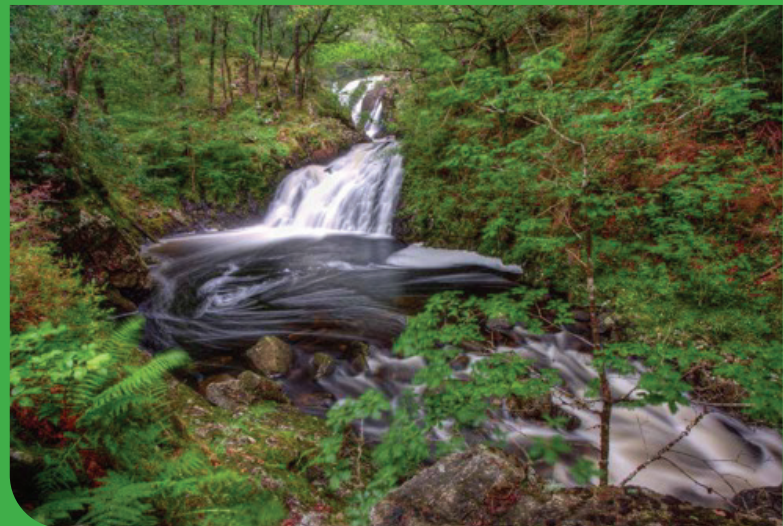
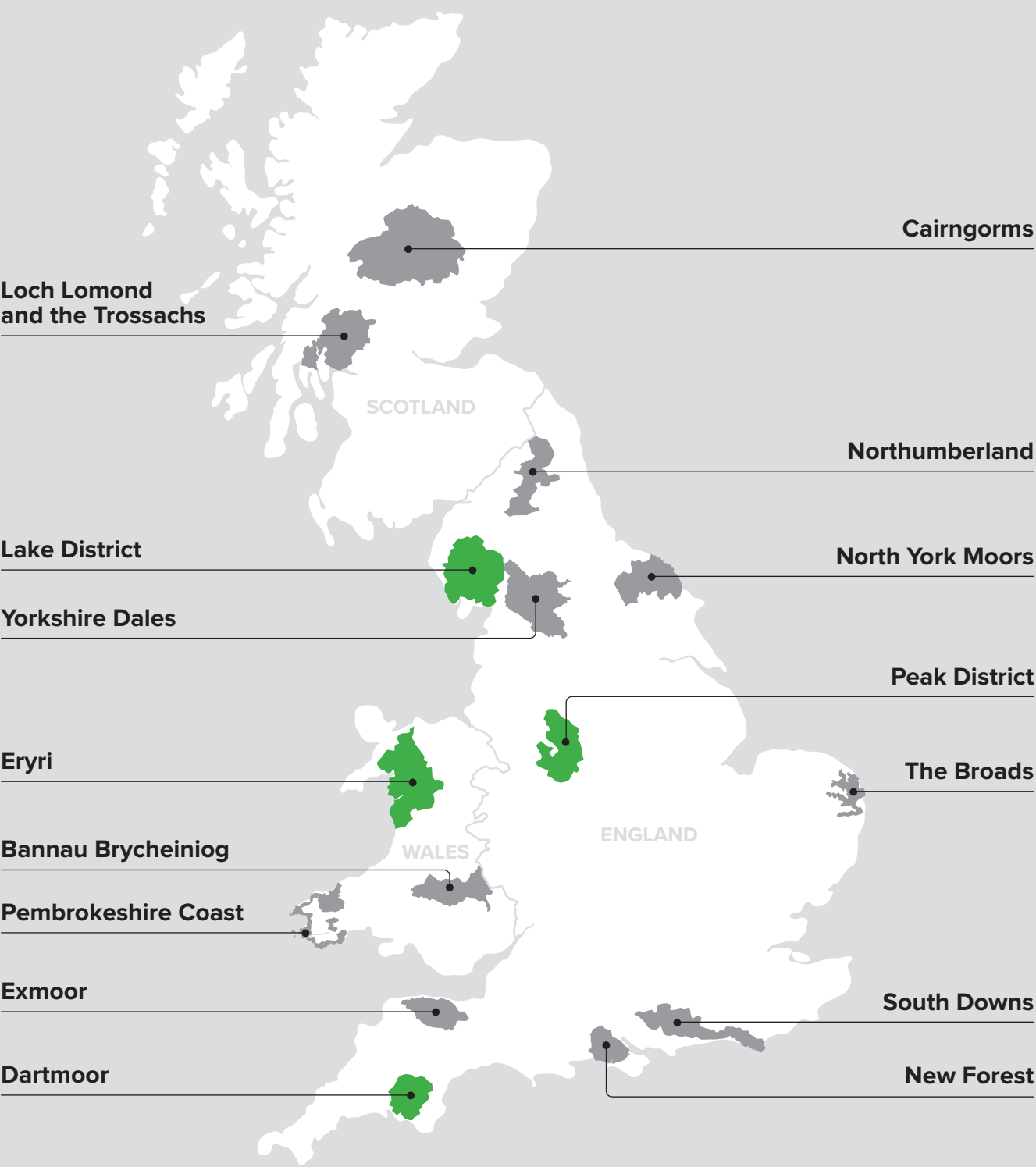


75 years of National Parks

A celebration and
a look forward



UK National Parks



Foreword

Anniversaries offer the chance to look back, to reflect on shared history and hard-won progress. They're a moment to take stock and celebrate. But they also offer a powerful opportunity to look forwards – to share our vision for a positive future, and commit ourselves to achieving it.

This 75th anniversary is just such an opportunity.

Every time the British public is asked, they'll tell you that they love the British countryside, and that they're proud of our National Parks. Quite right too. What an incredible gift they are for the Nation, and how much poorer we'd be – socially, physically, culturally and economically – if they didn't exist.

But we live in a time of great flux. The impacts of wildlife loss and climate instability are ratcheting, and the future we face is one of transformation – warming climate and seas, species on the move, and new shapes in the social and economic fabric of society. It will be volatile, uncertain, complex and our National Parks must be on the front foot to respond, to lead, and help create and sustain the positive world we need.

So it's more important now than ever that we make the case for why our National Parks matter. National Parks must be reservoirs – wellsprings – of nature, feeding and flowing far beyond their boundaries. They are national, critical infrastructure, providing frontline defence against flooding, drought, overheating. They are a powerful engine for helping us adapt to climate change. They deliver food, community, access, and health. They are our Nation's most treasured landscapes. They have extraordinary potential to do more.

The scale of transformation we need requires bold leadership and a willingness to take risks. It also requires humility – knowing that familiar ways of working may no longer serve us, that new partners, shared learning and coordinated action are the only way to secure the future we need. The case studies in this report demonstrate some of the brilliant partnership work already underway in our four oldest National Parks. I commend the teams driving this work on, with passion, skill and vision.

The future National Park I imagine is one where I know I've crossed the boundary into it because of how the landscape looks, smells and sounds. It will be abundant and resurgent. Farming will be resilient, nature-rich and sustainable. Local people will live in beautiful, affordable homes that sustain healthy, diverse communities. Visitors will travel slow. And when our children spend a night under the stars, they will know that it's the first of many, and the start of a lifelong relationship with these special places. They will know that they belong to these places and these places belong to them.

We rightly take pride in the achievements of the past – knowing that we stand on the shoulders of the brave, the radical, the visionary folk who brought the National Parks into being. Those figures from history can teach us. The landscapes themselves can be our teachers too – telling powerful stories of adaptation, continuity and resilience.

So Happy Birthday Pen-blwydd Hapus Eryri, Dartmoor, Lake District and Peak District National Parks. Thank you, congratulations, and here's to a resurgent, creative, hope-filled future. For you, and for our Nation.

Mary-Ann Ochota, Chair of the Protected Landscapes Partnership

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About this report: This is an independent report commissioned by Britain's four founding National Parks – Dartmoor, Eryri (Snowdonia), the Lake District and Peak District – to mark their 75th anniversary in 2026. It has been researched and written by Andrew McCloy and reflects his own analysis and conclusions.

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Designed by Chapman Design

Cover photos (L-R from top): Merrivale Stone Row in Dartmoor National Park (photo: DNPA), A 'Miles Without Stiles' easy access route beside Lake Windermere in the Lake District National Park (photo: LDNPA), Dove Stone in the Peak District National Park (photo: Andrew McCloy), Temperate rainforest at Rhaeadr Ddu, Afon Camlan, in Eryri National Park (photo: Keith O'Brien).

Andrew McCloy is a writer and consultant who was formerly Chair of the Peak District National Park and National Parks England. He is currently Chair of Campaign for National Parks, but this independent report does not represent the views of the organisation.

This report is available in English and Welsh.

A celebration and a look forward

Executive summary

Seventy-five years after they were created, Britain's national parks are now an established and cherished part of our national identity. There is widespread appreciation of their outstanding landscapes and natural beauty; they provide exceptional access and recreation opportunities for millions of people; they are valued for their cultural heritage and access to nature; and they make a significant contribution to local and national economies.

Their journey has been long and not always smooth, in part reflecting their complex origin and the British national park model itself. Popular protest, the nascent conservation movement and profound societal change provided the backdrop, but it was the upheaval of the Second World War that was the eventual catalyst. The national parks that emerged a few years later, beginning with the Peak District, Lake District, Eryri (Snowdonia) and Dartmoor in 1951 – the four who have commissioned this independent report and are its focus – were a key part of a new and modern Britain that embodied hope, healing and opportunity for all. They were also living or lived-in landscapes, not wilderness reserves, national assets but in mostly private hands. The unforeseen changes that followed, notably farming's transformation, a surge in leisure visits and nature's catastrophic decline, all challenged these often poorly resourced and sometimes powerless new designations.

Despite this, seven decades after the first were established, national parks have not just survived but their experience and the skills acquired along the way have enabled them to become capable and independent organisations, with now 15 across the UK. They demonstrate an understanding of landscape as an integrated whole and speak for 'the place' in a way that few other public bodies can. Innovation and partnership-working underpin their approach, not least in ambitious landscape-scale restoration programmes like Moors for the Future in the Peak District, Celtic Rainforests in Eryri and Dartmoor's Dynamic Landscapes, as well as the work of Fix the Fells repairing the high paths of the Lake District World Heritage Site. Through the success of Farming in Protected Landscapes and Ffermio Bro grant-funding schemes, they are demonstrating the value of locally administered land-based programmes tailored to protected landscapes, as well as the multifunctionality of land. Miles without Stiles, traffic-free railway trails and award-winning youth engagement on Dartmoor are broadening public access, while placing Welsh language and culture at the heart of Eryri has deepened the national park's bonds with its community.

When the first four national parks appeared in 1951, designation regarded landscape somewhat passively through the lens of natural beauty; but 75 years and many changes later, we need to recognise the parks' utility for the nation in a different way. The challenges facing us now and over the years ahead, particularly from nature loss and a changing climate, carry not just a grave environmental risk but also a threat to human wellbeing, economic prosperity and national security. However, healthy and resilient national parks can play a vital part in our response through the abundant supply of essential natural resources, from clean air and drinking water to valuable carbon sinks; their powerful natural beauty and opportunities for recreation and tranquillity offer good health for mind and body alike, available to all; and they can play a pivotal role in not just providing access to nature but leading its recovery in the first place. Nature-rich national parks also have an economic dividend, from jobs in the tourism and hospitality sector and thriving nature-friendly farming to healthcare cost savings through green

social prescribing, with national parks delivering a natural health service for rural and urban audiences alike.

To realise this vision, and for national parks to be robust and play a dynamic leading role, their statutory purposes need to be recalibrated; the parks need to be properly resourced and their powers updated so they can operate more effectively; and they need to adopt new and innovative ways of working. Public bodies and utility companies owning land in national parks need to share the ambition, their decision-making steered by the parks' statutory purposes; and management plan partners must be held accountable for delivering bold outcome-focused actions.

In this depiction of the next 75 years, better equipped and empowered national parks are able to coordinate ever more ambitious and effective landscape-scale restoration within and beyond their boundaries. Together with national landscapes, they are fully supported to lead nature's recovery, swiftly and at scale, and ensure the UK meets its 30x30 targets. Nature-friendly farming becomes the norm; tighter controls curb damaging land management practices or eliminate them altogether; and there is an open and honest debate about long term land use in national park uplands, balancing livelihood and tradition with opportunities for a less intensive and more nature-friendly approach.

Innovative sustainable tourism and transport initiatives help those parks under particular pressure mitigate the environmental and social impact of high visitor numbers, with revenue from any new charging schemes introduced by third parties directly benefiting the national parks. Similarly, tighter regulation of short-term holiday accommodation and second homes helps ensure sufficient housing stock remains available for year-round local use and communities continue to prosper – but all of this recognises that the circumstances of each park are different and, where needed, are likely to require individually tailored approaches.

