

National Parks for nature recovery

Introduction

Scotland has two national parks: Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park (created in 2002) and the Cairngorms National Park (created in 2003). Over 17,000 people live in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, and over 18,000 in the Cairngorms National Park.

We need a fresh approach to national parks in Scotland that is fit to meet the challenges facing us. The Scottish Rewilding Alliance considers that the overarching purpose of a national park should be the restoration of nature, in order to halt biodiversity loss, mitigate the effects of climate breakdown, support local communities and contribute to national net zero and biodiversity goals.



We cannot reach net zero in any time frame unless we restore nature too. Our current national parks have already started on a journey which is leading towards the restoration of nature. They are undertaking numerous actions to increase biodiversity in the parks. By redefining their overarching purpose, we as a nation can give them the clear remit to continue on that path, setting a new direction for the next iteration of their strategies. We can also give the new national park a clear and uncompromised vision - of restored and thriving nature - from the outset.

Our national parks are home to tens of thousands of people. By restoring and rewilding our national parks, we are creating an opportunity to transition the parks towards nature-based economies. The job of our national parks is to create places where people and nature do not just co-exist, but thrive alongside each other. This can only be achieved through a just transition.

Three quarters of people in Scotland want to see wilder national parks, with areas devoted to rewilding. In an opinion poll carried out by market research agency Survation in Scotland, 74% of people agreed with the call to make national parks wilder. We need a fresh approach to national parks in Scotland that is fit to meet the challenges facing us. The Scottish Rewilding Alliance wants to see more national parks in Scotland, restoring nature and championing nature-based economies.

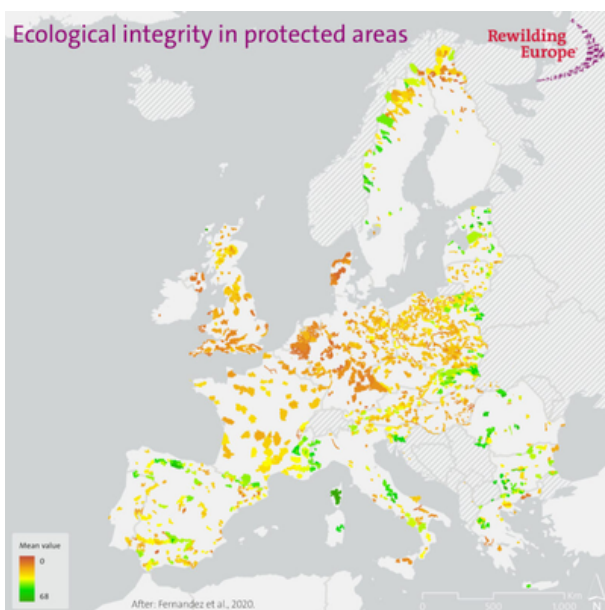
National parks around the world

There are thousands of national parks across the world, taking many different forms. In many other countries, national parks consist of vast areas of wilderness set aside for nature. In Scotland, the vast majority of our landscape is the result of thousands of years of human activity. Our model of national parks is comparable to Denmark, where many of the national parks cover largely cultivated areas.

Loch Lomond and the Trossachs covers 1,865 square kilometres (720 square miles). The Cairngorms covers 4,528 square kilometres (1,748 square miles). These are comparable to the larger national parks in the rest of Europe - although many national parks in Europe and the rest of the world are far smaller.

Denmark, with a similar population to Scotland but just over half its landmass, has six national parks. Austria is the same size as Scotland, with approximately 3.5 million more people, and also has six national parks. Slovakia, with a similar population and with a landmass slightly bigger than Denmark, has nine. Sierra Leone, slightly smaller than Scotland and with a comparable population to Austria, has 8. Even with 1 new national park, Scotland will still be lagging behind many other countries.

Across Europe, national parks are on a journey towards nature recovery. Retezat and Domogled-Valea Cernei National Parks in Romania, for example, have signed agreements with Rewilding Romania to increase rewilding efforts and support the area's free-ranging bison.



This analysis from Rewilding Europe shows the ecological integrity, or ecological health, of protected areas across (then) EU member states.

A map showing the ecological integrity of protected areas (>1000 ha) within EU Member States (Jelle Harms/Rewilding Europe)



Fit for the future: updating the National Parks Act

The original National Parks (Scotland) Act is nearly a quarter of a century old. The legislation sets out four key aims for Scotland's national parks: to conserve and enhance natural and cultural heritage; to promote the sustainable use of natural resources; promote understanding and enjoyment of the areas; and to promote sustainable social and economic development.

There is no point in creating new national parks unless we create better national parks. At this point in time, that has to mean creating parks where nature is the priority. We also need our national parks to demonstrate how people and nature can thrive alongside each other. In order to do this, we need to reset how people and nature relate to each other.

We cannot reach net zero in any time frame unless we restore nature too. Nature sustains us - the focus of all our efforts should be repairing the damage we've done. Our two existing parks have had two decades to develop an approach that puts nature first. Our new national park will not have this luxury - an overarching purpose of leadership of nature recovery and a just transition will give them the best chance of quickly becoming a valuable tool in the battle against nature and climate breakdown.

