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## National Parks as Countryside Management: A 21st Century Dilemma

Bell, J., & Stockdale, A. (2019). National Parks as Countryside Management: A 21st Century Dilemma. In M. Scott, N. Gallent, & M. Gkartzios (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Rural Planning* (pp. 437-445). Routledge.

**Published in:**  
The Routledge Companion to Rural Planning

**Document Version:**  
Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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## Chapter

### National Parks as Countryside Management: A 21st Century Dilemma

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#### ABSTRACT

National parks were first established a century and a half ago and remain a popular means to protect and manage highly prized landscapes. This chapter reviews their transition from the primary purpose of protection towards delivery of a broader set of countryside management aims. Evolving national park models embrace a strong sustainability agenda within multifunctional and increasingly contested landscapes. This presents challenges for contemporary rural planning and governance. These include the management of competing traditional and new rural economy functions and associated stakeholder interests. The chapter provides insights into the economic and social forces at work in managing contemporary national parks. It seeks to contribute to ongoing debates about the role and mechanisms of national park management in the 21st century.

#### INTRODUCTION

The concept of national park designation is based on the principle of preserving park areas for the nation. Since the designation of Yellowstone in 1872, national parks have evolved considerably in their type and form. Originally a wilderness and conservation concept, national parks now integrate a wider set of management objectives (conservation, recreation and economic development). As a result, "there is no single model of national park" (Frost and Hall 2009: 11). Their evolution has paralleled the changing role of the countryside and the emergence of the sustainability agenda. A New Rural Economy (Shucksmith 2012) is evident, characterised by an increasingly consumptive and commodified rural space (Woods 2011). In this context, meeting the challenges of sustainable development has proved problematic for national park management. Parks have been criticised in the past for prioritising conservation of the natural environment at the expense of rural development needs (Bishop et al. 1998; McCarthy et al. 2002). Today there are fears that rural development (such as, extractive industries) alongside market based conservation strategies are prioritised in the context of economic austerity (Cortes-Vasquez 2017). Reconciling competing land uses and stakeholder interests within national park boundaries, therefore, continue to present challenges for contemporary rural planning and national park management. This chapter reports on the changing role of national parks in increasingly contested rural landscapes, and on the on-going and emerging dilemmas for rural planning. While multiple challenges could be reported, here we choose to focus on two: the installation of energy infrastructure and the emergence of a natural capital approach to countryside conservation.

## **NATIONAL PARK - AN EVOLVING CONCEPT**

The original 19th century wilderness and conservation model of national park in the US stemmed from a desire to protect 'natural monuments' (Dilsaver 1997) from human influence. Wilderness based national park models were brought into state ownership and managed through a system of resource use restrictions. While intended to be enjoyed by the people, this was only under controlled conditions. This model of national park corresponds to IUCN (1994: 19) category II areas which are defined as:

"A natural area of land and/or sea, designated to (a) protect the ecological integrity of one or more ecosystems for present and future generations, (b) exclude exploitation or occupation inimical to the purposes of designation of the area, and (c) provide a foundation for spiritual, scientific, educational and visitor opportunities, all of which must be environmentally and culturally compatible."

The legacy of this wilderness model has been the development of 'conservation islands' and a distorted appreciation of the relationship between nature and society (IUCN 2002; IUCN 2008). These criticisms, and the core principle of managing land in the national interest, remain central to national park debates today, particularly in relation to the challenges of reconciling national/ local and public/private interests.

In contrast to Runte's (1987) 'worthless lands' hypothesis (alleging that US parks were only designated because they had no alternative economic uses) the European countryside is both inhabited and cultivated. Many European landscapes are the product of centuries of resource use activity and encapsulate the co-evolution of nature and society (Phillips 2005). Therefore, the wilderness model was deemed unsuitable (Barker and Stockdale 2008) and a multi-purpose national park, recognising the importance of nature as well as the needs of local communities, was required. This heralded a 'new paradigm' for protected areas and led to the creation of the IUCN category V protected landscape/seascape (Locke and Dearden 2005):

"... [where] the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cultural value, and often with high biological diversity" (IUCN 1994: 22).

Even though they are multi-purpose, European parks still perceivably adopt an "overriding emphasis on environmental management, protection and enhancement" with social and economic issues being of secondary importance (McCarthy and Lloyd 2002: 667). Zoning is commonly introduced to minimise land use conflicts (Bishop et al. 1998; McCarthy and Lloyd 2002), whereby a highly restrictive central protection zone is typically surrounded by peripheral zones where some development and recreational activity is permitted.