This scenario also sees national parks themselves become more entrepreneurial, their leadership more inclusive and agile as they bring through a new generation of national park leaders and custodians. National parks continue exploring new income streams, including philanthropy and green finance, locally and at a national level.

The 75th anniversary of our first national parks is a moment to celebrate, but it is also an opportunity to rekindle the pioneering spirit and to reset for the future. Covering over 9% of the British land mass, these iconic places still have so much more to offer. The recommended high level actions set out here work as an integrated set and although many are for government, because these are national designations, after all, there are also responsibilities on the national parks themselves and all those who deliver their statutory plans, as well as encouragement for the public to move beyond passive enjoyment and show their love for national parks through advocacy and engagement.

Recommended actions by national, devolved and local government

- 1. Prioritise and resource national parks to lead landscape restoration and nature recovery:** Resource national parks to coordinate further transformative landscape-scale restoration, supported by stronger environmental protection; and (with national landscapes) lead the urgent delivery of the UK's 30x30 commitment, underpinned by amended statutory purposes defining a more focused and active national park role.
- 2. Set out long term arrangements for farming and land management in national parks:** Confirm future nature-friendly farming programmes and upland land use in protected landscapes, with an enhanced role for national parks in the design and delivery of local agri-environment schemes, including devolved responsibilities from other public agencies.
- 3. Make health and wellbeing benefits of national park landscapes available to all:** Public health providers to work with national parks to develop an ambitious programme of nature-based interventions, so broadening access to national parks, achieving healthcare savings and improving health outcomes for rural and urban audiences alike.
- 4. Promote sustainable tourism measures and innovative transport schemes in national parks to mitigate local impacts:** Tighter regulation of holiday accommodation and second homes, and innovative tourism and transport initiatives to tackle localised visitor pressure; but approaches need to be individually tailored to the parks' circumstances and revenue from any new visitor levy or vehicle charging introduced by third parties must directly benefit the national parks affected.
- 5. National park funding certainty and support by local authorities:** Government to set out multi-year core funding for national parks and support for income diversification; local authorities to actively support national parks in line with the Protected Landscapes Duty (England) and Section 62 Duty (Wales).

Recommended action by national park authorities:

- 6. Bold leadership and new ways of working:** National parks to show bold and visible leadership to drive nature and landscape recovery; embrace governance reform and continue to diversify income streams and innovative ways of working; and bring partners together through dynamic and inclusive management plans.

Recommended action by partners helping to deliver National Park Management Plans:

- 7. Partnership and prioritisation:** Management Plan partners, and decision-making public bodies and utility companies owning land in national parks, to deliver outcomes-focused actions that demonstrably share the parks' vision and strategic ambitions.

Recommended action by the public:

- 8. Support, participate and champion:** Active public support for national park charities and societies; participation in national park activities (from volunteering opportunities through to governance roles); and championing of the importance of national parks and what they care for and do.

Introduction



Llyn y Dywarchen, Eryri National Park
(photo © Dilwyn Williams).

This report has been commissioned by Britain's first four national parks to mark their 75th anniversary in 2026: Dartmoor, Eryri (Snowdonia), the Lake District and Peak District. It looks back at what has been achieved since 1951; highlights areas of success and innovation, including current initiatives; and identifies some of the challenges and obstacles that have slowed progress. It concludes with a look ahead to the next 75 years and recommends some key high-level actions to provide a reset so that the original pioneering ambition can be rekindled, tailored to today's circumstances and future-proofed so that the national parks are able to fulfil their national mission.

This is an independent report and as such has not been formally 'adopted' by any of the national

park authorities; but while the four national parks created in 1951 are its focus, it is also a celebration of all 15 UK national parks. It recognises that the four are predominantly upland in nature and there may be different issues for lowland national parks; and that all 15 are unique places with their own special characteristics and circumstances. Also, devolved power has led to different approaches and structures across England, Scotland and Wales, so any reference to 'government' and 'nation' in this report applies equally to all unless specified otherwise. Indeed, devolution has created new legislation such as the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, enabling national parks in both countries to better shape their own future.

The terms 'national park' and 'national park authority' are also used interchangeably for ease of reading, again unless indicated differently, but it is important to understand the distinction between the national park (the designated protected landscape – the place) and national park authority (the public body that administers it).

This study has drawn on the contributions of a wide range of individuals who have shared their opinions and experiences. It has also reflected on previous reviews of the workings of national parks, from Sandford in 1974 and Edwards in 1991 to recent reports on designated landscapes in Wales (Marsden, 2015) and England (Glover, 2019). This one doesn't pretend to offer a thorough analysis, nor present an in-depth blueprint for the future. Instead, it aims to provide a moment of reflection 75 years after Britain's first national parks were founded; and it also presents an inflection point and an opportunity to consider their likely trajectory over the next 75 years. While identifying specific examples of good practice and celebrating some of the visionary and transformational work going on in national parks today, with a deliberate focus on the first four, the intention is to keep to a fairly high level and identify what they were set up to do and how they have gone about doing it; what has been learned along the way and where their strengths lie; and what part they can play in tackling some of the most pressing environmental, economic and social challenges facing us over the next 75 years.

Fundamental to an understanding of British national parks is that although they are locally administered and for the most part consist of privately owned and managed land, they are nonetheless national designations with statutory purposes that speak to a set of aspirations for the nation. Moreover, national parks connect people, landscape and nature; they evoke inspiration and awe; provide wellbeing and sanctuary for people and wildlife alike. They celebrate distinctive local landscapes, both natural and cultural, but they are also an intrinsic part of our national heritage.

“National Parks are the soul of Britain. They are the centre of our imagination. When people think of Britain, wherever they are, they imagine these landscapes.”

Rory Stewart OBE, former Under-secretary of state in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

However, in contrast to national parks elsewhere in the world where there is an emphasis on wilderness and preservation, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classifies the UK’s national parks as Category V ‘managed landscapes’, involving direct interaction between people and the natural world. Here the landscape has evolved from thousands of years of human influence and activity and it has both a natural and cultural significance. The UK’s national parks are run by public bodies (national park authorities) with boards of appointed members, centrally funded by and accountable to the respective governments of England, Scotland and Wales, and with few direct powers save the promotion of sustainable development through their planning function. They are pioneers, place-based conveners and regulators all in one, guided by statutory purposes around conservation, enhancement and promotion of their special qualities, as well as a duty to foster thriving local communities.

National parks cover almost 10% of the land area of England, around 20% of Wales and 7% of Scotland. Up to 80% of the UK’s priority conservation habitats are within national parks; they attract over 100 million visitors and generate over £5 billion of spending a year; and they are home to 446,000 people. Whichever way they are measured, the UK’s national parks make a substantial contribution. The question, therefore, is why were they created 75 years ago, to what extent have they been successful in their mission and what should be their role going forwards?

Andrew McCloy

National parks in Britain – a short history



Left: Tom Tomlinson was appointed as the Peak District National Park's first Head Warden in 1956; and (right) a mobile information centre in Eryri National Park (c1965) which was taken around the national park before the visitor centres were established (photos: PDNPA/ENPA).

To assess the contribution of the UK's national parks it is necessary to have some understanding of their origins, the motivations of the early campaigners and the issues that these new designations were intended to address.

Until the late 18th century the wilder parts of the British countryside were regarded as dangerous and uncivilised, but the poets, writers and artists of the Romantic movement encouraged a new way of perceiving nature and natural beauty and in doing so laid the foundations for the concept of national parks. It was perhaps most famously expressed by William Wordsworth, who considered the Lake District “a sort of national property in which every man has an interest who has an eye to perceive and heart to enjoy”.

At the same time, huge social upheaval was starting to take place in Britain that shifted people's relationship with the land itself. Widespread changes to farming and land management initially brought about by Enclosures restricted public access and forced people off the land altogether. Many headed for the growing cities as the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, and by 1851 half the population of England already lived in towns.

The countryside offered this rapidly expanding urban audience a place for leisure and escape, but others sought to protect its wildlife, natural beauty and heritage in the face of unchecked development, and conservation organisations like the National Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Council for the Preservation of Rural England (and also for Wales) were founded at this time. They were soon followed by mass recreation bodies like the Youth Hostels Association and the Ramblers' Association, amid growing public protest at the lack of access to the open hills and moorland of northern England, in particular, which manifested itself in direct action like the mass trespass on Kinder Scout in the Peak District in 1932.

By this time national parks were already a global phenomenon, beginning as far back as 1872 with Yellowstone in the USA. Throughout the 1930s there was a growing clamour to establish them in Britain, with a broad coalition of groups coming together to form the Standing Committee on National Parks (now Campaign for National Parks) that lobbied tirelessly and effectively. The upheavals of the Second World War and the reconstruction that followed provided the catalyst to finally realise them; and for the postwar Labour government, access to the country's finest countryside sat alongside education reforms, a national health service and new town and country planning as key pillars of a new and modern Britain.

"It is to be remembered that National Parks are, in the best sense, a popular cause, with a place in the public imagination: a formed public opinion supports and demands them." *John Dower, Standing Committee on National Parks (1942).*

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949¹ was described by Lewis Silkin, Minister for Town and Country Planning, as "the most exciting Act of the postwar Parliament". It provided for national parks in England and Wales, the first four established two years later: Peak District, Lake District, Eryri (Snowdonia) and Dartmoor; and by the end of the decade that figure had risen to ten. In addition, the Act set up the National Parks Commission to designate and review the parks, as well as create national nature reserves (managed by the new Nature Conservancy), and provided for definitive maps of public rights of way, areas of outstanding natural beauty (now known as national landscapes) and long distance footpaths (now national trails). It effectively provided the foundation for all conservation and recreation statutes that have followed ever since.

The landmark legislation was based on a report by John Dower, then taken forward and recommended to government by the Hobhouse Committee, which defined a national park as follows: *"An extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which for the nation's benefit and by appropriate national decision and action the characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved; access and facilities for public open-air enjoyment are amply provided; wildlife and buildings and places of architectural and historic interest are suitably protected; while established farming use is effectively maintained."*

National parks had to have "great natural beauty... of substantial continuous extent" so this inevitably meant that the early designations favoured the more remote and undeveloped areas of hill, mountain, moorland and coast in the north and west; and, notably in the Peak District and Eryri, their boundaries were drawn to exclude extensive urban or industrial areas. Then, as now, national park authorities are guided by two statutory purposes and an accompanying duty (see box). The Broads Authority has additional functions, powers and responsibilities as a navigation and harbour authority; and Scotland's national parks also have a fourth aim around sustainable use of natural resources.

¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/12-13-14/97>

National Parks' statutory purposes

National parks in England and Wales have two statutory purposes:

- 1. To conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area.**
- 2. To promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the national park by the public.**

In pursuit of these purposes, they also have a duty to seek to foster the social and economic wellbeing of the local communities within the national park.

The purposes reflect the broad dual aims of the 1949 Act – countryside protection and public access – and although Dower envisaged that the purposes and duty would be inter-dependent, rather than in competition, the primacy of the first purpose was subsequently underlined by the so-called Sandford Principle which states that conservation will take precedence over recreation if the two are irreconcilably conflicted.

Joint planning boards were established for the Peak District and Lake District national parks, but for Eryri and Dartmoor (as well as the other parks created afterwards) administration for the new bodies fell to a committee of a county council. This was not changed until the 1995 Environment Act which established full administrative boards for every park, as well as amending the purposes and duty. Other relevant post-1949 legislation addressed countryside and wildlife protection, introduced greater public access to mapped upland areas in England and Wales, and created new national parks for Scotland and latterly two new national parks in southern England (see timeline box).

“National Parks should be in a true and full sense *national*... [they] are not for any privileged or otherwise restricted section of the population, but for all who come to refresh their minds and spirit and exercise their bodies in a peaceful setting of natural beauty.” *John Dower*

Inevitably there have been significant changes in the past 75 years, many entirely unforeseen by the 1949 legislators and outside national parks' control. Several assumptions have simply not stood the test of time. For instance, the two purposes were regarded as entirely compatible; it was believed that traditional farming practices would continue to conserve the countryside; and the planning land use system would be effective in controlling inappropriate or harmful development. Both Dower and Hobhouse envisaged that national parks would be for peaceful, dispersed and low intensity recreation (or “countryside contentments” as the

Hobhouse Committee quaintly put it); and the new national parks would actively acquire land to achieve widespread and lasting public access.

Some of the more profound postwar changes that impacted on national parks are discussed in chapter 4. For now, though, it is worth bearing in mind why they were set up and the purposes underpinning them, and examine what Dartmoor, Eryri, the Lake District and Peak District, as well as the other national parks that followed, have gone on to achieve.



