say more in a few minutes. But unlike many of the 113,000 National Parks elsewhere in the world, UK parks are neither owned by the state, nor are they intact in terms of 'natural' environment. Both of these areas clearly show strong impacts from local people having cultivated the land today and in the past, albeit dwarfed by the grandeur of the rocks and rivers. And in addition to the impact of local farmers and residents, over 90 million visitors a year arrive to enjoy the scenery in National Parks, particularly in the well-known tourist honeypots around Hadrian's Wall and Derwent Water.

By contrast in the USA, areas such as the awesome Grand Canyon National Park, one of the first Parks in the USA to be so designated, remain in public ownership, and are minimally touched by direct human activity. Despite logging in some forested Parks, large areas are currently almost pristine wilderness. Although that is not universally true, as the photograph of a traffic jam of 'would be' campers in the RVs in a Utah Park shows, these American Parks are necessarily much closer to being wilderness than anything that can be experienced in the UK. Access to them is in some cases restricted by permits, or by charges to enter and stay, and the concept of wilderness is important to Americans. In South America last week, Chile was given some 4.2 million ha of land by a group of American business people, and has consequently designated major new areas as National Parks, treating them in a similar way to the US by removing sheep and fencing, promoting a programme of 'rewilding', and retraining farmers to become conservation officials. It is worth noting that this has followed later in the week by local protests that land was unnecessarily being removed from productive use, which sets the context to the situation in the UK. We are not 'rewilding' our National Parks, nor ostensibly retraining farmers as security guards.



Problems arising from public access do nevertheless also beset UK National Parks, where protection of the 'natural' environment comes into conflict with modern priorities such as urban bypasses. For example the area around Arundel in Sussex has become the subject of major debate within only a few years of the South Downs National Park being designated. Several of the proposed bypass routes remove protected areas of Park, or bisect habitats, creating difficulties for wildlife corridors. The road itself also introduces noise, traffic and light into an area that was formerly rather peaceful. Whether it reduces congestion as a whole remains to be seen. We in the UK tend to be more pragmatic (cavalier, some might say) towards our protected land areas than some other parts of the world. This will be an interesting challenge in relation to the Lake District's new-found status as a World Heritage Site; World Heritage Sites such as Grand Canyon and the Taj Mahal are normally intended to be preserved absolutely in their current state – fossilised, arguably. Whilst the scenery of Loch Lomond is stunning and perhaps could be 'fixed' if it were designated as a World Heritage Site, there would be problems if this approach were attempted elsewhere. And it might not be advisable anyway.

Author George Monbiot, for example, describes some of the UK's National Parks as 'wet deserts' because of their diminished biodiversity, and wholly artificial ecosystems, and suggests that preservation in this state is actually not desirable. On average, Parks do contain much higher than average proportions of the most wildlife-rich habitats such as heaths, fens and ancient woodlands. It is also true that up to 80% of some specific habitats that are priority targets for conservation are within the National Parks and that they are the homes of some specific endangered species such as the fen raft spider seen here, which is currently the subject of a reintroduction programme. But large areas of protected lands are nevertheless not particularly valuable ecologically, having been affected by intensive cultivation. The main problem in reintroducing the fen raft spider, and others endangered species, is the loss of much of the relevant habitats, which is part of a wider problem associated with human pressures on and adjacent to the Parks. This has left a series of protected areas that are too small to be very valuable, and where reintroducing species is likely to fail.

Our ideas of appropriate preservation of scenic and valuable habitats, interestingly, also do not extend to fracking, the extraction of shale gas, since that is permitted by UK law underneath Parks, if not directly in them. Drilling next to the Park, and then injecting fracking fluids sideways at depth under the Park, is however permitted, rather surprisingly since announcements from Government Minister Amber Rudd early in 2015 suggested otherwise. Naturally opinions on the environmental risk and appropriateness of this activity vary, and I illustrate here the conflicting views of the onshore oil and gas industry, the Department for Energy and Climate Change, and Friends of the Earth. Environmental preservation is certainly not an absolute priority in UK National Parks.

