

**Trevor's Blog – 20 September 2019**



I have just returned from the UK National Parks Conference for 2019 which took place in the Yorkshire Dales National Park (YDNP) with the theme of “New Horizons”. The SDNPA delegation also included Margaret Paren, Helen Jackson, Heather Baker and Andrew Lee, all of whom will be able to add much to the brief account in this blog – so if you encounter any of them ask how they got on and what they took away from the conference.

These events take place every two years and many of you will remember that we hosted the last one in the South Downs. The team from Yorkshire followed the pattern established for our own conference and the whole event ran smoothly with fantastic support from the YDNP staff. Unlike our own conference the weather was bright and sunny (almost) throughout which showed off the bleak grandeur of the Dales to its best effect.



After the usual welcome to the area the conference began with a brilliant potted history of National Parks from David Butterworth, the National Park Officer for YDNP. He drew attention to the

speed with which the movement was originally created – with the first six National Parks designated within just five years – compared to the decades that it took to designate the South Downs or to approve the Lake District and YDNP extensions. There was clear message in all this to government to streamline its processes and this theme recurred throughout the conference – with the added implication that NPAs should do the same. Unfortunately no Ministers could attend but Theresa Villiers sent a video message and there were speakers from Scotland and Wales. The first day concluded with a speech from the Duke of Devonshire at Bolton Abbey and supper in an ancient Tithe Barn on the estate.

The second day was devoted to a series of day long study tours. My own began with a short trip on the Settle Carlisle line to the isolated Ribbleshead Station from which YDNP's three peaks encircle the horizon. We heard from the dedicated volunteers who have turned this part of the national rail network into a major visitor attraction in its own right, running museums, cafés and accommodation and helping with maintenance. We walked under the Ribbleshead viaduct itself which, together with the Blea Moor tunnel, was built in 1870 to 1875, an extraordinary feat of engineering at a time when most of the work was still done by hand. We were accompanied by archaeologists from YDNPA who showed us the remains of the camps for the navvies, which were complete settlements with romantic names like Jericho, Jerusalem and Sebastopol for what must have been extremely unromantic living conditions. Many died in the construction of the line and were buried in mass graves at local churches.

We moved on from Ribbleshead to explore the Ingleborough National Nature Reserve, part of which is a former quarry which has quickly been reclaimed by nature since it closed in 2000. Here we saw some wonderful examples of extensive limestone pavements. We had to cast around to discover the foundations of a long house that may have been Viking since even our guides found it difficult to navigate this wild landscape. Some sensitively placed interpretation would have been useful. Throughout our visit there was little indication that we were in the National Park – even at the tourist hot spot of Ribbleshead.



The second day finished with a formal dinner at which a series of awards were handed out, the most memorable of which was to Xander Johnston who became the Cairngorms first Nature Young Ambassador at the age of 10 and in the two years since has contributed nearly 500 hours of volunteering, as well as appearing on Countryfile and Springwatch.

The final day began with three thought provoking presentations followed by workshops and a debate. Tony Juniper, the recently appointed Chair of Natural England (NE), gave a graphic account of the urgency of the environmental challenges we all face. He argued that “we can and must do much more with our National Parks, for Nature recovery, landscape beauty, carbon capture, climate adaptation, public health and local and regional economies. We need an integrated approach, using all tools we have in the box.” He did not, however, explain how NE will support us in this. Dr William Bird gave a similar presentation to that which he has delivered at our health and wellbeing and staff conferences, explaining the powerful health giving effects of outdoor exercise and the science behind it. His message was no less powerful for being familiar to those of us who have heard him in the South Downs.

The final speaker was the most challenging and practical. Georgina Umney is one of Yorkshire Wildlife Trust’s “Tomorrow’s Natural Leaders” and gave a presentation that fully justified the title. She argued that the passion that young people have for the British landscape is a massive opportunity for National Parks that can only be exploited if they are given a voice and a clear role. She argued for more work placements and the creation of a welcoming environment for young people linked to entry level jobs and accommodation. She felt that National Parks were too focused on presenting themselves as places to visit, rather than places to be active and to engage with. She proposed that we should “facilitate exploration by creating hubs that spread awareness of climate change and form the basis of new communities of young people”. She suggested that such hubs could host residences for young artists, lend out equipment, deliver events and facilitate new forms of “micro volunteering”. She said that every National Park should have a forum for young people who could be actively and meaningfully engaged in breaking down the barriers to participation.



So what key messages did I take away from the three days?

- a) The twin challenges of biodiversity and climate change, which have been given real momentum by Extinction Rebellion and Climate Emergency, provide a huge opportunity to position National Parks as the first and most obvious places to take action. We need to rise to this challenge and show how it can be tackled in an integrated manner – zero carbon through nature recovery.
- b) The urgency of these environmental issues will require National Parks and government departments to act swiftly and to streamline their processes and procedures. This also likely to be a theme of the Glover Review.

- c) The diversity of skills in our National Parks and the radical differences between them at local and community level are our greatest strength but we could do more to share these skills and to promote the existing groups of specialists that already join up across the Parks. I'd like to explore whether some short term job swaps might be possible.
- d) Although there are superb examples of engaging young people in the governance and operation of NPAs (for example at Loch Lomond) the work with young people is not proceeding with sufficient speed. Many of you will remember the inspiring challenge that Adam Phillip-phillips issued at our own conference to engage young people through their smart phones – and this was referred to in the Dales. SDNPA took up this challenge and have greatly extended our use of smart phone technology and youth ambassadors. There was a general feeling that such work to spread the message was not proceeding in a way which truly engaged young people in the decision making of each Authority.
- e) Many National Parks do a lot to attract wider and younger audiences through their visitor centres and there was much talk of the need to build them into multi-purpose “visitor hubs” – particularly to attract young people. We are well behind in this (for understandable reasons) but as we catch up in Seven Sisters – and hopefully elsewhere – we must learn the lessons of existing successful visitor centres so we can profit from their model, rather than repeating their mistakes.

I will present this summary to the 1 October NPA and we can add the input of others who attended the conference to provide the basis for further discussion – and action – on these issues, many of which are likely to be picked up by the Glover Review.

As a stop press to all of this I have just heard that the Glover Review will be published at midnight tonight (Friday) – so please look out for it. The Review will be available to see at

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-landscapes-national-parks-and-aonbs-2018-review).