In 2021, the 70th anniversary of the UK's national parks was celebrated in a commemorative issue of stamps (© Royal Mail)

National Parks Timeline

1810

Wordsworth describes the Lake District as a “sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye and heart to enjoy”

1908-1928

Unsuccessful bills seeking access to mountains

1931

Addison Report recommends creating national and regional reserves

1932

Kinder Scout mass trespass takes place in the Peak District

1936

Standing Committee on National Parks established

1945

Ramsay Committee report identifies five areas suitable for national parks in Scotland

1945

John Dower’s report on national parks published

1947

Hobhouse Committee’s report paves the way for legislation

1949

National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act creates the framework for new national parks in England and Wales

1951

Peak District, Lake District, Eryri and Dartmoor national parks established

1950s

Pembrokeshire Coast, North York Moors, Yorkshire Dales, Exmoor, Northumberland and Bannau Brycheiniog (Brecon Beacons) become national parks

1968

Countryside Act places a duty on public bodies to have due regard for conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside

1974

Sandford review recommends governance changes, a requirement for National Park Officers and addresses the issue of conservation versus public enjoyment

1989

The Norfolk and Suffolk Broads are given national park status by the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act 1988

1991

Fit for the Future: National Parks Review Panel report led by Prof Ron Edwards

1995

Environment Act creates independent national park authorities, reforms statutory purposes, introduces mandatory management plans and a duty for public bodies to consider national park purposes in their decision-making

2000

Countryside and Rights of Way Act introduces a right of access to mapped land on mountains, moors, heaths and downland in England and Wales

2000

National Parks (Scotland) Act establishes Loch Lomond and The Trossachs (2002) and the Cairngorms (2003) as Scotland’s first national parks

2005

New Forest National Park established

2010

South Downs National Park established

2015

Review of Designated Landscapes in Wales led by Prof Terry Marsden

2016

Lake District and Yorkshire Dales national parks’ boundaries extended

2019

Landscapes Review of national parks and national landscapes in England led by Julian Glover

2021

Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act requires regional bodies to consider national park purposes when decision-making

2023

Section 245 of Levelling Up and Regeneration Act requires all public bodies in England to ‘seek to further’ the purposes of Protected Landscapes

Dartmoor, Eryri, Peak District and Lake District National Parks in numbers (cumulative totals)



6,884
square km
(2,658 square miles)

133,434
residents

38.2
million visitors

Worth
£4.2 billion
to their local economies



179
lakes and reservoirs

2.7%
of national park land
owned by national
park authorities

2,224
Scheduled
Monuments

14.2%
of land wooded



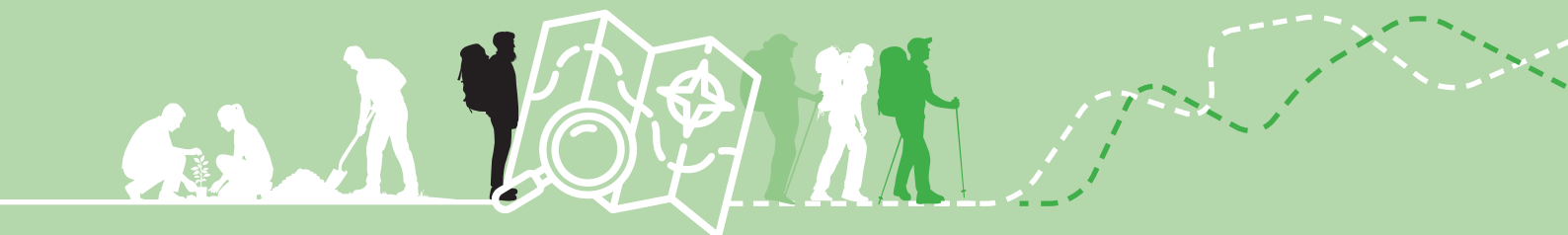
43
sites protected
for nature
under European
designation

27.7%
of land designated
as Sites of Special
Scientific Interest

73
million tonnes of carbon
could be stored in healthy
national park peatland

79%
of land used
for farming

4,429
farms



17,891
work days contributed
by national park
volunteers

9,276
km of public rights
of way (5,763 miles)

3,527
square km of Open Access Land over which the public
have freedom to roam (1,362 square miles)



75 years of achievement



Ullswater in the Lake District National Park
(photo: Andrew Locking).

Much has been accomplished by the UK's national parks over the past 75 years, but simply establishing the first four in 1951 so quickly from scratch, with little in the way of a blueprint, very limited resources and during a time of postwar austerity, was an achievement in itself. As well as creating national parks, the 1949 Act began (for the first time) to set out wider countryside protection and recreational management as part of the development of a modern national land use planning system. In subsequent decades this would evolve further in response to changing circumstances, for instance creating country parks to meet the leisure boom of the 1960s and '70s and replacing the National Parks Commission with the broader remit of the Countryside Commission; and latterly have come further administrative changes with devolved power across the UK. The considerable achievements of all 15 national parks

across a broad spectrum of delivery, as well as their continued expansion, popularity and sheer longevity, must be framed in this context.

The contribution of the first four parks, presented in simple statistical form in the graphic on the previous page, is now examined by themes relating to their purposes and duty.

Landscape protection and restoration

Since conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of national parks' landscapes is fundamental to their designation, it is perhaps surprising that the four national parks that are the focus of this report own or directly manage very little estate themselves: from around 1% in Eryri and 2% in Dartmoor to about 4% in the Lake District and Peak District. The original intention that parks would actively acquire land has seldom happened, most notably in the Peak District in the 1970s and '80s when land ownership was effectively used as a conservation tool with the acquisition of the North Lees, Roaches and Warslow estates. (Similarly, Exmoor National Park purchased land to prevent it from being ploughed up and it now owns 7% in total.)

Rarer, still, is the re-drawing of national park boundaries in order to secure greater landscape protection. In 2016, the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales national parks were extended towards each other to protect high quality landscapes covering the Lune Valley, Howgill Fells and Sizergh, originally left out in 1951. It added about 3% to the Lake District's overall size and grew the Yorkshire Dales by almost a quarter.

Instead, national parks have become adept at negotiation, persuasion and collaboration in order to influence land management decisions. Sometimes they are broadly aligned to the national park's own aims, most visibly in the Lake District where the National Trust looks

after 20% of the national park; elsewhere activities are more at odds with national park designation. Since the early 1800s Dartmoor has been used for military training, but in 1978 the Dartmoor Steering Group was established to reconcile continued military use with national park purposes. A dedicated working party now undertakes environmental monitoring and conservation works and there is more awareness of the need to balance landscape protection and national defence. Despite this, peatland restoration on Dartmoor still has to bear the considerable cost of removing unexploded ordnance, even though (as the Fursdon Review pointed out) the burden should fall predominantly on the Ministry of Defence, according to the ‘polluter pays’ principle.

Military training aside, most of Dartmoor is farmed or grazed with numerous landowners, and 37% of this is on common land with high landscape and conservation value. The ancient tradition of commoning involving free-roaming animals is also prevalent in the Lake District and New Forest, but in 1985 Dartmoor National Park was instrumental in developing the Dartmoor Commons Act that established a new approach to land management and public access in the national park (see box).

“To me, places like Dartmoor signify wildness, freedom, nature and peace. For 75 years the National Park has played a pivotal role conserving and promoting this special landscape, and without its guiding hand it would be immeasurably poorer.”

Kate Ashbrook, General Secretary, Open Spaces Society

CASE STUDY 1: DARTMOOR

Management, access and protection of the commons

Dartmoor’s large tracts of unenclosed moorland and registered common land with long-standing grazing rights are a special feature of the national park, but over time their condition had declined. The Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 was a ground-breaking piece of legislation that created the first statutory Commoners’ Council to manage livestock; established a right of access on foot and on horseback to the commons of Dartmoor for the purposes of open-air recreation (including backpack or wild camping); and provided powers to manage visitor pressure and livestock on the commons. The Act was developed in partnership, with the national park working closely with landowners and commoners to arrive at long term solutions to protect the commons, improve their overall health

and agree ways in which they could be sustainably managed. In 2025 the Supreme Court rejected a legal challenge to the 1985 legislation and upheld the right to wild camp on the commons.



Dartmoor ponies

(photo: Em Parkinson/Dartmoor Trust).

In recent decades there has been a shift in approach from passive protection and promotion of national parks' landscapes to more active restoration and enhancement. In the Lake District, landowners RSPB, National Trust, Forestry England and United Utilities are working at scale on major projects that aim to return parts of the landscape to a wilder and less managed state, including Wild Haweswater and Wild Ennerdale (see next section). In the south west of the national park, the Defra-funded Upper Duddon Landscape Recovery Project, led by the University of Leeds, is actively restoring native woodland, wood pasture, heath, scrub and peat bog, with multiple benefits for nature and people.

The Peak District's Morridge Hill Country project, in conjunction with 25 local farmers and Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, is also looking to create a joined-up approach to nature and farming; while National Grid is removing unsightly pylons and overhead transmission lines around the Dwyryd Estuary in Eryri National Park. Dartmoor's Dynamic Landscape is a partnership programme focusing on the landscape and habitats of the Okement, Dart, Erme and Yealm river catchments; while the Central Dartmoor Landscape Recovery initiative involves the Duchy of Cornwall and a cluster of 40 farms covering a quarter of the national park, sharing learnings and good practice with the Walkham Valley Landscape Recovery project (led by Dartmoor National Park Authority) and the East Dartmoor Landscape Recovery project (led by Devon Wildlife Trust).



“Although we play different roles, the Duchy of Cornwall has a mutual partnership with Dartmoor National Park through which we share the same strong narrative around the environment and the desire to build a resilient landscape that can adapt to the challenges ahead.” *Emma Magee, Head of Communities and Nature, Duchy of Cornwall*

Landscape restoration in national parks often tackles deep-rooted environmental issues. In the Peak District, over two centuries of atmospheric pollution from surrounding mills and factories, together with overgrazing, fires and footpath erosion, had resulted in extensive areas of damaged moorland and seriously degraded peat. In response, the national park embarked on a series of detailed moorland erosion studies in the 1980s; collaborated with the Countryside Commission on a Pennine Way repair project trialling new restoration techniques (1990); then subsequently hosted the ambitious Moors for the Future Partnership to restore its vital peatland habitat (see box overleaf). Peat accounts for 43% of the land area in English national parks (compared to the average of 11% across England) and is a vital carbon sink, so the contribution of healthy national park moorlands is highly significant.

CASE STUDY 2: PEAK DISTRICT

Long term peatland restoration delivers multiple benefits

Moors for the Future Partnership (MFTFP) began in 2003 and has so far raised £75 million and restored over 250 sq km of badly degraded peat. Hosted by the Peak District National Park, original funding from European and agri-environment sources is giving way to a more blended approach. The latest (2026) is a green finance investment of £25 million linked to the water companies' new Asset Management Plan that recognises the value of investing in improved quality water catchment areas. MFTFP has pioneered new restoration methods and shared good practice internationally; and it has encouraged citizen science and volunteering, with 13 million sphagnum moss plugs planted by hand over a decade! The programme's ongoing success shows that restoration on this scale and complexity works across boundaries and requires time, funds and lasting commitment, with vital contributions from partners like the National Trust and water utilities; both science and storytelling

is important; and a flexible funding model exploring new revenue streams potentially provides ways forward for other areas of national park delivery.

www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/



Before (inset) and after: Peat stabilised and vegetation restored on Black Hill, Peak District National Park, through the work of the Moors for the Future Partnership (photo: MFTFP).

The South West Peatland Partnership involves Dartmoor and Exmoor national parks working with others to reinstate England's most southerly blanket bog; threatened temperate rainforest is being restored in and outside Eryri (see next section); four national parks are supporting the Great North Bog restoration initiative across 7,000 sq km of northern England's peatland soils; and South Downs National Park is partnering with national landscapes and national trails on the Big Chalk programme to create thriving chalk and limestone landscapes in southern England. This really is 'super landscape recovery'.

Elsewhere the emphasis is as much on integration. In 2020, Eryri National Park hosted the Carneddau Landscape Partnership with 20 local organisations working together on conservation projects, including meadow and montane heath restoration (see box overleaf).

CASE STUDY 3: ERYRI

Conserving and celebrating the heritage of the Carneddau

This 5-year project hosted by Eryri National Park and financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund brought together over 20 local organisations to both conserve and celebrate the special upland landscape of the Carneddau mountain range. The programme involved a wide range of projects, from recording farming traditions and place names to understanding Neolithic axe-making and using aerial LiDaR surveys to reveal hidden features on the ground. Restoration of montane health and lowland meadows went hand in hand with tackling invasive species and improving the habitat for native coughts. The programme treated the Carneddau as a living landscape with people at its core, recognising the importance of involving generations – from the oldest farmers to the

youngest schoolchildren. Project delivery partners included conservation groups, local authorities, farmers' unions, recreational bodies and education establishments.

www.carneddaupartnership.wales/



The Carneddau, Eryri National Park
(photo: Ben Porter).