Our National Parks are also frequently the site of major controversies amongst local residents, Park users, Park managers, local government and others. Close to Loch Lomond, for instance, disagreements between local residents, an Australian-owned gold mining company, and the Park Authorities, have created difficulties in starting to process gold ore already mined in the area. In due course, the expectation is that 23,000 ounces of gold would be produced, in particular for bespoke Scottish wedding rings. The local residents are mainly in favour of the operation as the production of unique Scottish gold could create well paid jobs and bring an income stream to a rather poor region. Conversely, the Park Authorities, and some residents, are concerned about environmental impact of the spreads of mine tailings on vegetation, pressure from noise and traffic, and possible water pollution from mine drainage.

Close to Honister Pass, in the Lake District National Park, proposals for a zip line to attract adventure tourists also created controversy back in 2012. It was alleged that a zip line would affect parking locally, and would intrude on the views of 'wilderness', or at least of relatively wild environments. The aspirant entrepreneur suggested that the zip line would have minimal impact, and would bring new money to the area, but it has not progressed in the face of objections from local ramblers. By last month, new proposals for eight long zip lines across Thirlmere were being submitted, with environmentalists suggesting that the charms of the area would be destroyed for fell walkers and hikers by the shrieks of the riders. Conversely, in Snowdonia and the Peak District, there are several recreational zip lines and many other forest-based experiences to be bought, attracting thousands of younger visitors and bringing in income, apparently without much opposition. I have to say that these zip lines do look rather fun, though the head down flight position may not be everyone's choice, and coniferous plantations are not 'wilderness' in any conventional interpretation of course.



The Peak District National Park is not all harmony, however. Clashes between off road motor and trail bikers and hikers produced severe animosity, with police involvement and threats of legal action between different types of users of a green lane. A 'green lane', for those who do not already know, is an unpaved road with historic rights of way for motorised vehicles, as well as horses and pedestrians. The conflict generated a wide range of apoplectic exchanges on the web as well as on the trail, particularly since the broadcast of a BBC television programme in 2012. The debate clearly focussed around priorities, but quickly degenerated into abusive messages on both sides. Some messages asserted that trail bikers had a legal right to use these public rights of way, that bikes were less dangerous than horses and dog mess, and their access to these types of exciting routes was anyway limited. Indeed, some were war veterans, with their own businesses and families, and felt that they deserved respect for their pro-biker views. These contrasted with messages suggesting that the hikers were elderly, bigoted, hypocritical, 'grumpy old gits', whose opinions were not important, and worse. Now we may smile at the use of the English language, some of which is decidedly Anglo Saxon in the way it is expressed, but to me it is not clear whose views should have priority. In fact, a majority of cases seem to have been resolved in favour of the hikers, as the website of the 'Friends of the Peak District' celebrates, but even amongst the most strongly worded opinions, there are grains of truth about the bikers position. The last message here, for instance, refers to the winning of access rights for the less privileged users, in the face of opposition from the landowning locals, in the middle of the last century. One suggested solution is to pave the roads, removing the attraction for the off road bikers, but that seems a rather nugatory solution, as presumably no one would prefer that option to the *status quo*.

This latter reference to the Mass Trespass of Kinder Scout ridge in the heart of the Peak District in 1932, is a powerful one. A radical communist-affiliated workers' group from Manchester, the British Workers' Sports Federation, organised a hike through land which was owned by the Duke of Derbyshire. After rendezvousing with a second group of city dwellers from Sheffield, they set off to return to the railway station, but came into violent conflict with gamekeepers and the police. Six men were arrested, and five were sentenced to jail terms of up to six months for 'riotous assembly', rather than for trespassing. This civil disobedience led (after extended Parliamentary deliberation) to the legislation establishing the UK's National Parks, and has been referred to by Lord Hattersley as "The most successful direct action in British history". (I must assume he is excluding the direct actions of the Suffragettes in that assertion). It has also been interpreted as the embodiment of a working class struggle for recreational access to land held by a small number of the privileged class, for the purposes of grouse shooting, and as part of a broader conflict for workers' rights. In fact, the right to roam freely, even within National Parks, remains far from universal in the UK, although the pressure continues to mount.

