

Letter from Scotland

On a recent visit to Galloway, I looked across the Solway Firth from the Southerness lighthouse and saw the hills of the Lake District mocking us. Their cloud banners seemed to be saying: "Scotland, wha's your national parks?"

Good question. We only have two, Loch Lomond and the Cairngorms. And they were formed only 20 years ago when the new Scottish Parliament discovered that it was a Scots émigré in America, John Muir from Dunbar, who invented national parks. England has had them since 1951. There are now 10 in England, three in Wales and just the two late-comers in Scotland.



Southernness, Scotland's oldest lighthouse 1749
Not to worry, The Scottish Government has promised there will be a third national park by the spring of 2026. And therein hangs a tale.

Galloway is an obvious choice, being a so-far ignored, quiet, beautiful part of country, stretching from the Solway Firth to Moffat hills and from the Irish Sea to Dumfries. But then, so are the Borders and the North West Coast. Looming over all of this is a debate over national parks themselves. Should the whole of Scotland, outside the main cities, be a national park ?

Britain's national parks are unlike many others in the world because the land is still owned by the original farmers or estate owners. The park authorities simply have the powers to control development and have the resources to handle the growing public demand for walking, camping, cycling, and tourism. There is then a balance to be struck between the interests of the people living in the national park, the interests of the visitors and the interests of the planet in protecting the environment.

The same judgement of Solomon is needed in the similar debate over marine protected areas. The government wants to designate 10 per cent of Scottish waters no-fishing zones – which are not in the short-term interest of the fishing communities but are in the long-term interest of the environment.

Other live debates are taking place over biodiversity and wildlife protection, with land-owners, farmers, golf course tycoons and gamekeeper on one side the fence and environmentalists and city dwellers on the other. Such debates frighten politicians into bland reassurances or worse still, uneasy compromises.

The questions of land and sea have rung through Scottish history since the bitter days of the "Clearances" in the 18th and 19th centuries. Traditional crofters were forced off what they thought was common land by landlords keen to make money out of sheep farming, grouse and deer estates and modern agricultural developments.

The legacy of those days lingers on in the Land Reform Act of 2003 which established the “right to roam” over land anywhere in Scotland, provided no harm is done, and the right for a community to buy its own land. There have been some 25 community land-buyouts in recent times, ranging from estates, forests and islands, to small projects in the cities, such as my own community centre here in south Edinburgh, Bridgend Farmhouse.



Lorna Slater. Photo © 2023 Martin P. McAdam
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On Thursday Lorna Slater, one of the two Green ministers in The Scottish Government, launched a public consultation on national parks, asking for people’s views on the criteria for park designation, which rather skirts round the vital question of where the third national park is to be. The Greens have to be so careful not to frighten the horses or their shaky coalition with the SNP will fall apart. There are already signs of strains over the bottle re-cycling scheme, marine protection zones, farming subsidies and the transition away

from oil and gas.

Rishi Sunak dived into the North Sea debate by declaring, at Prime Minister's Question time, that it "makes no sense not to invest in the resources we have here at home". It's being taken as a sign that the UK Government will soon give the go-ahead for the Norwegian company Equinor to begin developing the large Rosebank oil and gas field off Shetland.



John Muir and President Teddy Roosevelt, Yosemite, 1903

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He famously took President Teddy Roosevelt on a camping trip to the Sierra Nevada in 1903 to persuade him to create the world's first national park.

She'll need to find room in her tent for Rishi Sunak and her own First Minister Humza Yousaf.