National parks are inherently place-based designations and their experience and skillset gives them an aptitude and capability to lead this sort of landscape-scale work. In doing so, they are playing a critical role managing the supply of natural resources we all depend on: the Lake District National Park provides north west England with a third of its drinking water; healthy, re-wetted Peak District moorland reduces the impact of downstream flash flooding and fewer moorland fires means better air quality for surrounding cities; restoring the damaged peatland of Dartmoor to full health could store up to 13 megatonnes of carbon with ultimately billions of pounds of net benefits; and recent surveys of Eryri's residents and visitors alike revealed how the national park's openness, nature, tranquillity and dark skies play a hugely positive part in their physical and mental wellbeing.

This vital work – effecting positive and lasting change across entire landscapes – requires government to give priority and resource to national parks over the decades ahead; and as such it forms a key recommendation for action in this report.

“We must accept that national park landscapes like the Lake District are always evolving and that management approaches have also changed over the years. In the face of today’s massive challenges we need landscapes that are both dynamic and resilient, not static and resistant to change.” *Mike Innerdale, National Trust Regional Director – North of England.*

Nature recovery and climate change

Although national parks were originally conceived as landscape rather than nature designations, since 1995 conservation and enhancement of wildlife has been included in their statutory purposes. The four parks featured in this report provide a refuge for wildlife and are home to some of our most iconic and exciting species, from red squirrels in the Lake District and mountain hares in the Peak District to wild goats and choughs in Eryri and Dartmoor's famous free-roaming ponies. The range of upland habitats they offer gives rise to a fascinating and sometimes unique assembly of plants and insects, including Blue ground beetles in Dartmoor's ancient oak woodlands and rare orchids and ferns in the Peak District's limestone dales. National park ecologists work alongside partner organisations to safeguard these special places, for instance restoring habitat and controlling predators to improve the number of breeding waders like curlew in the Peak District. Rosy saxifrage has been reintroduced to Eryri's mountains after a 62-year absence; and Dartmoor National Park has joined with Butterfly Conservation and 146 landowners to improve habitats and public understanding of threatened butterfly species, including five types of fritillary and the Narrow-bordered Bee Hawk-moth. Bolder, still, is an approach in the Lake District restoring the ecosystem of an entire valley with benefits for a range of species (see box).

CASE STUDY 4: LAKE DISTRICT

Nature recovery and wild land at scale

Wild Ennerdale began in 2002 and is one of the UK's longest-running wild land projects. It covers 4,711 ha and aims to allow natural processes to function more freely at scale, shaping the landscape and ecology of the remote valley on the western side of the Lake District. Habitats are being restored and enhanced, including bog, heath and the planting of native trees. This in turn is benefiting the survival of species as diverse as Marsh fritillary, Freshwater pearl mussel, Red squirrel, Ring ouzel and England's only migratory Arctic charr population. Newly introduced species to Ennerdale are Hairy wood ants and Water vole, with plans also developing for free-living beaver. The project is led by principal landowners Forestry England, National Trust and United Utilities, with the support of Natural England, and in 2022 Wild Ennerdale was declared

a new national nature reserve. This project is aligned with the Cumbria Local Nature Recovery Strategy and is core to the Nature Recovery Delivery Plan for the Lake District National Park. www.wildennerdale.co.uk/



The remote Ennerdale valley in the Lake District National Park (photo: Wild Ennerdale).

Moreover, the popularity and reach of these four national parks, as well as their size and location, allows them to provide a vital interface between people and nature. They offer a chance for connectivity with the natural world, encourage understanding and stimulate action through local projects, partnerships and volunteering opportunities; but above all, national parks allow people to experience nature first hand.

“No one will protect what they don’t care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.” Sir David Attenborough.

The sheer variety and accessibility of habitats in national parks like Eryri (from mountain, moorland, bogs and forest to rivers, lakes and coast) gives people this opportunity and is why national parks are so vital for both people and nature. Eryri alone has 21 national nature reserves, 107 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and three Ramsar sites (internationally designated wetlands), as well as other designations like the Dyfi Biosphere Reserve. Eryri Nature Partnership has been established by the national park to draw up a Nature Recovery Action Plan for Eryri based on the ‘Lawton’ approach where Eryri’s habitats overall are bigger, better and more connected. Among the habitat restoration taking place is a major project to safeguard Eryri’s internationally important temperate or Atlantic rainforest (see box).

CASE STUDY 5: ERYRI

Protecting and restoring the Celtic Rainforest

Temperate rainforests are an incredibly rare biome, with just 1% of the earth’s land surface having the correct climatic conditions to support them. The mild and wet conditions of the Welsh coastal regions include valuable surviving fragments of a type of temperate rainforest referred to as Atlantic oakwoods. Delivered through the EU LIFE programme (and the largest LIFE project in Europe at the time), Celtic Rainforests LIFE is a 9-year attempt to restore temperate rainforests by taking direct action against pressures facing the habitat. These include the eradication of invasive non-native species *Rhododendron ponticum*, conservation grazing and restoring ancient woodland sites by removing undesirable conifers. Engagement with local schools and communities is raising awareness and encouraging future support for these precious habitats. Key to

the project’s success has been its ambitious landscape-scale approach, working with partners across national park boundaries and the longevity of funding. The End of Project conference, held in April 2026, shared learnings and considered options for future support.

<https://celticrainforests.wales/>



Temperate rainforest in Eryri National Park
(photo: Mari Lloyd Photography).

But, despite their best efforts, and as elsewhere in the UK, nature in national parks has been impacted by wider habitat decline, unfavourable land management practices, pollution and climate change (see section 4). Although national parks have a key part to play in helping to reverse this, historically they have not been empowered to stop biodiversity loss even within their own boundaries and radical change is now needed. The national parks themselves have shown their commitment and ambition to be ‘the pinnacle of the nation’s Nature Recovery network’² and they clearly realise that action needs to be immediate and at scale; but they need the tools and levers to make this happen.

² <https://nationalparksengland.org.uk/resources/nature-recovery-in-english-national-parks-case-for-delivery>

Local Nature Recovery Strategies in England and the national Nature Recovery Action Plan in Wales provide the roadmaps, through which the national parks can play a potentially pivotal role in helping the UK meet its 30x30 targets to protect and conserve a minimum of 30% of land and sea for biodiversity by 2030. This has been underlined by the Biodiversity Deep Dive in Wales³, and also England's Environmental Improvement Plan⁴ which has a commitment to 'enable Protected Landscapes Organisations to make land greener, wilder, and more accessible to all'. Indeed, with around half of all SSSIs in England alone found in national parks and national landscapes, the Protected Landscapes Partnership has calculated that the protected landscape family (including national trails) could between them provide over a third of England's 30x30 commitment⁵.

Dartmoor was the first national park to declare a Climate and Ecological Emergency; but as far back as 2013 the 'Living Dartmoor' strategy produced by Dartmoor Biodiversity Partnership sought to protect the park's internationally important habitats like blanket bogs, upland heaths, upland oak woods and mires. Local conservation projects have included Curlew Head Start with the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust and Duchy of Cornwall; and pine marten reintroduction with Devon Wildlife Trust.



"Dartmoor National Park's early recognition of the climate emergency and historic legal stand on the public's right to backpack camp have been examples to other national parks on what's possible." *Tom Usher, CEO, Dartmoor Preservation Association*

As the scale of the nature crisis and climate emergency has become clear and the need for urgent and transformative action more pressing, the UK's 15 national parks launched Net Zero with Nature, a collective strategy aiming to attract private sector investment in natural capital and collaborative restoration projects. All have undertaken carbon baseline studies to measure their carbon footprints, establish land-based targets and budgets, action plans and monitoring; and they have also become the first in the world to join the UN-backed Race to Zero initiative, committing to drive action to halve carbon emissions within their landscapes by 2030 and become significant net carbon sinks by 2050. Through the Landscape Observatory, national parks are also using new technology and AI to inform future decision making (see box overleaf). It again demonstrates the national parks' expertise in science and research, as well as a continued appetite for innovation.

In conclusion, Britain's national parks have the potential to drive nature's recovery and play a major part in fulfilling our 30x30 commitments, providing an increasingly urban population with experiences and connections with the natural world and inspiring action, but at the moment they are not empowered or resourced to properly fulfil this work. Appropriate support from government and other key partners is crucial, so this represents another important recommended action in this report.

³ <https://www.gov.wales/biodiversity-deep-dive-recommendations>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/environmental-improvement-plan-2025/environmental-improvement-plan-eip-2025>

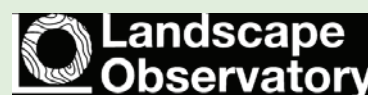
⁵ <https://www.protectedlandscapespartnership.org.uk/work/30by30-potential/>

The Landscape Observatory: a new approach to mapping, monitoring and management

Faced with the growing impact of climate change, national parks are using science and cutting-edge technology to inform new approaches to conservation management. The Landscape Observatory is funded by the Protected Landscapes Partnership, hosted by the Peak District National Park and delivered in partnership with Cranfield University. It is producing baseline mapping using high resolution aerial images and AI technology to allow detailed identification and monitoring of land use, habitats and cultural heritage features across protected landscapes. This in turn will inform new adaptive management practices that look to build resilience by better understanding the future role and nature of complex ecosystems, rather than simply falling back

on historical management plan approaches of what went before. It will also help plot other likely changes affecting national parks – from a switch in farming practices to population and visitor movement in the face of increased humidity and overheating in urban areas. The Observatory's work is already becoming a national model for habitat extent mapping and vital for adaptive land management and was recognised as such in the recently published Land Use Framework for England.

www.landscapeobservatory.org.uk/



Access, recreation and engagement

Providing opportunity for public access and recreation was a cornerstone of the 1949 Act, which was described by the then Minister as “a people’s charter for the open air”. However, the changing nature of outdoor recreation and rising number of leisure visits (described in the next section) has required new management approaches. In Dartmoor this includes imaginative engagement work with young people and disadvantaged communities (see box overleaf).

“I think [other girls] would get a big confidence boost from taking part and learn how to socialise more with people. It’s showing that girls can do this stuff too, not just boys” (Kelsie, 13). “The best moment of this was photography, but we did so many other amazing enjoyable things, such as climbing, picnics and weaselling... this was one of the best things I have ever done and I will never forget it” (Isla, 13, on Girls Do Dartmoor)

National park rangers continue to provide a highly visible interface with the public, and for many they appear to be almost emblematic of national parks. Youth or junior rangers are now well established at all four parks, and together with an indispensable contribution from volunteers, they play a hands-on role promoting responsible behaviour. This emphasis on outreach and education has shone through from the early days. Eryri established its first national park information centre at Llanrwst in 1958, while the UK’s first dedicated national park visitor centre opened at Brockhole in the Lake District in 1969. Losehill Hall in the Peak District (1972) and Plas Tan y Bwlch in Eryri (1975) became leading national park study centres putting on a range of professional training and environmental learning courses.

CASE STUDY 6: DARTMOOR

Engagement and outreach with young people

Dartmoor National Park actively engages a youthful audience. Younger children can join the Ranger Ralph Club, while 12-17 year-olds undertake hands-on activities as Youth Rangers. The national park's award-winning Girls Do Dartmoor project, backed by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Dartmoor Preservation Association (DPA), offers outdoor experiences for deserving teenage girls from local schools. Activities range from bushcraft and photography to nature and mindfulness, all designed to promote confidence and self-worth, as well as belonging and ownership of the national park. Partners like Shallowford Farm offer transformative nature experiences and connections with rural life; while for teenagers considering careers in the outdoors and environment there's Dartmoor Future Skills residential. DPA's 'Moor Boots'

small grants scheme helps young people buy outdoor equipment in order to train and take part in the Ten Tors and Jubilee challenge on Dartmoor. The aim is to both engage and empower young people, and at the same time nurture future custodians of the national park.



'Girls do Dartmoor' (photo by Katherine Koster-Shadbolt, DNPA)

National parks remain a hub for the provision of outdoor education, from the mountain training centre of Plas y Brenin in Eryri to the YHA's network of youth hostels. In the early days, construction of some hostels was even grant-aided expressly to provide affordable accommodation for national park visits. The Defra-funded Generation Green project has recently seen English national parks partner with YHA, Scouts, Guides and others to allow thousands of young people a "night under the stars" through residential visits.

Achieving equity of access was also the aim of the Mosaic project in 2001 involving eight national parks. Led by Campaign for National Parks, it sought to encourage visits from more culturally diverse visitors and address barriers to participation. In 2024 the (now independent) Peak District Mosaic charity began work with the Peak District, North York Moors and Yorkshire Dales national parks on a Lottery-funded project called Championing National Parks for Everyone that aims to train community champions, build confidence and increase the diversity of visitors to national parks.