National Park legislation was set forth in 1949, followed quickly by a series of designations of specific areas after 1951 and continuing until the latest designation of the South Downs in 2010, making fifteen Parks in total, covering about 10% of the land area. It was a hard fought battle to secure National Parks in the UK, but we now have the position that all the areas mentioned in the 1947 Hobhouse Report have been designated; some have taken longer than others to be achieved. The short video extract gives a little more background. The early Parks were characteristically poor agricultural land, but the later ones are clearly not, which is where a lot of the current controversies arise. The Broads is actually a slightly different arrangement, where navigation rights are also protected, but that does not significantly alter the intent and purpose of the law. Twenty three years ago, the law was adjusted to emphasise and clarify the two principal statutory purposes of the Parks, and an ensuing 'duty', which can be summarised as

- Conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage, and
- Promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of national parks by the public

When national parks carry out these purposes they also have the duty to:

- Seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the national parks.

Do note that these three priorities are clearly articulated and distinct, a theme to which I will return in a few minutes. These imperatives nevertheless have the potential to conflict with one another, as I discussed previously in my brief examples. For simplicity I have shown them here as a Venn diagram. If we think of the



case of the 'green lane', where local people are objecting on several grounds to the activities of bikers who are enjoying some of the 'special qualities' of the area (the gradients, and the challenge of sport in a legal off-road location), but green lanes are gradually being removed from use by bikers as a result, then perhaps it is useful to emphasise the changes in balance amongst the three sets here. There may be some deleterious effects of motorised vehicles on local ecology and conservation, but they are probably quite slight overall. However, the weight of local opinion from resident walkers is heavy.

In fact, a principle known as the Sandford Principle is intended to be used in the case of conflicts of this sort, as I have explained this on the slide. We note the Park authorities views that 'Most of the time it is possible to achieve both the original two purposes of the National Parks by good management. Occasionally a situation arises where access for the public is in direct conflict with conservation. Following the ethos of the Sandford principle, the Environment Act 1995 sets down how a priority may be established between conservation and recreational use'.

The Sandford Principle is then summarised as, "*where those two purposes cannot be reconciled by skilful management, conservation should come first*".

There is a raft of other legislation too, protecting specific habitats, species and activities. Of course, in the case of opening a gold mine, where it would be necessary to cover part of the ground with spreads mine tailings, or construct a pseudo 'glacial moraine', then the National Parks conservation priority might not hold. Similarly, if it could be demonstrated in the zip line case that 'enjoyment' and 'access' were very important, then the conservation issue might have to take a seat further back.

However, we may go further than this in unpicking what is intended by the Mission. For example, if we look at the statement about 'natural beauty', we are quickly into difficult territory. Most of the land cover of UK National Parks is not 'natural' in any meaningful sense. In terms of vegetation, 'natural scenery' would principally comprise the ancient beech and oak woodlands of England, or the Atlantic Hazelwoods of the Scottish uplands, which became established in the period following the last Ice Age but were largely removed by human activity in the Bronze Age. We would, of course, not be able to see many of the features that we now enjoy, should we 'rewild' to allow these woodland ecosystems to be re-established. Nor, probably would our farmers and walkers want to see extensive areas re-established as the habitat of wolves, bears and lynx (a fully native British species), even though these too are certainly 'natural' inhabitants. We enjoy the 'chocolate box' agricultural scenery, the sheep, stone walls and cottages of North Yorkshire, for instance, as we see here at sunset. And the landscape of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads is almost entirely a human artefact of pumped drainage, river straightening and peat extraction from the seventeenth century onwards, not natural in any real sense. These areas are no longer drowned under the sea, or even 'rushy, plashy fen', but are often dried out, shrunken and oxidised organic soils resulting from water extraction within, and to a greater extent, beyond the Park Boundaries, and are heavily used for intensive agriculture. They are shedding their stored carbon into the atmosphere at a heck of a rate too. And they have the boats of the wealthy chugging along their artificial channels. Whereas some concept of 'restore' to an arbitrary point might be achievable, 'rewilding' National Parks to some notion of a romantic, pristine past with ancestral ecosystems and top predators roaming around is not, in my opinion, desirable and is anyway impossible.