The UK has taken the evolutionary development of national park a step further. Initially, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949) designated national parks in England and Wales (the first in the Peak District in 1951) with two statutory aims similar to the early wilderness model: to conserve natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage and, to promote opportunities for understanding and enjoyment. Like in the US, the Act was introduced in response to concerns about

unplanned rural development (in this case, forestry, housing, quarrying) and a lack of public access to scenic areas (MacEwan and MacEwan 1982). Unlike in the US, lands within the designated national parks remained in private ownership reflecting past and intended future management practices. Each designation is managed by a National Park Authority which also operates as a planning authority for the park. Designation under the 1949 Act imposed national conservation priorities in the 'public interest'; this restricted development and arguably impacted negatively on local communities due to issues of housing affordability, employment availability, and population sustainability (Marshall and Simpson 2009; Richards and Satsangi 2004). Then in the 1990s, owing to the influence of the sustainability agenda, a duty to foster the economic and social well-being of park residents was placed on national park authorities (but not as an additional statutory aim). The Environment Act (1995) and (English) Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) gave greater prominence to development within parks but not at the expense of conservation: in situations of conflict between the park's aims, greater weight is given to 'conserve natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage'. Nevertheless,

"...the remit of the national parks - pursuing the economic and social wellbeing of communities alongside environmental management - is a thoroughly modern concept. ... In this sense, the [National] Parks are 'exemplars of sustainable development'" (Arup 2013: 9).

Sustainable development principles are even more firmly embedded in the model of national park introduced in Scotland by the National Park (Scotland) Act 2000. Two further statutory aims accompany those already associated with English and Welsh national parks: 'promotion of sustainable use of natural resources' and 'promotion of the sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities'. While "[t]his signalled a firm legislative commitment to sustainable development" (Bell and Stockdale 2015: 216), like in England and Wales, greater weight is given to conservation in situations where irreconcilable conflict arises between the four Park aims. Moreover, in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, the Park Authority became the planning authority, while for the Cairngorms National Park planning powers remain with the local authorities (councils). Therefore, arrangements for the delivery of planning functions have also evolved.

Protected areas increasingly function as instruments for regional development (Mose 2007). National park purposes have also evolved to the extent that many are now designated as much for their economic potential as for their conservation function (Fredman et al. 2007). This approach is typified in Scotland where national parks include an explicit socio-economic aim and potentially represent the starkest contrast yet to the original wilderness model of national park. A 'new conservation' paradigm has emerged representing a re-conceptualisation of conservation based on particular interpretations and applications of sustainable development; typically an approach which shifts from state to a community-led focus and the inclusion of neo-liberal ideology to 'make conservation pay' (Brown 2002 and 2003). Tourism, for example, is a means to contribute towards the financial sustainability of protected areas (Spenceley et al. 2017). Evolution of the national park concept also reflects a 'new rural' paradigm (Horlings and Marsden 2014) and the emergence of a New Rural Economy (Shucksmith 2012) including closer links between the urban and rural economy, a multi-sector place-based approach to rural development, and an increasingly consumptive countryside. Indeed, 'national park' is now a globally recognised brand label and offers a structure

through which commodified tourism can operate (Reinius and Fredman 2007). However, national parks as popular tourist attractions, according to La Page (2010) and others, raise concerns about the natural environment.

'New conservation' recognises that the role of government has evolved from 'controller and provider' to 'facilitator and enabler' through the involvement of non-state actors in decision-making; participatory forms of governance are regarded as essential for effective protected area management (Lockwood 2010; Worboys et al. 2015). Indeed, national park governance today involves co-management, negotiating diverse and frequently competing stakeholder interests, particularly public and private interests as well as local and national interests, and achieving an appropriate balance between centralised and decentralised decision making. Accordingly, partnership working has become a key feature of both rural development and national park management (Hamin 2001; Blackstock et al. 2017; Tatum et al. 2017). However, within such governance structures, power dynamics often determine which stakeholder interests exert greatest influence. While the UK planning system is built around mediating public interests and private property rights (Cullingworth et al. 2015) and includes collaborative and participatory approaches to accommodate diverse stakeholder interests (Healey 2006), modern-day multifunctional national parks present on-going - and mounting - planning and management challenges.