"I'm fortunate to live on the doorstep of the Peak District National Park and I take ownership and responsibility for caring for it, while introducing others to look after it in the future. It's important that national parks engage diverse audiences to make this special place truly inclusive for everyone." *Yvonne Witter MBE, Chair of Peak District Mosaic and Secretary of State appointed member, Peak District National Park*

Greater access for all has been a significant achievement over the last two decades across all four parks, with 'Miles without Stiles' providing routes for people of all fitness levels and especially those with disabilities. So far there are over 50 designated routes in the Lake District and 30 across the Peak District and Dartmoor, with similar accessible routes promoted in Eryri. Some of these utilise the trackbed of former railway lines that have become traffic-free

walking and cycling routes, including Keswick to Threlkeld in the Lakes, the Wray Valley Trail and Granite Way in Dartmoor, and a network of highly popular trails in the Peak District (see box). Here the national park has utilised Defra's Access for All funding to open two Changing Places facilities, while its own bike hire centre at Parsley Hay has become a leader in providing adaptive models for people with disabilities.

CASE STUDY 7: PEAK DISTRICT

Railway trails offer quality national park experience for all

In the 1970s and 80s the Peak District National Park acquired the trackbed of four former railway lines and subsequently developed them as recreational trails for walkers, cyclists and horse riders. They are free to use and offer safe, accessible and traffic-free routes through superb natural and cultural landscapes, including dramatic tunnels and viaducts. In 2020 post-Lockdown visitor numbers doubled, in some instances to 2,000 people per day. New tourism and catering businesses have sprung up along the 34 miles of trails, which are now also being developed as nature corridors. The Monsal, High Peak, Tissington and Thornhill trails promote active travel and allow visitors to have a unique and sustainable national park experience. They form part of the 67km (42-mile) White Peak

Loop being developed with Derbyshire County Council and embracing the towns of Buxton, Matlock and the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site outside the national park. www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/visiting/places-to-visit/trails



Cyclists on the Tissington Trail in the Peak District
(photo: Andrew McCloy).

Despite national parks facing the twin challenge of soaring car use and dwindling rural public transport (see next section), some innovative sustainable travel schemes have been trialled. In the Peak District in the 1970s new area management plans involved closing the road through the head of the scenic Goyt Valley on summer weekends, instead promoting active travel and use of a special minibus laid on for visitors. Some years later a similar scheme was introduced in the Upper Derwent Valley. In the same decade, the Yorkshire Dales National Park supported the successful Dales Rail initiative that continues to run services for summer visitors on the Settle-Carlisle line; and in 1976 Eryri began funding the Snowdon Sherpa bus service for walkers. Lack of resources, powers and influence may have curbed national parks' ambitions lately, but there are still signs of progress. The 'Mini Switzerland' integrated public transport pilot coordinated by Hope Valley Climate Action is set to take place in the Peak District in 2026/27 with funding of £12 million from the Department of Transport and East Midlands Combined County Authority.

The variety and quality of outdoor recreation available in national parks extends from the local public rights of way network (now often maintained by national parks) and the gold standard national trail network through to open access to wilder land. In the Peak District access agreements to more than 180 sq km (70 square miles) of hitherto private moorland were negotiated in the 1950s, including to Kinder Scout where the mass trespass of 1932 took place. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 increased the amount of publicly

accessible mapped land across national parks (in the Peak District alone doubling it to almost 500 sq km); and through Local Access Forums national parks continue to look for opportunities to widen public participation in line with their purposes.

However, the postwar leisure boom in national parks has also led to types of outdoor recreation that have a potentially adverse effect on the parks' special qualities and on other users' enjoyment. On occasions national parks have had to resort to challenge and restriction, sometimes in the face of opposition. In the mid-1970s the Lake District National Park brought in by-laws prohibiting power boats on the smaller lakes, extended over time to the larger ones and culminating in a 10mph speed limit on Windermere that came into force in 2005. In the Peak District, in the early 2000s, the national park imposed Traffic Regulation Orders prohibiting off-road vehicles and motorbikes on a small number of unsurfaced routes where unsustainable landscape damage and impact on local amenities and other users was taking place, including Long Causeway at Stanage and Chapel Gate at Edale.

Sometimes the sheer number of users has had a detrimental impact on the landscape, most notably through erosion; but national parks have responded with expertise and energy, such as in the Lake District with Fix the Fells (see box).

CASE STUDY 8: LAKE DISTRICT

Erosion repair on the high fells

Walking, running, mountain biking and horse riding in the fells is core to the enjoyment of the Lake District National Park for visitors and residents alike, but over time, many of the most popular paths became badly eroded and unsightly, causing significant environmental damage. In response, a dedicated restoration partnership called Fix the Fells began in 2001 and now repairs and monitors 408 paths across the national park, covering more than 790km in length. The partnership, comprising the Lake District National Park, Friends of the Lake District, the Lake District Foundation, the National Trust and Natural England, relies entirely upon fundraised donations to cover its work, investing over £650,000 annually in erosion repair and habitat restoration alongside paths. Work is carried out by a team of highly skilled upland path rangers,

supported by 140 volunteers, who use a mix of traditional and innovative techniques to repair erosion, manage water and so mitigate flooding, secure carbon, protect habitats and create a sustainable line for path users. www.fixthefells.co.uk/



A Ranger working on a path at Loft Beck
(photo: Isabel Berry, National Trust).

Footpath damage on Yr Wyddfa has also been a long-standing problem, first tackled in 1979 through the Snowdon Management Scheme, culminating in the decision to replace the visually intrusive and polluting visitor centre at the summit. The resulting 8-year project led by Eryri National Park not only stabilised the summit area and adjoining paths but, in testing working conditions 1,065m above sea level, replaced the building and railway terminus with a sustainable and award-winning new building called Hafod Eryri.

Further recreational pressure followed during the Covid Pandemic with a huge increase of visitors to Yr Wyddfa post-Lockdown, requiring a coordinated response from the national park, Gwynedd County Council and North Wales Police to address parking and access problems. Responsible behaviour is also promoted through the national park-led Caru Eryri (Love Snowdonia) initiative with volunteers from Cymdeithas Eryri (Snowdonia Society), Outdoor Partnership and the National Trust carrying out litter picking and footpath repairs on the mountain. They very deliberately engage with some of the 600,000 visitors who walk up Yr Wyddfa every year, encouraging personal responsibility and safety, and supported by the Eryri Adventure Smart Champions project which shares key safety messages through local businesses.

Looking back over 75 years, providing opportunities for public access and recreation has undoubtedly been one of the national parks' foremost achievements; and the continuing popular appeal and high brand recognition of not just the four studied in this report but all 15 national parks across the UK is impressive. A focus on ensuring that they are truly accessible and welcoming to all must continue to be balanced with the wider impact on fragile environments and local communities.

National parks: lessons from Lockdown

The surge in numbers of people heading into national parks around the Covid Pandemic of 2020 brought significant visitor management challenges, but it also demonstrated how much people value access to nature and green space and the opportunities for outdoor recreation that national parks provide. The impact on local businesses through a loss of trading also highlighted the key contributions made by national parks to rural economies and the tourism industry. More positively, there is now

a renewed appreciation of the role that national parks play in the nation's health and wellbeing, both physical and mental. And post-Covid there has been a noticeable increase in first-time visitors to many national parks, including young people and from more diverse ethnic backgrounds, many of whom have continued to visit. Cumbria Tourism's latest survey (2026) showed that 19% of visitor groups included someone in their party from an ethnic minority community, up from just 2% in 2018.

Cultural heritage protection and restoration

National parks' landscapes are intrinsically cultural, shaped by humans over countless generations, and a success of national parks is how they have been able to demonstrate an understanding of their evolution and what makes them distinctive and special. In the Peak District, where human influence is keenly felt, as much as 60% of the national park has been surveyed in some way, for many years by a dedicated survey archaeologist. This has helped build up a detailed dataset that is of enormous value not just to the national park but for history groups and academic institutions, since the Peak District has developed close ties with universities like Sheffield to promote research and knowledge sharing.

This engagement role is not confined to higher education. In 2016 a Lottery-funded project in the Lake District focused on the historic Coniston coppermines and included the enthusiastic participation of children from the village primary school through model-making and storytelling. This in turn involved their families, some of whom had ties with the mines which were worked until the 1950s, and so an even deeper local connection was made with the national park. In the Peak District, a current project also funded by the Lottery called 'People

of the Peak: Past, Present, Future’ aims to enhance the monitoring and conservation of the national park’s 473 Scheduled Monuments and 2,848 Listed Buildings by providing up to 500 inclusive volunteering and engagement opportunities.

The power of national parks’ landscapes to enthuse and stimulate was also behind ‘Wild Words’, a compilation of writing from local essayists, diarists, poets and lyricists that were all inspired in some way by Dartmoor. It was coordinated by Dartmoor Preservation Association, who said: “Our vision is that, through reading and sharing these stories, people will discover, or strengthen, their connection to Dartmoor. We believe that a strong connection to the landscape inspires activism, accountability, stewardship and a sense of responsibility.”

CASE STUDY 9: DARTMOOR

Unlocking and learning from the Past

With 1,082 Scheduled Monuments, Dartmoor has over 5% of England’s entire total (in just 0.7% of its area) and cares for some of the most important Bronze Age heritage in western Europe. This includes the 3,500-year-old hut circles of Grimspound and Stall Moor, which at 3.4km is believed to be the longest stone row in the world. The national park recognises that internationally important heritage on this scale challenges conventional scheduling and requires a landscape-scale approach, involving integration with specialist colleagues in other fields such as farming and ecology. Detailed surveying has mapped 14 Premier Archaeological Landscapes within the national park to inform land management decisions; an active volunteer group helps conserve scheduled monuments; and the national park is working with higher education establishments including Leicester University so it can respond quickly and dynamically to unexpected finds. This includes Bronze Age cists (ancient graves) such as those excavated at Cut Hill in 2023

and before that at Whitehorse Hill Burial in 2011, two important excavations overseen by the national park team. www.dartmoor.gov.uk/wildlife-and-heritage/heritage



Triple Stone Row on Cosdon Hill, Dartmoor National Park (photo: Dartmoor Trust Archive).

In the Lake District considerable restoration of traditional farm buildings and the historic environment was carried out in the 1980s via the new Environmentally Sensitive Area schemes. Today much of this work is delivered through the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme (see next section) with farmers and land managers actively conserving and maintaining barns, walls, bee boles and lime kilns – in other words, key features of the national park’s cultural landscape. This is also informed by meticulous Conservation Area Appraisals carried out by specialist staff. There are 23 designated areas in the Lake District, but as many as 109 in the Peak District, providing a vital tool for planners, architects, conservationists and

the public at large. Together with design guides and specialist pre-application planning advice, they help explain the importance of local vernacular and encourage quality in the design and construction of proposed works.

This human imprint on the landscapes of the UK's national parks is not just of local importance. Hadrian's Wall (some of which runs through Northumberland National Park) was declared a World Heritage Site in 1987, while UNESCO conferred a similar designation on the Slate Landscape of Northwest Wales, comprising six historic quarrying areas which sit either within or immediately adjacent to Eryri's boundary. However, in 2017 the Lake District became the UK's largest World Heritage Site and the only UK national park to be entirely designated. The UNESCO inscription refers to a cultural landscape shaped by long standing farming traditions and local industry, as well as Picturesque landscape design, Romanticism and the birthplace of the UK's modern conservation movement. On the one hand businesses and tourism providers say that this has boosted the national park's attraction as a quality destination for staying visits and confirmed its wider heritage role; and on the other it has required proposals for development and land use change to now measure their impact on the national park as a World Heritage Site, whether physical or more intangible, through Heritage Impact Assessments. However, it is also a recognition from UNESCO that cultural landscapes like UK national parks have evolved and will continue to do so. The vital role played by national parks like the Lake District is to carefully manage this evolution so that change is measured, consensual and acceptable.

In Wales, cultural heritage is at the heart of Eryri National Park's very identity, in particular through the promotion of the Welsh language, one of the oldest living languages in Europe (see box overleaf). The national park also celebrates this through support and promotion of artists, musicians, storytellers, craftsmen and women and local festivals, all celebrating the rich heritage of Eryri. The Carneddau Landscape Partnership (see page 19) offered apprenticeships for young people to gain practical skills and deeper understanding of cultural heritage, while the national park has supported the Slate Landscape of Northwest Wales World Heritage Site in providing opportunities to learn traditional crafts, including slate work and other building skills important for preserving heritage and economic viability in North Wales.



“The Welsh language is integral to the identity of the communities of North Wales and is a key feature of what makes them special, something that Eryri National Park has evidently understood and successfully embraced.” *Professor Prysor Williams, Professor of Agriculture and Environment, School of Environmental & Natural Sciences, Bangor University.*

The broader achievement of the national parks' cultural heritage approach is how the evident expertise and understanding across the teams is incorporated into wider landscape work, whether through planning, engagement or conservation projects. This integration is at the heart of the parks' successful landscape-wide approach, but it is vital that they are sufficiently resourced to maintain this high quality specialism.