The internal contradictions of this element of the Mission are too many to describe. Water in National Parks, for instance, is very popular as an element of beautiful scenery, but reservoirs are not in any sense natural. Water is sucked away from several of our National Parks, to supply cities. Buttermere may be a more-or-less natural lake (though its ecology is not), but Thirlmere is managed as a water supply, its levels rising and falling in response to the demands of Manchester, well outside the Park boundaries. For many years, people were excluded from close access, too. Contradictions arise in relation to water and wildlife, as well. Conservation is suggested as an imperative, but angling is permitted in many National Parks, which may not be consistent with preservation of wildlife, at least as individual animals.

Beyond that, although there are some heroic attempts to reintroduce specific endangered species of animals and plants, remember that as a society we judge it appropriate to pay only about £1 each, per year, for the privilege of maintaining National Parks. It is not much, so presumably our Parks are not a priority. In fact, across the UK biodiversity is greatly threatened, and it is difficult to see whether National Park designation has had much



meaningful effect. We have 'Red lists of Threatened Species' but wildlife conservation locally and internationally is problematic. The World Wildlife Fund found in 2014 that from 1970 to 2010, the numbers of 3000 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish have declined by over 50% on average, because of unsustainable human consumption. The UK is no different, and participates in the sixth great extinction event of the Anthropocene. Over the last forty years, for instance, two thirds of our common larger moths have declined, according to Rothamsted's national insect survey, published in 2013, and this has occurred despite the protection nominally afforded by National Parks. Moths are a good indicator of wider problems with habitat protection. There is some evidence that the declines are greater in the south, where National Parks and habitat protection are thinner on the ground, than in the North of Britain, but the protection evidence is not compelling. We want our landscapes and habitats, even in conserved areas nominally of 'natural beauty' to be rather sanitised, and are prepared to see our wild areas and our biodiversity, picked away, little by little, despite the feel-good words of wildlife 'protection'.

And what about intensive sheep farming, wind farms and second homes? One would also have to ask, when looking at these internal contradictions, for whom National Parks actually exist. The National Parks' 'Mission' makes specific reference to the economic and social wellbeing of local communities. Local occupancy clauses have been used to try to mitigate some of the worst of the exclusions for local residents in National Parks, but desirable places, with attractive landscapes whether or not they are natural, will feel economic pressures of two sorts. For some local people, second homes will drive up prices and reduce their chances of buying houses within the National Park. Conversely, the arrival from near or far of boat owners, zipliners, climbers and mountain bikers brings money to the cafes, restaurants and shops of the areas, and so there is a strong pressure to accommodate their aspirations, even at the expense of the local ecology. That third imperative of National Parks relating to the social and economic interests of local communities (and what is 'a community'? Can a collection of second homes be a community, or a few people working in a gold mine or elderly hikers walking a green lane?) may not be achievable in conjunction with the first and second. So consequently tourism is accommodated, facilities constructed, and wildness driven back.

Sarah Hall writes about the Lake District National Park, in the Guardian newspaper last summer, and with Wordsworth in mind, 'The alchemy of solitude, imagination and dramatic landscape is undoubtedly inspiring and tonic. Great poets and painters of the past created a valuable, once revolutionary, now definitive legacy here. Walkers and nature lovers flock. But are our wildish spots to transform fully into therapeutic leisure centres and museums?' These areas have some of the lowest wages in the UK and are dependent upon tourism, which will necessarily take away from the broad sense of 'conservation', even if we could agree what is appropriate to conserve.'

