



Understanding the factors underlying partnership working: A case study of Northumberland National Park, England



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ABSTRACT

Although rural partnership working is a well-researched area, less attention has been paid to the particular challenges in IUCN Category V protected areas. This paper explores the policy and practice of partnership working in a case study Category V area—Northumberland National Park, England. Qualitative research was conducted through documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews with a sample of 23 stakeholders involved in the management of this protected area. It was found that a convoluted institutional history has shaped the present day approach to its management. The processes driving partnership working were understood in terms of governance factors with a relatively high degree of control and behavioural factors with a relatively low degree of control. There was a tacit acceptance among actors that success was dependent upon uncontrollable factors and in particular inter-personal relations between representatives of stakeholder bodies. These findings are important for all IUCN Category V protected areas reliant upon working within stakeholder partnerships to achieve sustainable development objectives. Management bodies can benefit from examining the history of these often complex webs of relationships and the implications for communications between organisations if they are to understand the processes that underpin this form of governance.

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1. Introduction

Designating areas of land for environmental conservation is not a new occurrence. Mose and Weixlbaumer (2007) report that there is evidence of forestry conservation orders being used to protect hunting and timber production in Europe as early as the 8th and 9th Centuries. However, the modern trend for protecting land for its natural beauty or importance to wildlife had its genesis in the 19th Century. Alongside the rapid urbanisation of towns and cities came a greater appreciation of the value of rural landscapes and a desire to preserve them as the antithesis of industrialisation. Intellectuals and artists were drawn to these environments, with William Wordsworth's *Guide to the Lakes* (1810) (Wordsworth, 1810) providing an early example of the celebration of a particular landscape aesthetic. In the UK, early preservationist movements, such as the Commons Preservation Society (established in 1865) and the Lake District Defence Society (established in 1883), began organised campaigns to provide public access to open space and protect landscapes from development. While the growing appreciation for landscape and natural beauty was centred on the UK,

the first national park designation took place at Yellowstone in the USA in 1872, reflecting contemporary concerns about the preservation of America's wildlife and wilderness in the context of growing development pressures. Since momentum towards the formal designation of protected areas in the UK was slow, national parks began to appear in mainland Europe, starting in 1909 with Abisko National Park in the sparsely populated North of Sweden. Other European countries followed soon after, with the high mountains of the Swiss Engadin Valley (1914), the Picos de Europa Mountains in Northern Spain (1918), and the Italian Gran Paradiso area (1922). The number of protected areas has increased in recent decades so that it is estimated that approximately 25 per cent of Europe's land area is now designated in some way (Mose, 2007). The overwhelming majority of these protected areas are categorised by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Category V, "A protected area where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value, and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the area and its associated nature conservation and other values" (Lausche and Burhenne, 2011: 147). Whereas the US national parks are classified as IUCN Category II, natural systems, or in the process of restored to that status, the UK national parks are Category V, managed, cultural landscapes, (IUCN, 1994).

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During the interwar period, anxieties grew in England and Wales over the loss of open countryside through development. Four influential organisations helped to stimulate debates about the creation of possible protected areas in the UK. These were: the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (established in 1865); the National Trust (established in 1895); the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (established in 1912, and changing its name to the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts in 2004); and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (established in 1926, and changing its name to the Council for the Protection of Rural England in 1969, and then to the Campaign to Protect Rural England in 2003). In 1929 the Addison Committee considered the feasibility of national parks, reporting in 1931 that the objectives of designation should be to control development, to enable access, and to conserve nature (Addison, 1931). In 1936 a fifth campaigning organisation was established, the Standing Committee on National Parks (becoming the Council for National Parks in 1977, and then the Campaign for National Parks in 2008), with the directive to permanently protect vast swathes of the countryside for benefit of quiet enjoyment and appreciation of natural beauty by the public.

However, it was not until after the Second World War that UK conservation and access campaigners were able to harness enough support for designation. There was some debate as to the name of the designation since ‘national park’ was simply adopted from the so-called American ‘wilderness’ national parks, which are entirely different entities to the largely private landscape of the UK (National Parks Bill, 1949, 1464). Although the changing political climate of the time provided new opportunities, Sheail (1984: 31) noted that legislative progress would have counted for little had it not been for “the complex web of personal initiatives and relationships.” The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 paved the way for the creation of ten national parks in England and Wales in the 1950s. The system was extended in the 1980s and again in the 2000s to include new national parks in Scotland and the south of England.