CASE STUDY 10: ERYRI

Welsh language, cultural identity and community bonds

In 2012 Eryri National Park purchased Yr Ysgwrn, a farm near Trawsfynydd that was the home of Hedd Wyn. He was one of Wales's best-known Welsh language poets and his death in World War One and subsequent legacy has come to symbolise the nation's deep emotional connection with that time of loss. Yr Ysgwrn is now open to the public and provides an important point of public connection with the national park; but it also reflects how the park has recognised and supported Welsh culture, and particularly the Welsh language, which is fundamental to its own identity since 58% of Eryri's population speak

Welsh as a first language. Eryri National Park Authority is fully bilingual and the prioritisation of its name from Snowdonia to Eryri (and Snowdon to Yr Wyddfa), as well as pioneering work with Cardiff University and the Welsh Language Commissioner recording and standardising Welsh place names, has helped strengthen this. The Welsh language is a special quality of Eryri National Park and the value and prominence given to it has deepened community bonds, which in turn has had a positive effect on dialogue around other national park issues. www.yrysgwrn.com/



Yr Ysgwrn in Eryri National Park with Hedd Wyn's Bardic Chairs (photos © Ffoto Nant).

Farming, thriving communities and the local economy

The four national parks featured in this report – indeed all 15 UK national parks – are living, working landscapes, each with their own character and distinctive local communities, and where intricate relationships between people, nature and culture are played out.

Farming

Ever since the Scott Committee of 1942, tasked with considering postwar economic reconstruction in rural Britain, concluded that “the countryside cannot be ‘preserved’... it must be farmed if it is to retain these features which give it distinctive charm and character”, the role of farming in national parks has been pivotal, nowhere more so than for national parks in Wales where as much as 90% of the land is farmed in some way.

There are over 1,000 farms within the boundaries of Eryri National Park and the sector is a major local employer. Although the sheer longevity of the national park has helped establish its identity and role, the successful relationship it has developed with its farmers is based on sustained grass roots contact, with many national park staff coming from the same local farming communities. Regular dialogue through the Agricultural Liaison Group, Eryri Forum and landscape partnerships, as well as deeper bonds around Welsh language and culture

(see last section) have all helped. There is a sense from external commentators, including a farmers' union consulted for this report, that Eryri is now regarded as proactive, collaborative and solutions-driven, rather than simply an administrative organisation of regulation and enforcement.

Similarly, in 2002, Dartmoor National Park responded to local farmers' concerns after the Foot and Mouth outbreak with the Dartmoor Moorland Vision that set out a shared ambition; and out of this came Dartmoor Farming Futures, a collaborative bottom-up approach to agri-environment scheme design. Separately, the national park established the Dartmoor Hill Farm Project to add value to local agriculture and increase vocational skills. It continues to host the partnership, which includes the Duchy of Cornwall but is driven by local farmers and has led to initiatives like 'Our Uplands Commons Healthy Livestock' welfare project. Another, delivered in partnership with Shallowford Farm Trust, is called 'Making Connections: Food on your Fork, Nature on the Farm' and makes the link between food eaten at school or at home with farming and conservation on Dartmoor. Part funded by Defra's Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, it has delivered 35 farm visits involving 11 different farms and over 1,000 children.

CASE STUDY 11: PEAK DISTRICT

Nature-friendly farming in national parks with multiple benefits

Between 2021-25 a total of £5.8 million was awarded via the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme in the Peak District. Through 450 separate projects, over 4,220 ha of land was directly managed for nature, including tree planting, pond and hedge restoration; but local schemes also restored cultural heritage features and improved public access. With an emphasis on local design and delivery, 827 farmers took part and 10 farm cluster groups were developed and supported, with collaboration, shared learning and understanding at its heart. "As a farmer and a Local Assessment Panel member it has been great to see so many diverse and wonderful projects supported through the FiPL grant scheme," said Tom Mills of Bubnell Cliff Farm, Derbyshire. "It's a farmer-led scheme, which is really important to the farming community of the Peak District, so it has been great to see the positive feedback

about how simple the process has been and how it has helped support farmers and land managers throughout the National Park to implement sustainable farming practices, increase biodiversity and support rural enterprise." www.peakdistrict.gov.uk/looking-after/living-and-working/fiopl



Longhorn cattle grazing woodland pasture at Bubnell Cliff Farm, Peak District National Park (photo: Tom Mills).

The huge success of FiPL in the Peak District (see box), as well as other English national parks, has built on the work of their specialist farm advisers originally set up in the 1980s. Through them the park has helped the government to design new delivery methods, most recently a Test and Trial engaging local farmers and land managers to determine whether a National Character Area framework could be used to design some of the Environmental Land Management building blocks.

“It’s imperative that Eryri National Park continues to work with its farmers through the likes of Ffermio Bro so they can understand how climate change will impact on their livelihood and devise shared approaches.” Sue Beaumont, Chair, Cwmdeithas Eryri (Snowdonia Society)

Across the designated landscapes of Wales, the equivalent funding programme (Ffermio Bro) is similarly oversubscribed and supports, amongst other things, regenerative farming clusters in Eryri. Like FiPL in England, it is usefully informing the wider design of the Sustainable Farming Scheme. Both demonstrate how a flexible funding scheme delivered locally, tailored to local circumstances and led by farmers through Local Assessment Panels can deliver multiple benefits, including for farming communities themselves. Such has been the success of FiPL that it has already been extended by three years, reinforcing the belief that what started out as a transition measure should be made permanent.

However, since FiPL and Ffermio Bro mainly cover capital funding, the challenge of providing sufficient revenue support persists, and thus the wider economic sustainability of hill farming in national parks. This has implications not just for traditional livelihoods but also for the long term management, appearance and health of upland landscapes. Indeed, the cultural importance of hill farming is of particular importance to national parks like the Lake District, where its World Heritage Site inscription reflects the system of hefted grazing, tenure and dialect of its distinctive upland hill farming culture.

Although beyond the scope of this report, given the pressing need for healthy, nature-rich national park landscapes (see part 5), it is perhaps time for a radical re-think of upland land use and its contribution around nature, natural resources, farming and communities. It is hoped that Dr Hilary Cottam’s ongoing review for Defra of the social, economic and environmental challenges facing England’s upland communities will contribute to new and innovative ways forward here.

“With over 80% of national park land farmed or grazed in some way, it’s crucial we secure a viable future for our upland farmers in order to safeguard the rich cultural heritage of our landscape, while at the same time embracing nature friendly and carbon storing approaches.” Julia Aglionby, Professor of Practice, Centre for National Parks and Protected Areas, University of Cumbria

In conclusion, it is a recommendation of this report that government needs to set out the long term arrangements for supporting farming and land management in national parks, recognising that design and delivery is different in protected landscapes, but the multiple environmental, economic and social benefits can be considerable and national parks are ideally placed and equipped to lead the development of local schemes. Indeed, such is their expertise, local knowledge and connections that they are well placed to take on devolved responsibilities from other public agencies.

Thriving communities and the local economy

Local economies in national parks have undergone fundamental change in the last 75 years, with employment in traditional sectors like farming and quarrying largely replaced by tourism, leisure and hospitality. The importance of tourism in national parks across the UK, to both local and national economies, cannot be overstated. In 2022, the 24,370 businesses in the ten English national parks alone had a combined turnover of £14.8 billion, while their 90 million-plus visitors contributed over £6 billion to the economy⁶.

⁶ <https://nationalparksengland.org.uk/resources>

Dartmoor National Park has calculated that for every £1 it spends another £4 is generated for the local economy. Over 1,500 jobs in the Lake District are directly supported by hospitality, retail and other tourism-related areas. Although national parks do not lead Destination Management Partnerships, they nevertheless make an important contribution, for instance promoting ‘regenerative tourism’ experiences through the National Parks Collection (launched in 2019) that not simply minimise impact but instead seek a positive net contribution from tourism.

Of course, the impact of around 100 million visitors a year to UK national parks is felt in other ways, but initiatives like the Gwynedd and Eryri Sustainable Visitor Economy Plan 2035 is showing how national parks and partners recognise that this vital economic contribution must be balanced with protecting the qualities that makes the area unique in the first place.

A similar joint approach was taken by the Peak District National Park in 2000 with its support for the creation of the independent Stanage Forum to steer the management of the park’s flagship Stanage North Lees estate. It was one of the first examples of a management plan for a public property being produced in partnership with local community groups and businesses, rather than in consultation with them.

The scale of visiting in the context of impact on local communities in some national parks is stark: contrast the Lake District’s 40,000 residents with 18 million annual visitors; or the Peak District’s 38,000 residents living within one hour’s drive of 20 million people; and in places the pressure on housing, in particular, can be acute (see next section). Given their limited resource base and statutory powers, the four parks have become adept at both attracting external funding and channelling contributions from others, but also sometimes as direct grant-givers themselves.

Cronfa Cymunedau Eryri (Eryri Communities Fund) is distributing £100,000 in 2025/26 that includes support for a long term sustainable tourism offer in Dyffryn Ogwen (Ogwen Valley). The Lake District’s Communities Fund ran for 8 years and awarded more than £250,000 to local projects. In the 1980s the Peak District National Park used European funding to launch the first ever Integrated Rural Development schemes in a small number of village communities. Local people themselves devised and implemented grant schemes for combined social, economic and environmental benefit. Later, national parks in England administered Defra’s Sustainable Development Fund using a flexible and bureaucratic-light system of local semi-independent award panels and supported a whole raft of innovative projects. This included setting up the first ever electric car charging network for Dartmoor in 2010 – truly pioneering and ahead of its time.

Even relatively modest awards like these can make a significant difference, such as Dartmoor Community Support Network coordinated by the national park in the wake of the Covid Pandemic. Sometimes this funding acts as a pump primer for more ambitious community development, as shown by the Lake District National Park’s impressive local recovery work in the wake of damage caused by Storm Desmond in 2015 (see box overleaf).

CASE STUDY 12: LAKE DISTRICT

Routes to Resilience for Lake District communities

In December 2015, Storm Desmond caused widespread flooding and severely damaged local infrastructure in the Lake District. In response, the national park spearheaded recovery with a £3 million project called Routes to Resilience, channelling funds from the Rural Payments Agency to rebuild 74 bridges, restore 58 paths and 30 gates. National park rangers liaised closely with parish councils and residents to prioritise work. A Business Task Force was mobilised to re-start the visitor economy and political leaders (including the Prime Minister) were persuaded to visit and endorse the recovery work. Through reconstruction the national park helped build local confidence and resilience; and this led to local people forming a community interest company to launch Ullswater Catchment Management to carry out environmental projects and build farm business resilience. Although supported by the national park,

National Trust and others, this is a bottom-up approach designed and led by the community that now engages over 70% of local farmers to restore rivers, plant hedgerows, create wetlands and wood pasture and manage land in ways that protect both nature and livelihoods.

<https://ucmcic.com/>



The aftermath of Storm Desmond in the Lake District in 2015 (photo: LDNPA).

National parks are the statutory planning authority for their area and this is a key management tool through which the purposes are delivered and their relationship with resident communities often defined, but it was not until the mid-1990s that bespoke national park planning policies began to emerge, including a focus on facilitating affordable local housing rather than meeting general housing need. This remains a challenging area for national parks (see next section), but in Eryri the national park authority is attempting to manage the supply of residential properties for local needs housing through an Article 4 Direction, which revokes the ability to change a main residence into a second home or short-term holiday let without securing planning permission.

In 2019, the Landscapes Review observed that English national parks and national landscapes “should be a positive force for the nation’s wellbeing.” As well as supporting prosperous and resilient communities, many national parks have begun to explore their local role as ‘health assets’, with some in England partnering with local NHS providers to provide ‘nature prescribing’ programmes. Through a pilot with RSPB, the Peak District and North York Moors national parks are demonstrating how a landscape-led natural health service has huge physical and mental health benefit for local people and visitors alike.

To try and quantify this benefit in monetary terms, an independent report into social return on investment commissioned by North York Moors National Park in 2018 calculated that every £1 invested by government generated £7 of health and well-being benefits. In other words, national parks deliver a clear health and economic dividend on public investment. With their wide-ranging brief, the UK’s national parks are well placed to develop this forward-looking public role and provide national leadership, including in Wales where the Well-being of Future

Generations Act (Wales) 2015 provides a visionary framework. The potential contribution that national parks can make towards a healthier population and a more cost effective health service forms the basis for a recommendation in this report.

