

NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK OVERVIEW

Introduction

Northumberland National Park is a statutory conservation organisation. 'National Park' status is the highest form of landscape protection in the United Kingdom. Of the eleven National Parks in England and Wales, Northumberland is the most northerly, the most remote from large urban areas, the least visited and the least populated.

National Parks came into being as a result of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act. When the designation of the first National Parks began in 1951, concern was raised by prospective residents and politicians, who feared strict planning controls and a massive influx of visitors to the proposed National Park areas. As a result, the National Parks concentrate on the country's major areas of remote upland landscape.

When Northumberland National Park came into being in 1956 (administered as part of Northumberland County Council until 1997) its boundary was drawn up close to the upland areas, with any significantly sized settlement remaining outside. Consequently Elsdon village, with around 50 homes, is the largest settlement in the National Park, while the larger scenic Northumbrian villages of Otterburn and Bellingham and the pleasant towns of Rothbury and Wooler are excluded.

Prior to designation, there was great debate over which parts of Northumberland's diverse landscape should be included. The Northumberland Coast was left out, but has since been designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The majority of Kielder Forest was also excluded, but has since become part of the Border Forest Park.

So what was included? The rich heritage of Hadrian's Wall, from the Cumbrian border, along the central section of the Wall up through the rugged North Tyne Valley and the Central Northumberland Fells, to the breathtaking beauty of the remote uplands of the Cheviot Hills and the fine historical landscapes of the border valleys to the Scottish Border.

Purposes

Northumberland National Park has two purposes, which were strictly laid out in the 1949 (and subsequent) legislation. These are conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park, as well as promoting opportunities for understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of those areas by the public. It also has a duty to foster the economic well-being of the local communities within the National Park, without incurring significant expenditure in doing so, and to co-operate with local authorities and public bodies whose function include the promotion of economic and social development within the National Park area.

In 2001 the National Park realised that the best way to achieve its purposes and duties was to put the economy and the community at the heart of its work; by working with the local community and other partners in a new form of sustainable rural development. The new vision is that Northumberland National Park will be proactive, innovative and forward looking, working towards a National Park with thriving communities and a sustainable local economy grounded in its special qualities, including a richness of cultural heritage and biodiversity, a true sense of tranquillity and a distinct character associated with a living, working landscape, in which everyone has an opportunity to understand, enjoy and contribute to those special qualities.

The Management of the National Park

In 1997 the Northumberland National Park Authority became freestanding from Northumberland County Council. This means that the National Park is now run as a separate Local Authority, similar to District Councils. However, the National Park Authority does not provide schools, refuse collection etc., but does continue to be responsible for planning applications, visitor services, farm grants schemes, etc..

The National Park Authority is managed by a committee, comprising of 22 members, that governs the authority. Six are county councillors, six are district councillors, four are parish councillors and six are appointed by the Secretary of State (who is the final arbiter for decisions concerning the National Parks). Members meet to discuss and decide upon planning applications and policy issues, prepared by National Park employees, which influence the day-to-day activity of the National Park. In this way everything that the Park Authority undertakes is democratically agreed.

Funding

The work of Northumberland National Park Authority is funded by public money. The 2003/4 budget settlement was £2,500,000 of which 75% came from central Government and 25% from the local Councils. Additional income is found from a variety of external funding sources including European grants, the Sustainable Development Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund. Often these grants will only provide a proportion of the money needed, and the remainder has to be found from other sources.

The Work of the National Park Authority

Northumberland National Park employs approximately 85 staff, half of these are on seasonal or part-time contracts. Many of the seasonal workers in the visitor centres and the Ranger Service return each year. In addition to paid employees, there are many Voluntary Rangers who are invaluable in helping the Park Management team in various ways. It was through them that Northumberland National Park Search and Rescue Team was set up to help the emergency services to find lost and injured people within the National Park and across the North East.

The Authority staff are managed by a senior management team of four: the Chief Executive, the Director of Park Management, the Director of Resources and the Director of Access and Communications. Each senior manager is responsible for managing community development and local engagement in one of the four areas of Northumberland National Park (Cheviot, Coquetdale, North Tyne and Redesdale, and Hadrian's Wall – known collectively as the action areas); as well as having responsibility for the three directorates.

Park Management

The Park Management directorate is responsible for issuing conservation grants and advice, the management of sites for conservation, for agriculture and forestry consultations, ecological and archaeological research, historic buildings and archaeological research and field services – such as the ranger service, estate management and the voluntary rangers. Much of the Authority's work involves working with landowners and land managers to help them preserve and improve the valuable habitats, archaeological sites and historic buildings that may be on their land. These are often very expensive projects, but National Park staff can help with applications to the various UK and European funds that are available. There are 1887 hectares of protected habitats and 200 listed buildings within the National Park. There are 45 Iron Age Hillforts which, along with innumerable other archaeological features, form part of the historic landscape of Northumberland. The Director of Resources is responsible for the Cheviot action area.

Resources

The Resources directorate is responsible for financial planning, performance management, accounts payments and income collection, corporate administration, personnel, training, administrative services, and information technology. The Director of Resources has specific responsibility for the North Tyne and Redesdale action area, and advising the Authority on effective implementation of the National Park Management Plan and Best Value Performance Plan. The Management Plan outlines the Park's vision for the next 20 years, provides a 10 year management plan with a review built in after five years and a mid-term review

Access and Communications

The Access and Communications directorate is responsible for development and management of recreational sites and access land, communications, public rights of way, operation of visitor centres, and education, interpretation and information services. There are three visitor centres, one at Once Brewed which acts as an orientation centre for the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site, another is in Rothbury and a third in the small village of Ingram in the Breamish Valley. There are Information Points in several villages within and adjacent to the National Park. Throughout the year there are a wide range of public events, which range from family activity days to walks in high hills. The Education Service provides expert help for all ages of students, as well as youth and community groups, who either want information about the Park, or wish to visit the National Park. These enquiries can be local, regional, national or international. There are many leaflets, trails, books and signs that give visitors the information they need to develop their understanding and enjoy their visit more fully. Northumberland National Park staff also work on marketing the National Park, communicating its special qualities in order to encourage greater awareness and appreciation. Promotion of sustainable development and tourism is high on the agenda and staff work closely with local communities and businesses in and around the Park.

Land Ownership and Land Uses

Northumberland National Park Authority owns only 0.2% of the land within the National Park boundary. Most of this is visitor facilities, car parks, toilet blocks and visitor centres, together with some areas of conservation interest that have been made accessible for recreational use, such as Walltown, Hareshaw Linn and Greenlee Lough National Nature Reserve.

Around 2,000 people live in Northumberland National Park. Of the 400 square miles within the National Park boundary, around two thirds is privately owned and used mainly for agriculture. Around a quarter is owned by the Ministry of Defence and is used for military training; and a fifth belongs to Forest Enterprise and is used to grow timber. There is close liaison between National Park Authority staff and the many private landowners, including organisations such as The National Trust, and public organisations such as Forest Enterprise, the Ministry of Defence and the local communities in and around the National Park.

The predominant land use within the National Park is extensive upland hill farming. The farmers mainly produce sheep, usually Cheviot and Blue Faced Leicester crosses. Some farms also produce beef cattle. There is virtually no arable farming, except to provide winter feed for livestock. These and other land uses such as commercial forestry, military training and recreation, often overlap.

The National Park Authority is the sole planning Authority for the park area and therefore determines all planning applications. It only receives a small number of planning applications – approximately 70 each year – these few applications are processed through a contracted-out planning service located within Northumberland County Council.