## **CONTEMPORARY PLANNING CHALLENGES**

Protected areas are facing profound challenges in the context of economic austerity promoted in the global North since the 2008 financial crisis. The challenge is potentially exacerbated by the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union; for example, in the wake of Brexit, the UK government is proposing to boost the economy with large infrastructure projects in the countryside (Kentish 2017; Phillips 2017). Therefore, contextual circumstances (state divestment in conservation, reduced public funding and Brexit) have arguably furthered the potential for conflict between nature conservation and economic development. Squeezed public sector budgets means national parks are increasingly conceived of in terms of the services they provide to society (Tatum et al. 2017). The imperative to find new ways of making conservation 'pay its way' has resulted in the extractive economies and market based conservation strategies taking on a new importance (Cortez-Vazquez 2017). This is especially apparent in the UK, in the form of energy infrastructure and the growing prominence of the 'natural capital' agenda in public policy. Each of these issues are now discussed in turn.

### **National parks and energy infrastructure**

The social acceptance of energy infrastructure in the countryside has been a topic of controversy for some time (Ellis 2009). For example, the erection of wind turbines created 'green on green' tensions (Warren 2009), whereby conservationists are divided between those who cite local landscape impact versus those who endorse the pursuit of global climate goals (Cowell 2016). However, the use of the countryside for energy production has taken on a new dimension in the UK with the emergence of the fracking agenda. Attempts to exploit shale gas deposits for the production of gas and oil through the process of hydraulic fracturing or 'fracking' could be viewed as a controversial form of countryside commodification. Indeed, conflict rather than consensus has become a common feature of the countryside, as evidenced during the late 1990's/early 2000's by the

mobilisation of major protests around issues such as hunting, rural service provision and the future of farming (Woods 2003). Over a decade later the countryside is still typified by conflict, protest and discontent, as evidenced by recent anti-fracking protests (Pidd 2017; BBC 2017). National parks are not immune from the fracking policy controversy. While UK legislation prohibits surface drilling within national park boundaries, conservationists have expressed concern at the Onshore Hydraulic Fracturing (Protected Areas) Regulations 2016 which enables horizontal drilling 'under' national parks in ground at least 1,200 metres below the surface (Delebarre and Smith 2017; Gosden 2017). Not only could fracking equipment positioned adjacent to national park boundaries disturb the unique landscape setting of these designated areas, but such a precedent could pave the way for future above ground operations within national parks.

The fracking debate is ensconced in a 'framing contest', whereby supporters and opponents vie for acceptance of their interpretative frames in the public consciousness and in public policy (Hilson 2015). Recent analysis suggests that the positive government framing of fracking is overriding local environmental concerns and planning authorities in England continue to overlook the climate implications of embarking on further fossil fuel exploration in the form of fracking derived gas (Hilson 2015; Short and Szolucha 2017). Short and Szolucha (2017: 11) argue that post-Brexit, already "austerity ravaged councils" will be under increasing pressure to approve commercial fracking against the wishes of local people. If permitted on a commercial scale, fracking could dramatically and rapidly transform parts of rural Britain. Assessing the influence of power in shaping the articulation of local interests, examining how the inevitable conflict between rural stakeholders is managed and gauging the extent to which local interests get to determine how this issue progresses (against a backdrop of national economic prerogatives), represent emerging areas of inquiry for rural planning research.

Clearly, shale gas deposits within national parks are an exploitable resource which could contribute to national economic priorities. In the context of nationally imposed economic pressures, quantifying the long-term economic contribution of well maintained natural assets can help challenge 'exploitive' activities that typically carry a powerful short-term economic argument. Therefore, market based conservation strategies can help support the case for policy and investment that protect the natural environment.

### **National parks and the natural capital approach**

Market based conservation strategies emerged out of a neo-liberal rationale which suggests that, in order to protect nature, it is necessary to quantify the economic value of protected nature and commodify the ecosystem services that flow from nature (Cortez-Vazquez 2017). One such approach is based on the concept of 'natural capital' which is understood as the natural assets (including geology, soil, air, water) which provide the services upon which human life depends (World Forum on Natural Capital 2017). It has been claimed that a natural capital approach, which quantifies natural assets and any changes to this capital in a systematic way, can contribute to better informed decisions about land use, conservation and human development (Bateman et al. 2013; Agarwala et al. 2014).

Natural capital assessments have been championed as an efficient, practical and readily understandable approach to supporting more effective policy and investment decisions. Dieter

Helm, Chair of the UK Natural Capital Committee which advises the UK government, equates the natural capital contained within national parks to more widely recognised examples of economic development:

“The national parks are every bit as much a part of our economy as a jaguar car factory is, or a high speed rail route or a block of new houses; these [national parks] are part of the fabric of our economy and they need to be paid for” (Helm 2016).