National parks: strengths and skills

In conclusion, the UK's national parks have clearly amassed considerable experience and developed a broad range of skills over the last 75 years. First, they can evidently master a complex brief that views landscape in its totality, with an approach of time, scale and ambition to match. Subsidiarity has allowed them to identify and nurture local distinctiveness and decision making, both in terms of natural and cultural landscapes, successfully implementing national schemes at a local level that are tailored to specific circumstances. Significant amounts of public money have been levered in with funders clearly showing confidence in the national park

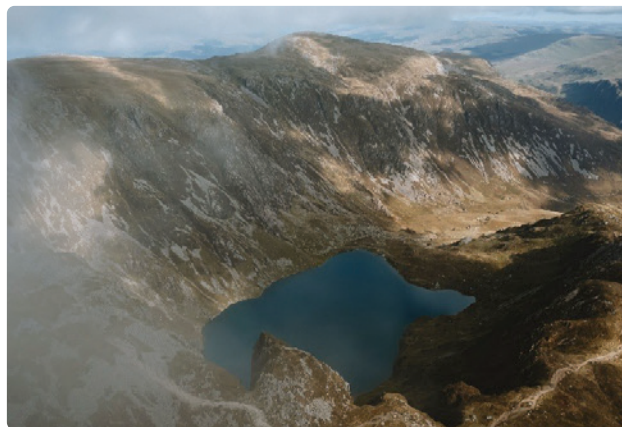
'brand' and their successful track record. There is expertise among national park teams, from ecologists, archaeologists and environmental scientists through to planners and rangers.

Second, national parks almost uniquely speak for 'the place' and over 75 years this has earned them recognition and in many cases trust (the four national parks were described as "honest brokers" by several consultees for this report). From the farming communities of Eryri to the military on Dartmoor, the tourism businesses of the Lake District to the quarry operators of the Peak District, locally-based national park staff have to show a palpable understanding of a landscape that is both protected but also lived-in and actively managed.

Third, in part because they have to, national parks have become adept at convening and developing partnerships to achieve key goals. This comes through most visibly in their statutory 5-year management plans, including in the Lake District where the plan is drawn up by an independent Partnership group with over 20 standing members and supported by 60 different organisations. Dartmoor Futures has been established as a new and autonomous charity to take forward the Partnership Plan's vision into the next 75 years; while in the Peak District, on top of the overarching management plan, the national park works with major landowners like Chatsworth to draw up Whole Estate Plans to aid understanding and align their long term strategic development with national park purposes.

"National parks like the Lake District need to be seen as an integrated whole, so that tourism needs nature to flourish, but nature recovery shouldn't be at the expense of farming and local communities which must remain living, viable and sustainable if these places are to function properly in 75 years' time." *Celia Caulcott, Chair, Lake District National Park Partnership*

Several commentators also observed how, over three quarters of a century, the UK's national parks have helped to promote a broader message about land and landscape as a common heritage, as well as demonstrate the benefits of multifunctional land. This has been achieved by an awareness of how their environments evolve and the contribution of special qualities perhaps felt less keenly 75 years ago. Now Dark Sky reserves (hosted by, amongst others, Eryri, Northumberland, Bannau Brycheiniog, Exmoor and the Cairngorms) and tranquillity



Cader Idris, Eryri National Park
(photo © Follow Films).

mapping is taking its place alongside more traditional appreciation of landscape beauty. The parks' continued emphasis on innovation, research and monitoring, most obviously through the work of the Landscape Observatory, is another strength.

Although there is no sense of 'job done' yet, the four national parks highlighted in this report have also led on a successful access and recreation journey that has gone from brokering new public access and trails through to pioneering a more inclusive and accessible countryside. The Covid Pandemic of 2020, like the earlier Foot and Mouth outbreak, showed the vital role of national parks in domestic tourism and the rural economy. This has been boosted by some national parks setting up charities to help fund national park project work, such as the Lake District and Peak District National Park foundations which each generate over £1 million annually. They have provided funds to support, amongst other things, hedgerow planting, initiatives with schools, water quality improvements and visitor centre development, as well as leading on successful external funding bids for the respective national parks. More broadly, the UK-wide work of National Parks Partnership exploring the potential of green finance is already proving valuable, but national parks will need more collaboration and support from government if they are to diversify their income streams further.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that national park authorities have done all this despite being small organisations with relatively few direct powers and, in recent years, coping with dwindling budgets and headcounts. In other words, national parks are much more than the sum of their parts.

Challenges and obstacles



Increasingly hotter and drier conditions in summer put fragile national park habitats at risk from fires and calls for responsible visitor behaviour (*photos Andrew McCloy/Moors for the Future*).

The UK's national parks have achieved a great deal over the last 75 years, but progress in some areas has been slower than hoped, with obstacles and threats remaining. The national parks created by the 1949 Act were designed in (and arguably for) a different era. The profound environmental, economic and societal changes that followed in subsequent decades undermined some of the core assumptions behind the legislation, requiring the parks to adapt and develop in ways that were not anticipated; and there were practical difficulties around administration and lack of political support in the early years. Although the issues highlighted below relate predominantly to the four national parks in this report, they include challenges and obstacles that are relevant to all UK national parks.

Landscape and farming, nature and climate

The inability to directly influence land management decisions hindered national parks from the start. Postwar afforestation and farming practices remained largely outside their control, as recognised in the Sandford committee's report in 1974. This could have extremely damaging results, perhaps most notably on Exmoor in the 1960s and 70s where the ploughing of moorland to create arable farmland became a highly contentious and long running issue.

Military training (Dartmoor) and mineral extraction (Peak District) both continue to have significant landscape impact, while grouse moor management has raised issues around fires and effects on peatland and wildlife. Major developments like Trawsfynydd nuclear power generation (Eryri) and road building projects such as the Okehampton bypass on Dartmoor and the A66 dual carriageway in the Lake District have gone ahead, in most cases despite national parks' objections but on the authorisation of government.

Since the majority of land in national parks is farmed in some way, the transformation of the sector over the last seven decades has had far-reaching environmental and social

consequences. National parks have had to navigate a careful path that balances local economic and cultural considerations with lasting environmental and landscape benefits, including the long-term viability of upland livelihoods. Here as in so many other areas, the parks' ability to shape relevant national policy is limited and often outside their remit altogether.

Equally dramatic and unforeseen has been the unfolding nature crisis, in tandem with the consequences of a changing climate, and especially for national parks designated for their landscape, natural beauty and wildlife. Certain changes in farming and land use, as well as pollution, poor water quality and inappropriate development have fragmented and denuded priority habitats; sensitive landscapes are often severely damaged by events like flooding and fires; raptor persecution remains an ongoing problem in some parks; and lack of baseline data and consistent monitoring is hindering coherent plan-making and target-setting. Much of this was highlighted in Campaign for National Park's Health Check report on nature recovery in national parks in England and Wales (2024)⁷, which estimated that only 6% of the total land area of national parks is currently managed effectively for nature. Their call to action has been echoed by other reports covering individual nations and the UK as a whole, including the Landscapes Review, Biodiversity Deep Dive in Wales and the IUCN UK National Committee's Protected Areas Working Group report 'Putting Nature on the Map'⁸.

The scale and urgency of the crisis may now be clear, as is the pressing economic and security case for action (see next section), but historically national parks have simply not been empowered to stop the loss of nature within their boundaries. They lack many of the levers of control and the ability to influence or instruct management plan partners to take action. And there are systemic problems, too, such as in the Peak District where the national park straddles multiple local authorities, meaning that it is covered by six separate Local Nature Recovery Strategies drawn up by six different organisations with six different action plans. Arguably, too, the fact that the 1949 Act established the National Parks Commission and Nature Conservancy as separate bodies has meant that, ever since, national parks have had to wrestle with a commonly held mindset of access and conservation as competing interests rather than integrated opportunities.

Leisure, tourism, access and communities

Widespread changes in people's leisure time and recreational habits over the last 75 years have also had a huge impact on national parks. The UK population has grown from 43 million in 1951 to around 68 million today, while greater affluence and mobility in the 1960s onwards saw a boom in leisure time and recreational activity, especially in visits to national parks by car. In 1951 there were 2.4 million cars on Britain's roads and today there are over 34 million, with noise, congestion and visual impact now a problem, and overcrowding at honeypot sites. All four national parks in this report have been affected by a rapid growth in motor traffic, which in some locations now poses a threat to special qualities like tranquillity, contributes significantly to carbon emissions and can negatively affect local communities. If the 'polluter pays' principle applies, is it now timely for vehicle users themselves to be part of the solution? For those especially well-used and accessible parks, a congestion charge or similar would generate significant revenue to fund public transport and active travel alternatives, and coupled with imaginative traffic management is likely to have an impact on traffic levels. However, it is vital that income derived from a charging scheme, whether implemented by national government or a regional mayor, for instance, must directly benefit the national park affected.

⁷ <https://www.cnp.org.uk/health-check-report/>

⁸ <https://iucn-nc.uk/projects/putting-nature-on-the-map/>

More intrusive recreational pursuits have impacted on the parks' special qualities and required regulation, including speed limits on boats in the Lake District and curbs on off-road vehicles and motorbikes in the Peak District (see last section). National parks have also had to stand up for public access rights, most notably Dartmoor National Park's successful defence of a legal challenge against backpack camping in the national park in 2023.

As visits by car have increased, rural public transport provision across most national parks has seen a steady decline, and national parks' innovative attempts to tackle the problem have often foundered due to a lack of funding and partner support. Regardless, addressing economic and also cultural barriers to accessing national parks in order to attract a more diverse visitor base (most recently highlighted in the Landscapes Review of 2019) remains a significant but complex challenge for national parks at a time of scarce resources.

Equally pressing is the need to maintain sufficient affordable housing to ensure national park communities remain viable places to live. In 2024, a Building Society report⁹ calculated that a house in a national park in England and Wales sold for 25% more than a similar property elsewhere, translated into a property valuation of an additional £66,700 based on average UK house prices at the time. In 2025, a report by Friends of the Lake District¹⁰ found that 28% of dwellings in the national park were unoccupied (more than twice the Cumbrian average) and 92% of holiday lets were in permanent buildings suitable for year-round housing, but unavailable to local workers and families. If our national parks are to remain thriving and lived-in landscapes, it is vital that we find a sustainable balance between holiday accommodation and housing for year-round local use. Where the problem is most acute, targeted action through tighter regulation of short-term holiday accommodation and second homes is one way forward.

In summary, it is clear that for some national parks, including those featured in this report, high visitor numbers are having a significant environmental and social impact, and here it is necessary to consider new approaches to sustainable tourism and transport, including the efficacy of visitor charging; and also to address the long term balance of local housing stock – and this forms a recommendation for action in this report. However, it also recognises that the circumstances of each park are different and so solutions, where required, need to be tailored accordingly.

Resources, powers and priorities

The challenge for government is to fully recognise the contribution that national parks make for the nation and so provide them with adequate funding and powers to maximise their delivery and effectiveness. The problem for national parks is that by and large the public already grasp their importance for nature, access and wellbeing, but meeting this expectation is difficult without sufficient central support. For many years in England, in particular, national parks do not appear to have benefited from any consistent joined-up strategic thinking at government level, perhaps because their work effectively cuts across multiple Whitehall



Winnats Pass in the Peak District National Park c1960s (photo: PDNPA).

⁹ <https://www.nationwide.co.uk/media/hpi/reports/n>

¹⁰ <https://www.friendsofthelakedistrict.org.uk/work/fairerhousing/>

departments. The ten national park authorities have seen the average value of their core public grant fall by 40% in real terms, with an inevitable impact on service delivery. While new and ongoing capital funding may be welcome, and additional income streams must continue to be explored (see next section), it should not hide the fact that core revenue funding is essential for their day to day operations; and in many cases they have been cut to the core already. Continued organisational uncertainty, short term budget planning and stop-start project funding is simply an unsustainable way to manage a national public body. The need for sustained multi-year core funding from government to provide a base on which these flagship organisations can go on and thrive is critical and as such forms a recommended action in this report.

There is also an issue around the status, role and identity of the public organisations that run national parks – national park authorities – since they are neither typical arm’s-length bodies of government nor conventional local authorities, yet they receive funding from and are answerable to government and are also statutory planning authorities. It possibly explains why they have not always been sufficiently bold and outspoken or lauded their own achievements; and perhaps is the reason why they have not been vigorously championed by the public who clearly have a deep approval of and emotional attachment to the place, but little understanding or support for the body that looks after it. Instead, the vociferous promotion of the four national parks highlighted in this report has largely fallen to NGOs like Campaign for National Parks and national park societies, including Dartmoor Preservation Association, Cymdeithas Eryri (Snowdonia Society), Friends of the Lake District and Friends of the Peak District, who between them do so much sterling work.

It is essential that efforts are made to translate the public’s very evident appreciation of national parks into more tangible involvement, support and advocacy; and with over 100 million visitors to UK national parks every year there is enormous potential here. This forms a proposed wider action in this report, as does the recommendation that national park authorities themselves show bold and visible leadership, embracing governance reform and innovative ways of working.