A definition of a UK national park was given by the Dower Report (1945), and accepted by the Hobhouse Committee in 1947, as:

“An extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which, for the nation’s benefit and by appropriate national decision and action, (a) the characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved, (b) access and facilities for public open-air enjoyment are amply provided, (c) wildlife and buildings and places of architectural and historical interest and suitably protected, while (d) established farming use is effectively maintained” (cited in Smith, 1978, 2).

A key provision was the word ‘national’, which implied that they existed for everyone to enjoy. However, in the UK at least, most of the national parks that were subsequently designated were privately owned and privately controlled (Smith, 1978). The original criteria for the UK national parks have always relied on working with others to achieve their objectives. Only small proportions of land in each of the national parks are publicly owned for the pursuit of access and conservation objectives. Hence these are ‘contested landscapes’ where different social, economic and environmental influences operate simultaneously (Winter and Loble, 2009).

Despite the Dower Report’s definition that a UK national park should be “strictly preserved”, in the subsequent years after the designations, “the parks succumbed to every kind of aesthetic insult: mineral extraction, nuclear power stations, water resource development, ploughing up of heather moorland, [and] blanket afforestation” (Price, 2007, 41). Other contentious management issues included the use of protected areas for military training, overgrazing by sheep, and excessive trampling of fragile soils and vegetation by humans (MacEwen and MacEwen, 1987). These pres-

ures eventually lead to the legislation of the Sandford Principle in the Environment Act of 1995, which states that conservation should take precedence in instances where reconciliation of objectives proves impossible (Department of the Environment, 1996). With nearly 25 per cent of England and Wales designated for its landscape quality, blanket protection from all development would be both unrealistic and counter-productive. A sophisticated understanding of the economic value of these landscapes is emerging so as to better understand how these protected areas contribute towards economic development (Price, 2007; Cumulus Consultants, 2013).

These conflicts over land use have shaped management approaches and over the history of UK national parks necessitated the development of complex partnership working arrangements. The development of this mode of governance has happened over many years and reflects the perception that more traditional governing styles will fail to sustain the interaction between people and nature. The responsible statutory bodies, the national park authorities, have a duty to promote both conservation and access, while at the same time to seek to foster the economic and social well-being of their local communities. Management plan documents increasingly reflect the realisation that this can only be done through and with other stakeholders. Behind the delivery of the plans is a complex pattern of partnership working that has evolved to become imperative to the management of Category V protected areas.

Across Europe, the accepted need for sustainable development is used as a reason to bring different stakeholder groups together (Mose, 2007). Despite this, as Lockwood (2010, 754), explains:

“Governing norms by which to steer traditional government functions are well established and understood; however, this is not the case for the new multi-level and collaborative approaches that characterise protected area governance. This is a largely new territory that makes novel demands on governance institutions and policy.”

Understanding these ‘novel’ forms of governance is critical to the future of protected area management. Political contracting framework theory explores the agreement between participants, and the development of ‘transaction costs’, which essentially means that in order for any given partnership to be successful, for each participant the costs of engaging must be outweighed by the expected benefits (Sabatier et al., 2005: 180). However, there remains a lack of understanding of the factors that determine success (Benson et al., 2013). This paper examines those factors with the governance of these Category V designations. It takes the example of Northumberland National Park, part of the UK network of protected areas, to report on findings of an in-depth case study on the workings of stakeholder partnerships. While the research results relate to this particular case study, it is argued that there are broader implications for all Category V protected areas.

The two objectives of the research were:

- To develop an understanding of the processes underlying rural partnership working; and
- To identify any particular factors that are especially influential to the success of any given partnership.

The methodology used semi-structured interviews with a selection of participants from a range of partner organisations in the case study area. The participants were encouraged to describe the significance of partnership working through their own encounters with partners in Northumberland National Park (attributing their own levels of significance to their own examples) thereby creating their own narrative contribution. The research was exploratory in nature and did not serve to prove or disprove any hypothesis; it simply

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