



Evolving national park models: The emergence of an economic imperative and its effect on the contested nature of the ‘national’ park concept in Northern Ireland



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ABSTRACT

National park models have evolved in tandem with the emergence of a multifunctional countryside. Sustainable development has been added to the traditional twin aims of conservation and recreation. This is typified by recent national park designations, such as the Cairngorms National Park in Scotland. A proposed Mourne national park in Northern Ireland has evolved a stage further with a model of national park to deliver national economic goals envisaged by government. This seeks to commodify the natural landscape. This paper compares Cairngorm and Mourne stakeholders' views on the principal features of both models: park aims, management structures and planning functions. While Cairngorm stakeholders were largely positive from the outset, the model of national park introduced is not without criticism. Conversely, Mourne stakeholders have adopted an anti-national park stance. Nevertheless, the model of national park proposed possessing a strong economic imperative, an absence of the Sandford Principle as a means to manage likely conflicts, and lacking any planning powers in its own right, may still be insufficient to bring about widespread support for a Mourne national park. Such a model is also likely to accelerate the degradation of the Mourne landscape. Competing national identities (British and Irish) provide an additional dimension to the national park debate in Northern Ireland. Deep ideological cleavages are capable of derailing the introduction of a national park irrespective of the model proposed. In Northern Ireland the national park debate is not only about reconciling environmental and economic interests but also political and ethno-national differences.

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1. Introduction

The countryside has undergone rapid and fundamental change in the decades since World War Two. In tandem with the emergence of a global sustainability agenda (Ilbery and Bowler, 1998) which sought to integrate agriculture with broader environmental and economic land uses (Cantore et al., 2011), a ‘new countryside’ has emerged characterised by a growing ‘consumption’ role (Cloke, 1993; Marsden, 1999). This is commonly referred to as a shift from production to post-production, or multi-functionality whereby productivist and post-productivist roles co-exist (Bjorkhaug and Richards, 2008; Marsden and Sonnino, 2008), or the emergence of a New Rural Economy (Shucksmith, 2012). Woods (2011a: 91) explains: ‘multi-functionality proposes that ...non-production benefits should be exploited as a source of revenue, by selling them

as commodities to be consumed’, and cites the exploitation of the amenity value of the countryside through tourism and recreational activities as one such example.

Rural commodification is a hallmark of the globalising countryside, the features of which are exhibited differently between rural locations, depending on ‘the degree of penetration of globalisation processes’ (Woods, 2007: 494; Woods, 2011b). The Northern Irish countryside, against the ‘backdrop of 30 years of very limited growth and investment. . .’ (DETI, 2010: 1), was, in contrast to Scotland for example, sheltered from the forces of globalised tourism. However, with the Northern Ireland peace process came the opening of the Northern Irish countryside to the forces of globalised tourism. This has contributed to the rapid commodification of natural heritage, as evident from a recent surge in major tourism-related infrastructural developments (and proposals). For example, Carrick-a-Rede rope-bridge in the Antrim Coast and Glens AONB (originally constructed as an access point for local salmon fishermen) has been re-packaged as a product for tourist consumption. While the site is owned and managed by the National Trust, the

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initially free, unstructured and informal tourist experience has become a major pay-as-you-enter tourist attraction. In addition, a multi-million pound visitor centre was recently constructed at the Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site (situated within the Antrim Coast and Glens AONB); the price of parking at the visitor centre has proved particularly controversial (BBC, 2013; Magee, 2013). Meanwhile, as part of the Northern Ireland Assembly's drive to market a global golf product, permission was granted for a £100 million golf resort at Runkerry which is located adjacent to the Giant's Causeway (again within the AONB). This decision was highly contested and the development poses a threat to the site's World Heritage status (Stewart, 2013).

As rural places become 'theatres of consumption for tourists and visitors' (Woods, 2011a: 97–98), their multiple roles have given rise to numerous management challenges. These include reconciling competing economic, social and environmental interests whereby tension and conflict are perceived as inevitable between stakeholders who attach variable weight to each (McCool, 2009; McAreavey and McDonagh, 2010). Maximising the economic potential of the countryside while at the same time maintaining or conserving the natural resource base is one such potential conflict. This dilemma can be conceptualised through the resource paradox (Plog, 1974; Oliveira, 2003; Williams and Ponsford, 2009) or creative destruction idea (Schumpeter, 2008; Mitchell, 1998; Mitchell and de Waal, 2009): natural areas, for example, offer a resource to be marketed, yet overuse (potentially through tourism) could destroy the natural beauty upon which the tourist experience depends, thereby jeopardising future tourism potential. In relation to natural areas, and national park locations specifically, Hamin (2002: 350) notes the possibility of 'loving our parks to death'.

