



Adult Learning Within Reach

Member Lecture – 9 July 2020

Britain's national parks – how we value heritage landscapes
Dr Hadrian Cook, WEA Ambassador

Questions and answers not taken during lecture.

Q1 Do you consider that one of the biggest issues could be the impact of too many visitors particularly in easily accessible spots and especially if there is a move to staycations?

An interesting question. I doubt if the increase would be enormous. Basically, most visitors to our national parks go for the day or very short breaks rather than vacations. Most popular spots are generally carefully managed anyway.

I also wonder if the hypothetical cohort of people who are not going abroad would have outdoor pursuit interests?

Another point is that while those close to the large centres of population (e.g. the Peak District, Yorkshire Dales, New Forest etc.) attract day-trippers galore, most remote national parks may experience increased pressure from longer stays. I am thinking here of the new Scottish examples or Pembrokeshire and maybe (but unsure about) Snowdonia. A great student project, but I guess any increase would be marginal and manageable!

Q2 Why have the North Downs not been made into a national park, now the South Downs have been granted national park status – particularly at a time when Kent / Sussex / Surrey are so under threat from urbanisation?

Another great question. I was brought up visiting the North Downs and became interested in urbanisation because the base maps of the geology maps I collected as (a mildly sad) teenager were often years out of date, so you could easily imagine how the London suburbs had developed, particularly in the 20th century. To try and address the point, three things:-

- The Town and Country Planning Act 1947 effectively created the planning system and re-enforced the notion of the 'Green Belt' which had occurred due to concern over urbanisation in the 1930s around many cities, including London. This may have been considered sufficient.
- I perhaps should have been clearer that the national parks in the 1950s were in upland areas of England and Wales (Scotland being another story). A good question is why this might have been? Probably the agriculture and timber lobbies were too strong for 'lowland' areas. Counter-intuitively, this includes the Downs!
- Specifically, the South Downs had a serious soil erosion problem brought about through agriculture and has a significant archaeological resource to be protected. I was appointed at Wye College in Kent in January 1988 and my then boss, Professor Bryn Green, was fond of the South Downs and he has been a Countryside Commissioner. Together with

the work of Dr John Boardman (once Brighton Poly and late of Oxford University) who did amazing work on soil erosion (the Rottingdean study is most famous, you can Google it), a kind of head of steam was built. It was realised in 2011 when the national park was declared.

While the problems of the South Downs have been greater overall, do not think a national park for the North Downs is impossible!

Q3 Does tourism influence when assessing whether to grant national park status?

Indeed it does. The criteria for establishing national parks includes the idea of protecting valued areas for development, deemed in appropriate feed of the back of a popular sense of their heritage, environmental and aesthetic value. Hence the problem is to manage visitors but also keep the local economies vibrant. An anecdote:-

Many years ago the Cook family took a cycling break on the Tissington Trail in Derbyshire. In a nameless small town, I had to repair a puncture on one of my kid's bikes. We did this following a jolly lunch in the local pub where the landlord and landlady could not do enough to accommodate families. Anyway, half-way through the repair, a dreadful woman came out of her house and started shouting at me for changing a tyre in the road below the bank to her garden. My reply was a sarcastic 'come and repair your bike in my garden anytime'. The two responses to me signify on the one hand a legitimate business response to keep the economy within the national park vibrant, the other a super-Nimby approach from someone I imagine whose house was worth a small fortune, and probably somewhere not shy of a house price on Cheshire or Surrey. Damn tourists. Actually, when I go to places I am a visitor.

Q4 Are you concerned that this / future governments may be tempted to erode the impregnable status of national parks by allowing housing creep, erosion of heritage farming and conservation of special sites of scientific interest (i.e. unique eco-systems) to encroach and destroy the original ethos?

OK, I am going to be Normative here and declare my allegiance to Labour. I think what you suggest is, and ever has been, a real problem. Conservative governments especially are close to development interests. People may remember Nicholas Ridley who hated the planning system when Secretary of State for the Environment. I also think unless carefully managed, the ramifications of Brexit could lead to a restructuring of British Agriculture that would be detrimental to sustainable agriculture, however that might be defined.

When Margaret Thatcher apparently because a tad greener, one wag commented 'No wonder the Tories are concerned with the environment, they own it!' That is the only crumb of comfort I can find. I will leave the matter here!

Q5 Should some AONBs become a new national park e.g. Surrey hills?

I can answer this one in that the presence of an AONB draws attention to the value of an area in terms of landscape and draws together local governmental and agency interests. This is a mechanism towards the establishment of a national park, For example, the Cranborne Chase and Jurassic Coast AONBs may yet provide the core of a new national park. I suggest you have a quick Google for any you are interested in to find out more.

Q6 How can we ensure that diverse species of flora and fauna continue to thrive for the benefit of each other and our landscapes, whilst allowing public access for leisure, mental and physical wellbeing and ecological research?

This is a summary of the kind of challenges that produced national parks in the first place! The art is to balance economic development and social inclusion against a range of conservation interests. My view is that the planning system and conservation bodies should be powerful and be able to progress on a case-by-case basis. There is no single (or indeed simple) answer. Public opinion before Covid-19 was revealed to be strongly behind XR and for doing something about the climate crisis. These kinds of (good) popular movements are influential over time.

Q7 You said Scotland was quite late to set up national parks – I often wonder why the northwest coast areas are not designated?

I do not know the exact answer to this but totally agree. Northwest Scotland is one of the most beautiful areas in Britain and a classic for geology and landscape heritage. It already enjoys considerable protection, including from UNESCO. A quick Google should reveal there is a will to create marine national parks as well. Given Scotland's late arrival in the national park business, one suspects it is only a matter of time.