"Rewilding means enabling nature's recovery, whilst reflecting and respecting Scotland's society and heritage, to achieve more resilient and autonomous ecosystems.

Rewilding is part of a set of terms and approaches to landscape and nature management; it differs from other approaches in seeking to enable natural processes which eventually require relatively little management by humans.

As with all landscape management, rewilding should be achieved by processes that engage and ideally benefit local communities, in line with Scotland's Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement, to support a Just Transition."

Defining Rewilding for Scotland's Public Sector

Prepared by the James Hutton Institute for the Scottish Government

National parks not notional parks

Over half of the park area in the Cairngorms National Park is protected by a landscape designation. Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park has 73 designated special nature conservation sites and 60 Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Approximately a fifth of these sites are not on a favourable condition. Increasingly, people are recognising the benefits of managing land for nature at nature's scale, rather than portioning land off into small habitats that might be managed for specific purposes or species. A national park offers an opportunity to do this.

A number of factors affect the ecological integrity of our existing parks. Intensive upland management practices such as muirburn, overgrazing by high populations of deer and large numbers of invasive species have a large impact on how the land around us operates and looks. Climate breakdown will also have an impact on our parks, as well as the rest of Scotland. Animal species may need to seek out new habitats in order to survive. Some tree species may struggle while others thrive in new areas.

The major land uses in the Cairngorms National Park include managed moorland (including for field sports), farming (rough grazing), conservation, forestry and recreation. Loch Lomond and the Trossachs is 65% agriculture; 27% woodland cover, including commercial forestry as well as other types of woodland; and 7% water. There can be conflict between these land uses. For example, one landowner might manage their land to support deer stalking as a cultural and economic activity. A neighbouring landowner might be managing their land for conservation and woodland expansion, which necessitates low numbers of deer.

Our national parks should showcase the best of Scottish landscapes, and be home to thriving rural economies.

National Parks in Scotland deliver on their aims through national park plans. The latest plan from the Cairngorms National Park contains bold ambitions. We need to empower them to deliver on these plans. The new national park will need to catch up quickly - by having nature as its core purpose from the start we can allow it to do so.

People and parks

Our national parks are home to tens of thousands of people. By restoring and rewilding our national parks, we are creating an opportunity to transition the parks towards nature-based economies. The job of our national parks is to create places where people and nature do not just co-exist, but thrive alongside each other. This can only be achieved through a just transition.

People are integral to wilder landscapes. For many people, living in a wilder national park will mean having a job tied to nature restoration, whether they are restoring naturally-flowing rivers, mixing stock management with wildlife guiding, running community engagement activities, carrying out monitoring and research, leading recreational fishing trips, or learning from the Norwegian model to pioneer wild field sports. And more people will visit the area to see the resurgent wildlife, visit eco-tourism projects, and spend their money in local cafes, pubs and shops. Rewilding and 're-peopling' can and must go hand in hand.

Rewilding Britain research looking at rewilding sites showed that over a period of 10 years rewilding led to a 54% increase in jobs and a thirteenfold increase in volunteering positions.

A just transition towards a nature-based economy should be a guiding principle of our national parks. If our national parks can rise to the challenge of enabling communities to flourish as nature is restored, they will be securing the future of the parks. We all have to respond to the climate and nature crises. Change is coming. Given the chance, people adapt to change: it becomes their new normal. Empowered communities defending a restored environment, where life flourishes, should be the ultimate goal when national park authorities interact with communities.

In order to achieve this vision, our national parks need to be welcoming places for people to live. In order for this to be true, our parks need affordable, secure, warm housing; jobs that provide a reliable living; thriving local services; good transport connections, including active travel and public transport. Communities should also have a real and lasting say in the evolution of the places around them - through the medium of co-design, rather than consultation. All this has to take place alongside the large-scale restoration of nature and rewilding of our parks.

What is a Nature-Based Economy?

“Rewilding Britain defines a Nature-Based Economy as one which helps nature heal and flourish and supports prosperous communities. We propose that nature-based economic areas need to be established across at least 30% of Britain by 2030 if nature and climate targets are to be met in any meaningful way.

Importantly, Nature-Based Economies should not be achieved at the expense of intensifying production beyond sustainable levels or as an excuse not to reduce carbon emissions or to increase biodiversity loss in surrounding higher resource-use areas.

In Nature-Based Economy areas, existing rural and coastal enterprises and production sectors should be incentivised to transition towards a high-nature value model. While maintaining some traditional activities, they would also create higher-value products with an emphasis on local provenance in agriculture and forestry. High quality nature tourism (and sustainable forms of hunting, where applicable) would be offered to attract visitors and spending in the area, creating new businesses and employment opportunities within the wider economy.”

Rewilding and the Rural Economy
Rewilding Britain

Sign the Rewilding Nation Charter

We're calling on everyone who shares our hopes and sense of urgency to make their voices heard by signing the Rewilding Nation Charter – urging our political leaders to make this declaration to benefit us all and future generations. The nature and climate crises can feel overwhelming, but we can all make a difference by uniting behind a clear message.

Restore. Revitalise. Rewild.

rewild.scot/charter