This changing role of the countryside is paralleled by evolving models of national park. An original wilderness or conservation model has largely been replaced by a multi-functional model seeking to integrate a wider set of management objectives: conservation, recreation and sustainable development. Most recently the 'national park' label has, on occasions, been interpreted as a form of countryside branding and marketing intended to bring about the commodification of natural landscapes and rural space. This is most apparent in the recent (successful) Scottish and (unsuccessful) Northern Irish attempts to designate national parks. Scotland designated its first national park as recently as 2002 while Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK and Ireland without a national park. We argue that the model proposed for Northern Ireland (DoE, 2011a) represents the most economically focused national park model seen to date. In this paper we examine the appropriateness of this proposed Northern Ireland model by drawing on the views of stakeholders within the proposed Mourne national park area and stakeholder experiences of Scotland's Cairngorm National Park model. The features of the Cairngorm National Park are closest to the proposed model for Northern Ireland (and the Mourne specifically).

The remainder of the paper is divided into six sections. First, we review evolving models of national park and argue that the model introduced in Scotland and proposed for Northern Ireland represent further evolutionary stages. Second, we outline the methodology adopted: namely, a series of interviews undertaken with stakeholders from the designated Cairngorms National Park (CNP) in Scotland and the proposed Mourne national park area in Northern Ireland. Third, we report on the local context and include a brief summary of past management strategies adopted in the Cairngorms and Mourne alongside ongoing local management issues. Fourth, we present the differing views between Cairngorm and Mourne stakeholders in relation to key features of the national park models: park aims, management structure and arrangements, and planning functions. Fifth, we compare the competing approaches to nationalism (as viewed through a national park lens) in Northern Ireland

especially as a means to help explain the different stances between stakeholders in the Cairngorms and Mourne. Finally, we conclude with reference to two key queries. In terms of the evolution of the national park concept, we debate whether or not its latest transformation from a 'management and protection' designation to an instrument for 'countryside commodification' is a step too far (and abandons the underlying principles of national park designation). This is then followed by a somewhat pessimistic outlook regarding the future of national parks in Northern Ireland: namely, that even a widening of the aims and purpose of national park designation to incorporate a strong economic imperative may not overcome the unique obstacle of 'competing nationalistic identities' whereby the very term 'national' in national park is disputed.

2. Evolving models of national park: towards an economic imperative

Fig. 1 depicts, as a ladder, the key stages (and their principal characteristics) in the evolution of the national park concept from an essentially conservation and recreation focused designation to one that increasingly and more explicitly possesses a strong economic imperative. The ladder is not intended as a definitive categorisation of national park models, nor is there any suggestion that the higher rungs of the ladder represent a 'better' or 'worse' model; rather the ladder demonstrates the broadening of national park purposes and each rung represents a new (or evolving) stage on a continuum of national park models. According to Frost and Hall (2009: 11) '[t]his evolutionary process means that there is no single model of national park'.

The term 'national park' derives from the desire to preserve parks for the nation (Harroy et al., 1974). The first national park designation (and first rung on our ladder) – Yellowstone in the United States (1872) – stemmed from the threat posed to America's natural resources by the expansion of private property. It possessed a strong conservation and public enjoyment remit and placed the management of natural resources in the national interest by setting aside or nationalising extensive areas of pristine wilderness, typically devoid of human habitation for the benefit of the nation. The earliest and original interpretation of national parks was, therefore, as wilderness areas: a nature 'apart' from or 'in spite' of society (Barker and Stockdale, 2008).

The model fits the IUCN Category II definition of national park as summarised by Goldsmith and Warren (1993: 210): 'ecosystems not materially altered by human activity, of great beauty and of great scientific interest, where human exploitation and occupation are removed and visitors only allowed to enter under very controlled conditions'. The legacy of this wilderness approach has, according to the IUCN (2002), been the development of conservation islands and a distorted appreciation of the relationship between society and nature. These have made this model of national park unsuitable for most of Europe (Barker and Stockdale, 2008) and as a consequence evolving models of national park have facilitated the global application of the national park concept. In doing so, national parks have evolved as mechanisms for the delivery of sustainable development (Dower, 1999) and have sought to reconcile the relationship between society and nature by incorporating conservation and socio-economic development aims (Holdgate, 1992). For example, *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987) called for national conservation mechanisms to integrate environmental protection with economic development, and the creation of Category V 'protected landscapes' designations by IUCN facilitated the delivery of sustainable development within protected areas (IUCN, 2002). Category V designations are places where '... the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cul-

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