Have our National Parks succeeded in fulfilling their Missions? The author George Monbiot says that they have not, at least in some areas. There is, of course, the danger of asserting the 'what if' in looking at this from an experimental perspective, since we can only speculate what might have happened without the existence of National Parks. Perhaps there would have been more inappropriate development (although we do have other legislation to prevent that)? Possibly wildlife might have been driven away to an even greater extent than has occurred already? We can look at boundaries, at what has happened inside, versus what has happened outside, but this has its own dangers of interpretation too, as our fracking and water extraction case studies illustrate. Boundaries can introduce other challenges too, displacing activities to just beyond the boundaries, or encouraging particular agricultural practices to operate more intensively in one area, than another, and inflicting greater damage as a result. George Monbiot talks of the loss of soils in the face of intensive sheep farming, the reducing role of uplands in reducing the generation of damaging flood runoff, and the loss of forests, and draws the conclusion that all is not well, and that the designation of the Lake District as a World Heritage Site will lead to even greater damage through fossilisation of the landscape. There are a lot of lessons to learn.

I want now to turn to the issue of London, a proposed National Park City. This is an initiative with roots far back in the history of environmental protection, at least into the mid nineteenth century as the slide shows. The latest initiative has a number of priorities, which can be summarised broadly as

- Connect more people to nature and the outdoors, improving their health, wellbeing and social cohesion



- Create more high quality green and blue space in London, delivering improvements for wildlife, people's enjoyment and an attractive and sustainable environment for living and working in
- Promote the identity of London as the world's first National Park City, helping residents and visitors to appreciate the potential for a rich cultural life anchored in its outdoor heritage
- Link people to the national and international family of national parks and other protected areas

It is now widely supported by Mayor Khan, a majority of local Councillors (over 1000), and a large number of other bodies. But not everyone.

Through the lens of the National Park objectives, will they be met. Internal contradictions, Evidence may well be lacking, for example it is not yet proven that access to green space actually improves health and wellbeing, at least in a way that satisfied the medical fraternity. .

There will be an International Event for those interested in the concept in 2019, working with the Mayor.

- The spiritual wellbeing of our cities is being eroded by the creeping corporatisation and privatisation of its public spaces, the author Will Self has warned.
- Addressing the first “public space intervention” to protest against the fact that sizeable chunks of London are falling into corporate hands, Self said the trend was having a deleterious impact on the capital's residents.
- “What people don't understand is that it does affect you psychically. It constrains you in how you think about what you can do in a space, and it constrains your imagination. It's like a condensing of time and money and space – it needs to be resisted.”
- Writer Anna Minton said that in London the proposed Garden Bridge was symbolic of the trend, pointing to the fact that despite using £60m of public money it would be plagued by corporate restrictions: cyclists would have to dismount to cross while social gatherings, playing musical instruments, making a speech, releasing balloons and many other pursuits would be banned.
- Asked what he thought of the Garden Bridge, Self replied: “It could be great – it will be shit.”
- Described as both a “public space intervention” and a “mass trespass”, the protest included a series of speakers defending the rights of urban residents as free-roaming citizens. Among them was comedian Mark Thomas, who attacked the coalition government's introduction of the Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) which allows councils to make illegal activities such as sleeping rough in an attempt to drive homeless people from town or city centres.
- Campaigners gathered on a patch of grass near City Hall on the banks of the Thames, chosen because it gives visitors the illusion of being a public space but is in fact controlled by private security, with its own set of regulations. Tourists can be admonished just for taking a photo, as Assembly Member Jenny Jones discovered while taking a picture of her place of work.
- Gesturing to the surrounds, Self said: “How anybody can think this is one of the nicest parts of London. It can only be because they have been deprived of the capacity to make free choices of their own: you're told what to do in a space like this, the very architecture tells us.”