Some of the ongoing challenges faced by all 15 UK national parks are in part due to the national park model itself where balance, priority, judgement and national versus local considerations are everyday factors in managing a lived-in landscape. But 75 years after they were established, these iconic places remain arguably under appreciated by other decision-making public bodies. In 1991, the report of the National Parks Review Panel (‘Fit for the Future’) found that there had been only a “partial acceptance” of the importance of national parks and their purposes. In England, the test today is whether the new so-called Protected Landscapes Duty on public bodies to “further” national park purposes while exercising their functions can change this mindset; while in Wales the Section 62 Duty for public bodies to “have regard” to the parks’ purposes remains in place and continues to be a significant constraint on progress.

Given the fact that so little of the land in the UK’s national parks is in direct public ownership, the contribution of public bodies and third parties in achieving the parks’ purposes and implementing their statutory plans is critical, and this is a further recommended action in this report.

“With national parks owning so little land themselves, the other key public and quasi-public bodies that do – such as forestry, water and the military – should have a mindset that puts national parks’ statutory purposes front and centre in all their strategies and decision-making.” *Rose O’Neill, CEO, Campaign for National Parks.*

New threats and challenges

Looking ahead to the next 75 years, many of the emerging threats to not just the four national parks examined here but all 15 across the UK are becoming more clearly understood, especially in relation to the impacts of climate change. Hotter drier summers, warmer wetter winters combined with more extreme weather events and rising sea levels will contribute to habitat loss, as species migrate and in some cases disappear altogether; new pathogens and invasive non-native species are likely to become more common. The impact on the parks' special qualities will also have a human element, with forced changes in farming and land management, stresses on infrastructure and natural resources (including on local communities and the rural economy), and likely shifts in visitor volumes and patterns of use, including population movement to water bodies and the cooler uplands in summer.

Despite this, access to nature and the outdoors is likely to become more important than ever as our urban post-industrial society seeks connection with green and blue spaces, faces pressing health inequalities and is likely to look more urgently for 'factories of wellbeing'. Ultimately it is about the supply of natural resources or public goods vital for human existence which flourishing national parks can deliver in abundance: clean air, water, nature, food and the ability to store vast amounts of carbon. In this scenario nature recovery, in particular, is of fundamental importance to the UK's security and prosperity, and here healthy and resilient national parks are critical.

Conclusion: a legacy and the future



Sunrise in Dartmoor National Park
(photo DNPA).

National parks at 75: a legacy

Seventy-five years after Britain's first national parks were established their natural beauty might remain undimmed, but in many other ways the landscape around them has changed immeasurably. From farming to visiting and the plight of nature, so much is different now for our finest landscapes; but, despite some challenging early years, our national parks have matured into independent and capable organisations. They have a firm grasp of their brief and demonstrate the strengths of a managed and lived-in landscape of national importance, as well as highlighting some of its inherent tensions.

There have been many achievements, not least how they have managed to retain distinctiveness in their natural and built environments by guiding others' land use and management decisions, as well as applying well designed local planning policies

of their own. They take an integrated approach to landscape management and use delivery partnerships to link local priorities and national strategies. The growing reach and ambition of their landscape-scale programmes of recovery and restoration is impressive, while the quality and extent of public access and recreation provision, cultural heritage know-how and appetite for research and innovation all show the parks actively fulfilling the founding vision. Theirs is a legacy of a well-established and popular national asset, the power of beautiful and wilder landscapes, and significant natural, cultural and economic value to the nation.

However, 75 years on and despite subsequent modification, national parks are still working in a framework largely designed in and arguably for a different era, and despite progress there are still impediments, not least inadequate powers and insufficient resources. But they can deliver so much more. Given the changes that have happened and the challenges ahead, now is the moment for a reset so that national parks have the direction, authority and requisite tools to play a more active and solutions-driven role for the nation. National parks' landscapes represent over 9% of the British land mass and their potential to drive both environmental improvement and economic growth for the UK is enormous; and much of this can come from leading nature's recovery.

In 2025, a Green Finance Institute report¹¹ warned that chronic climate and nature degradation in the UK could reduce GDP by 4.7% within the decade identified if nature is not integrated into our growth strategy. And the UK Government's latest national security assessment¹² is clear about a wider threat: "Nature is a foundation of national security. Biodiversity loss is

¹¹ <https://www.greenfinanceinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Business-Investment-in-Nature-Supporting-UK-Economic-Resilience-and-Growth.pdf>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nature-security-assessment-on-global-biodiversity-loss-ecosystem-collapse-and-national-security>

putting at risk the ecosystem services on which human societies depend, including water, food, clean air and critical resources.” It emphasises the importance of the Global Biodiversity Framework agreed in 2022 and the commitment by UK and others to protect 30% of global land and ocean by 2030. Viewed in this context and given that up to 80% of the UK’s priority conservation habitats are within national parks, it is legitimate to argue that national parks should be increasingly regarded as part of our critical national infrastructure.

As many commentators have already noted, finding a successful formula for the British national park model, where nature and natural resources are integrated with mixed land use and economic development, is gaining ever more attention. IUCN guidelines for a Category V Protected Area¹³ suggest that ‘the focus of management should be on the point of interaction between people and nature’ and where humans should be seen as ‘stewards of the landscape’. But what is an appropriate level of ambition here? What does ‘good’ look like in a lived-in landscape? The skills and experience that the UK’s national parks have built up over 75 years certainly puts them in a good position to test this out, accepting that our landscapes have always evolved and will continue to do so.

Given the present threats and uncertainty, now is the moment to rekindle the pioneering spirit of 1951, but tailored to a very different set of circumstances and pressures. Back then designation regarded landscape more passively through the lens of natural beauty. Now we need to reset and recognise the parks’ utility for the nation in a different way, understanding how their considerable natural assets can actively help the nation meet the challenges of the next 75 years. So what will the contribution of national parks look like in the future and what needs to happen to realise this?

“The Lake District National Park is only about 30 miles wide by 30 miles long, yet it now absorbs more than 18 million visitors a year. Creating it in 1951 took ambition and vision, but safeguarding this precious and pressured landscape for the next 75 years will require an even more radical step-change.” *Michael Hill, CEO, Friends of the Lake District*

A look ahead and recommended actions

The look ahead and recommended high level actions that follow are intended to build on the foundations laid down by the 1949 Act and subsequent legislation. National park purposes need to be recalibrated so the parks are set up to meet the challenges of the future; they must be properly resourced and their powers updated so they can operate effectively; and they should be supported to adopt new and innovative ways of working.

The vision is of inspirational landscapes of continuing great natural beauty, but which are fully healthy, functioning and resilient to change. Their special qualities are valued by the nation for the supply of natural capital or resources vital for our wellbeing now and into the future. National parks lead and support a range of ambitious partnerships to deliver cross-boundary landscape restoration and enhancement, funded by a blend of public and private finance.



Well-designed and sited affordable housing, as here at Grasmere in the Lake District, is vital in maintaining thriving national park communities (photo: LDNPA).

¹³ <https://iucn.org/resources/publication/management-guidelines-iucn-category-v-protected-areas-protected>

National parks (and national landscapes) play a leading and visible role in supporting nature's recovery and delivering the UK's 30x30 commitments. In England, this is in line with the government's Environmental Improvement Plan and the newly-published Land Use Framework¹⁴ providing a blueprint for the optimal use of national park land commensurate with statutory purposes. In Wales, this is steered by the targets and approach set out in the new Environmental (Principles, Governance and Biodiversity Targets) (Wales) Bill 2026¹⁵.

Successful nature-rich national parks provide the powerhouse for local rural economies, drive nationally important tourism and hospitality, support a thriving and sustainable farming and land management sector and generate a variety of green jobs and businesses. National parks channel considerable inward investment and, while continuing to receive the highest level of protection in national planning policy, contribute proactively to regional spatial and strategic planning.

National park management plans have bold landscape restoration and nature recovery targets, as well as a sharper focus on sustainable economic growth and health and wellbeing actions, all supported by better data and monitoring. Stronger delivery partnerships involve national nature agencies and statutory undertakers who demonstrate a shared ambition and best practice. All of this is steered by amended statutory purposes that set out a more active and purposeful role for national parks around nature and natural resources.

Healthy and resilient national park landscapes

This picture of the next 75 years requires whole national park landscapes to be fully functioning, healthy and able to flex to changing conditions. From mountain and moorland to woodland, rivers, grasslands and soils, the natural capital of national parks will provide the nation with clean air and drinking water, act as a brake on severe downstream flooding events, supply sources of food and vital carbon sinks, and a variety of habitats to sustain nature as it recovers. At the same time, national parks will provide society with tranquillity and connection with wilder green and blue spaces, and opportunities for exercise, adventure and wellbeing.



The Peak District National Parks' peat-forming upland moors are a vital store of carbon
(photo: Jim Randle).

Over the next 75 years, nature-friendly and regenerative farming in national parks becomes the norm and provides a pathway to 30x30, with national parks designing and administering local support programmes; and there is a just transition for farmers and land managers. A new long-term approach to national park upland land use sees some areas managed specifically for nature, or less managed altogether; and intensive land management practices that cause damage are controlled by regulation or stopped entirely.

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/land-use-framework>

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/wales-strengthens-environmental-protections-landmark-bill-passes-senedd>

National parks are accessible and welcoming to rural and urban audiences alike; their distinctive cultural heritage continues to be celebrated, especially through language in Welsh national parks. Green social prescribing programmes embedded in national parks widen access for all, connect people with nature and improve the physical and mental wellbeing of residents and visitors alike, contributing to significant healthcare cost savings.

National parks receive the certainty of multi-year core funding from government and a reduction in the regulatory burden of local government. Outcome-led management plans continue to drive up performance; and key decision-making partners, especially public bodies, are held to account and compelled to further national park purposes. National parks' governance is reviewed and modernised to broaden participation and bring through a younger and more diverse generation of national park leaders and custodians. National parks become ever more agile and entrepreneurial, developing blended income streams to fund their ambitious programmes. Innovative sustainable tourism and transport initiatives help those parks under particular pressure mitigate the environmental and social impacts of high visitor numbers and encourage positive behavioural change. Visitor charging and tighter regulation of holiday accommodation and second homes provide an option in some circumstances, although where this is required it is tailored to the circumstances of the individual park and revenue from any new charging schemes introduced by third parties directly benefits the national parks. With a conscious shift in culture as much as constitution, national parks begin to think and act beyond traditional process-led approaches and are vocal in leading ambitious change.

And finally, given their role as planning authorities and their proven expertise and assurance of delivering successful landscape scale projects, there is a strong argument that national parks are increasingly in a position to benefit from earned autonomy. The streamline decision making and cost savings that are likely to come with this will only accelerate their performance and delivery further.

The recommended high level actions set out below work as an integrated set and although many are for government, because these are national designations, after all, there are also responsibilities on the national parks themselves and all those who deliver their statutory plans, as well as encouragement for the public to move beyond passive enjoyment and show their love for national parks through advocacy and engagement.

Recommended actions by national, devolved and local government

- 1. Prioritise and resource national parks to lead landscape restoration and nature recovery:** Resource national parks to coordinate further transformative landscape-scale restoration, supported by stronger environmental protection; and (with national landscapes) lead the urgent delivery of the UK's 30x30 commitment, underpinned by amended statutory purposes defining a more focused and active national park role.
- 2. Set out long term arrangements for farming and land management in national parks:** Confirm future nature-friendly farming programmes and upland land use in protected landscapes, with an enhanced role for national parks in the design and delivery of local agri-environment schemes, including devolved responsibilities from other public agencies.
- 3. Make health and wellbeing benefits of national park landscapes available to all:** Public health providers to work with national parks to develop an ambitious programme of nature-based interventions, so broadening access to national parks, achieving healthcare savings and improving health outcomes for rural and urban audiences alike.
- 4. Promote sustainable tourism measures and innovative transport schemes in national parks to mitigate local impacts:** Tighter regulation of holiday accommodation and second homes, and innovative tourism and transport initiatives to tackle localised visitor pressure; but approaches need to be individually tailored to the parks' circumstances and revenue from any new visitor levy or vehicle charging introduced by third parties must directly benefit the national parks affected.
- 5. National park funding certainty and support by local authorities:** Government to set out multi-year core funding for national parks and support for income diversification; local authorities to actively support national parks in line with the Protected Landscapes Duty (England) and Section 62 Duty (Wales).

Recommended action by national park authorities:

- 6. Bold leadership and new ways of working:** National parks to show bold and visible leadership to drive nature and landscape recovery; embrace governance reform and continue to diversify income streams and innovative ways of working; and bring partners together through dynamic and inclusive management plans.

Recommended action by partners helping to deliver National Park Management Plans:

- 7. Partnership and prioritisation:** Management Plan partners, and decision-making public bodies and utility companies owning land in national parks, to deliver outcomes-focused actions that demonstrably share the parks' vision and strategic ambitions.

Recommended action by the public:

- 8. Support, participate and champion:** Active public support for national park charities and societies; participation in national park activities (from volunteering opportunities through to governance roles); and championing of the importance of national parks and what they care for and do.