A natural capital approach is considered integral to the delivery of the UK’s 25 Year Environment Plan, currently being developed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). In its advice to DEFRA on the 25 Year Plan, the UK Natural Capital Committee (UKNCC 2017: 18) recommends assessment of natural capital assets within national parks to inform policy and investment decisions:

"England’s National Parks contain very significant natural capital...where practical, each National Park should quantify and value the main natural capital assets in its area, using the accounting framework recommended by the Committee in its first term. Valuation should play a key part in the assessment of natural capital investment options."

The UKNCC also proposes that in order to further protect and enhance the UK’s stock of natural capital "consideration should be given to the creation of new national parks"(UKNCC 2017: 18).

Through the adoption of natural capital approaches in national planning and environmental policy it could be argued that the ethos underpinning protected area management in the UK is entering a new phase. If the guidance offered by the UKNCC (UKNCC 2017) is adhered to, and delivered, through DEFRA’s 25 Year Environment Plan, approaches to national park management could move beyond the conventional sustainable development approaches which have dominated the last two decades. A natural capital approach, which views the environment as a key economic asset, will result in existing, and potentially new, national parks attempting to frame their contribution to society in predominantly economic terms. For example, the Lake District National Park Authority has identified the opportunity to become an ‘early adopter’ of natural capital approaches to inform Local Plan development and the pursuit of strategic objectives. Meanwhile, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds applied a natural capital approach to its English Nature Reserves. While recognising that care needs to be taken to ensure that the approach does not neglect the intangible benefits of nature, the report asserts that a "natural capital approach needs to be at the heart of the way decisions are made by both the private and public sectors" (Bolt et al. 2017: 4).

UK National parks are likely to embrace market based conservation strategies to varying degrees over the next decade. In some instances, this will lead to further entrenchment of the conflict between economic and environmental interests. A commitment to market based conservation may leave national parks vulnerable to the forces of the neo-liberal economic agenda. For example, the natural capital approach can use economic arguments to justify investment in, and protection of the environment; however, financial calculations could have the opposite effect, making a stronger case for development rather than protection. The possibility of the latter is potentially heightened given that the economic case for environmental protection is strengthened by a longer-term assessment,

while politicians typically work to shorter-term economic priorities. Furthermore, the natural capital approach adopts compensatory measures or off-setting in instances where natural asset loss cannot be avoided. On the one hand, this approach could benefit the environment by securing compensatory measures for developments that would not otherwise make a contribution to the environment. On the other hand, due to the implementation of compensatory measures, the case for development (which would not otherwise be permitted) could be strengthened. It is not inconceivable that justification for perceivably inappropriate or controversial forms of development (such as fracking) could be strengthened by a form of off-setting.

## **CONCLUSION**

National parks have evolved in their purpose and management and now encapsulate a diversity of landscapes; they accommodate multiple land uses which reflect historical and contemporary interactions between society and nature. Traditionally, nationally defined understandings of the 'public interest' were deemed to favour conservation at the expense of the everyday needs of park residents. In the current context, national understandings of the 'public interest' have altered dramatically towards the pursuit of economic growth as embedded in national UK policy. These contemporary understandings of the 'public interest' therefore threaten the traditional purposes of national park management. As a result, Maidment (2016) detected National Park Authorities increasingly having to promote conservation purposes back to government (government was historically the main proponent of the conservation focussed public interest narrative). This is particularly pertinent within the context of contemporary energy infrastructure. Recent policy developments, such as the adoption of the natural capital approach, suggest some National Park Authorities are also subscribing to economic understandings of the 'public interest', to justify investment in, and protection of, the environment.

Tensions around how to define, and negotiate between multiple and often opposing interpretations of, what constitutes the public interest will continue to challenge decision making approaches within UK National Parks (Maidment 2016). For example, the issue of 'public interest' and the 'common good' has come to the fore in discussions about post-Brexit subsidy models to replace, for example, the Single Farm Payment. The idea of a subsidy model based on 'public money for public benefit' is gaining traction (WCL 2017; Harrabin 2017). Natural capital assessments represent one option for measuring existing levels, and any changes to the level of natural assets. National parks offer an opportunity to pilot a natural capital approach to inform future investment and policy decisions.

Regardless of the extent to which the 'language' of natural capital is embraced in UK and specifically national parks policy, it remains to be seen whether the 'approach' will be effectively adopted to influence decision making and ultimately support conservation objectives or add to the commodification of an already commodified national park concept.

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