



Consultation Response

Scottish Government Dialogue: The Future of National Parks in Scotland

June 2022



About Us

Volunteer Scotland is Scotland's National Centre for Volunteering. We believe that volunteering should be an enjoyable, rewarding and fulfilling experience for the volunteer; that volunteers have the right to be safe and protected in delivering their volunteering roles; and that to derive health and well-being benefits from volunteering requires regular and meaningful contributions of time.

Should any queries arise from our response, please contact our Policy Officer by emailing **sarah.latto@volunteerscotland.org.uk**

Response

We propose that the inclusive participation of volunteers should be a central factor in deciding on the location and infrastructure for a new National Park. The principal aims of Scottish national parks are:

- To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area.
- To promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area.
- To promote understanding and enjoyment (including enjoyment in the form of recreation) of the special qualities of the area by the public.
- To promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities.

In this regard, volunteering is a win-win-win-win. It is a sustainable way to help conserve and develop the natural and cultural heritage of the area whilst providing an opportunity for people from local communities and beyond to experience Scotland's natural environment whilst improving their physical and mental wellbeing.

As stated on the National Parks website, 'volunteers are the lifeblood of National Parks and so much is achieved because of their dedication and commitment'. It is clear that this is the reality in Scotland's two existing National Parks. Each has its own Volunteer Ranger programme, whereby volunteers act as ambassadors in interactions with the park's many visitors as well as undertaking practical conservation tasks. Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park also has a youth volunteering programme where young people undertake practical tasks whilst learning about nature and teamwork.

A number of other organisations also engage volunteers in the existing National Parks to support a range of activities, including conservation, culture, heritage, recreation and community wellbeing. Some of the organisations with volunteering opportunities in these areas include the RSPB, Plantlife Scotland, National Trust for Scotland, Ramblers Scotland and Scottish Mountain Rescue. This demonstrates the breadth of activity that volunteers support to ensure that our existing National Parks continue to thrive and develop.

As well as the practical benefits of involving volunteers, people who choose to volunteer also experience significant improvements to their mental and physical wellbeing. In 2019, the University of Essex conducted a Social Return on Investment analysis of Wildlife Trust programmes.¹ They found that 'targeted programmes designed for people with a health or social need showed a return of £6.88 for every £1 invested. This value was generated from health gains such as improved mental wellbeing. For those attending general volunteering programmes, the value was even higher with a return of £8.50 for every £1 invested.'

In addition, a study undertaken by Volunteer Scotland in 2018 found that 'volunteering can improve the mental health of volunteers through increasing their social connectedness; providing them with a sense of purpose linked to task satisfaction and sense of fulfilment; enhancing their skills, building confidence and

¹ <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/SROI%20Report%20FINAL%20-%20DIGITAL.pdf>

improving resilience and self-efficacy; increasing self-esteem and self-respect; and just by having fun and being happy'.²

The same study also found that 'the more disadvantaged a person is the more important the potential contribution of volunteering is likely to be.' In other words, the personal benefits of volunteering on health and wellbeing are more pronounced in people experiencing disadvantage, specifically those from more deprived communities. As such, it is vital that access to meaningful volunteering opportunities for those from more deprived communities in any new National Park is considered.

In addition to the positive impact of volunteering on collective wellbeing, it also has a vital role to play in educating people about the natural environment, sustainable land use and the damaging effects of climate change. A study by the University of Essex in 2017 found that volunteering in nature for 6 weeks increased 'pro-environment behaviour' by over 50%.³

As such, our proposal is that access to volunteering opportunities for a broad cross-section of the population should be central to the factors applied in the selection and planning of Scotland's third National Park. Relevant considerations include accessible transport and affordable accommodation for those giving their time to support the National Park.

It is also vital that volunteer management practices promote inclusion. Reimbursing travel expenses and addressing barriers within a volunteer induction journey, amongst other things, can support wider inclusion. A new National Park could make a formal commitment to become a 'volunteer friendly zone' by requesting that organisations engaging volunteers in the area undertake a relevant quality standard such as [Investing in Volunteers](#) or the [Volunteer Friendly award](#).

A form of 'volunteer passport' within the National Park could also be considered, whereby all volunteer involving organisations operating in the Park could share elements of their recruitment, selection and training journeys for volunteers. This would allow easier transition between roles for volunteers.

The Scottish Government is committed to the development of a 'Wellbeing Economy' in Scotland, founded on the principles of inclusion and sustainability. It is also committed to broadening volunteering participation, as detailed in the new Volunteering Action Plan due for publication in June 2022. Both of these commitments, along with evidence regarding the significant value of volunteering, suggest that taking steps to further promote inclusive volunteering, through those measures detailed above, should be a priority within Scotland's new National Park.

² https://www.volunteerscotland.net/media/1436178/volunteering_health_wellbeing_full_report.pdf

³ https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2018-05/r3_the_health_and_wellbeing_impacts_of_volunteering_with_the_wildlife_trusts_-_university_of_essex_report_3_0.pdf



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