

SCOTLAND'S FIRST COASTAL AND MARINE NATIONAL PARK

A BRIEFING PAPER

Background

The Scottish Executive says it has a long term commitment to the creation of a Coastal and Marine National Park.

The Candidate Areas (copied from SE website) are: -

- Solway
- Argyll Islands and Coast
- Ardnamurchan, Small Isles and the South Skye Coast
- North Skye Coast and Wester Ross;
- North Uist, Sound of Harris, Harris and South Lewis.

“Ministers agree that these are probably the strongest candidates in terms of the criteria set. Within this short list two areas in particular, Argyll Islands and Coast and Ardnamurchan, Small Isles and the South Skye Coast are identified as possible strongest all round candidates for Scotland's first Coastal and Marine National Park. A combination of these two areas (for example taking in Mull, Coll, Tiree, the Sound of Mull, Ardnamurchan, the Small Isles and the South Skye Coast) might also be a strong candidate.

Shetland, Orkney, South Uist and Barra, and the Clyde and Moray Firths are the other five areas identified as possible candidates.”

As can be seen, virtually all these are crofting areas. The Executive will select one from the above.

The National Park Concept

The unique natural and cultural heritage of these very special, and indeed World-class, areas is well recognised and we should have no problem with policies designed to safeguard, enhance and sustainably manage their environment.

We are however entitled to some scepticism as to the claims made for the National Park concept, for example: -

- Support for communities and tourism
- Improved planning and management
- Social and economic benefits
- Best practice and innovation

There is no indication as to how these outputs might be achieved.

Effect on existing communities and their economy

Without a lot more information we must be concerned about the effect on indigenous industries, in particular

- Fishing
- Aquaculture

These are often the ancillary employment of crofters without which many crofting communities would simply cease to function. Amongst the candidate areas, the Western Isles already has a local fisheries management policy and this should be sufficient to manage inshore resources without outside intervention.

Seaward and Landward Boundaries

There is no clear indication of landward boundaries. (The seaward boundary is assumed to be the inshore fisheries limit.) There are serious implications for planning, housing and economic development should marine conservation interests override the social and economic needs of coastal communities.

Without thriving crofting communities in such areas the natural heritage interest of the coastal zone will be lost, for example the internationally-important habitats created by traditional machair agriculture.

Potential development constraints affecting housing, water supplies and sewerage will affect in particular the ability of coastal, crofting communities to retain and attract economically active people and key workers.

Governance of the National Park

It is assumed that a National Park Authority would take control over

- Planning
- Economic Development
- Environmental Regulation

It is generally feared that this will lead to tighter planning controls and (as stated above) will affect the ability of communities to offer affordable housing to key groups of people. (The Executive will claim that National Parks have led to more affordable housing.) On the other hand economic development powers could lead to enhanced support for sustainable local businesses including agriculture.

There will also be an issue with local democracy if key powers are transferred from the local authority to a National Park Authority. It will be essential to ensure that the Park Authority at least consists of a majority of members elected from those resident within the Park's boundary.

A Flawed Consultation Process

The Consultation period closes on 10th January 2007 and SCF will respond formally before then.

Many consultees feel the process is flawed. We are severely hampered by a lack of key information on the implications of the Executive's proposals. HIE has condemned the consultation as 'rushed' and 'cheap and cheerful' (*West Highland Free Press w/e 8th December*) contrasting with the evolutionary approach taken to the creation of the Loch Lomond and Trossachs and the Cairngorms National Parks.

A firm of PR consultants took a display around such venues as supermarket car parks and invited people to be consulted. This 'consultation' consisted of two sides of 'tick the box' questions that could be completed in about half a minute. Those carrying out the 'consultation' said they knew nothing about the proposals and could not answer any questions.

Conclusions

There may well be nothing to fear from Coastal and Marine National Parks, and there may well be tangible benefits in the longer term, but until we have a transparency of

approach from the Executive and its agencies as to the true implications of such designations, we would do well to follow the precautionary approach of HIE. We should accept nothing, question everything in detail, and minute the answers!

Donald Murdie
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