

## The Case for a National Park

### The proposal

**3-1** In their proposal, Scottish Ministers noted that SNH had earlier advised them on the appropriateness and suitability of a National Park in the Cairngorms area. Ministers indicated that they were satisfied that the conditions set out in Section 2(2) of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000 are, or will be, met in relation to the general area of the Cairngorms. These conditions are:

- that the area is of outstanding national importance because of its natural heritage or the combination of its natural and cultural heritage;
- that the area has a distinctive character and coherent identity; and
- that designating the area as a National Park would meet the special needs of the area and would be the best means of ensuring that the National Park aims are achieved in relation to the area in a co-ordinated way.

### SNH consultation document

**3-2** SNH sought views on whether the general area of the Cairngorms meets these legislative conditions for designation as a National Park.

### Comments generated

**3-3** Many of the written responses and those who participated in the community-led consultation or other events addressed this question in terms of their general support or opposition to the National Park. A considerable number of respondents did not tackle this question at all but made comments about more specific issues, for example, whether particular areas should be included or excluded from the Park.

**3-4** Overall, support for the National Park was significantly greater than in 1998 and was not restricted to certain stakeholder groups, nor to responses from within or outwith the general area. Support for the proposal to establish a National Park was not, however, universal. A few respondents stated their opposition to the designation but said that, as they considered it a *fait accompli*, they would make their comments

known on the remaining issues for consultation. In addition to declaring their opposition to the proposal, a number of respondents also stated their desire not to be included in the Park and, where possible, these comments are considered in Section 4 on the area of the Park.

**3-5** The majority of the respondents who addressed this issue agreed that the general area of the Cairngorms met the conditions specified above or supported in principle the designation of a Cairngorms National Park. For example, over 75% of the recorded comments specifically about this issue from full written responses were supportive. The consensus at each of the open meetings in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness and Perth was in favour of the proposed National Park with 94% of recorded comments being positive.

**3-6** In terms of the local communities, strongest support for the establishment of a National Park in the Cairngorms was expressed in the community-led consultation reports for the Dulnain Bridge; Finzean; Ballogie and Birse; Grantown-on-Spey; Kirriemuir; and the Rothiemurchus and Glenmore areas. The strongest reservations were found in the consultation report from Aviemore, where there were many people questioning the need for a National Park. Local opinion about the case for the Park in other communities, including Blair Atholl and Struan; Carr-Bridge; Killiecrankie; Laggan; and Mid-Deeside was mixed. In some community reports, a majority of people seemed to be in favour of the Park, although this was either weakly expressed or conditional on particular issues addressed later in this report. A strong theme to emerge in many reports of local meetings was the desire for more information on which to come to a view on the relative merits or drawbacks of a National Park.

**3-7** Most respondents did not expand greatly on their opinion that the area met the conditions, or on their reasons for supporting the designation. However, from the views expressed, common supportive comments were on the following themes:

- a recognition of the special qualities of the area, both in national and international terms;

- the National Park would be the best way to secure and enhance the natural heritage of the area, to promote its cultural heritage; and to tackle the other social and economic challenges as set out in the consultation document;
- the advantages of designation would include benefits for tourism, better land management, rejuvenation of the local economy, and additional public-sector investment;
- if Scotland is to have a system of National Parks, the Cairngorms area should definitely be designated as one of them; and
- the initiative has been discussed for too long and the National Park should be designated as soon as possible.

**3-8** Perhaps surprisingly, relatively few responses highlighted the role of the cultural heritage of the Cairngorms in making the case for the National Park.

**3-9** A number of responses which expressed support for the Park were conditional. For example, implicit in a number of responses was: support for the Park provided that the Park Authority was well-funded; that local people formed the majority on the Board; or that it became the planning authority for the area. Perth and Kinross Council indicated that if the National Park Authority were to become the planning authority, they would resist inclusion of their area within the Park. Highland Council agreed that the area met the conditions but their support was conditional on sufficient additional funding being made available to all agencies working within the area of the Park.

**3-10** The most negative views about the Park were to be found amongst those who owned or managed land within the proposed area, particularly estates, or those who represented their interests. Overall, this group of respondents was the least enthusiastic of all those consulted about the prospect of the designation. It included the Scottish Gamekeepers' Association; the Association of Deer Management Groups; the Scottish Landowners' Federation; and a number of landowners within the area. However, generally negative or sceptical responses about the proposal were also expressed by a number of

others, including Aberdeenshire Council and several conservation and recreational interests, including the Mountain Bothies Association and the Mountaineering Council of Scotland.

**3-11** The most frequent reasons given for opposing designation of a National Park in the Cairngorms were related to the third condition of the Act, and included:

- the justification for the Park was poor and the reasoning flawed;
- the potential advantages of National Park designation are outweighed by potential disadvantages;
- the management plan (or Park Plan) for the area should be agreed before a decision on designation on the area is taken;
- the initiative was a waste of money, would add bureaucracy and/or would lead to more control by quangos;
- local people should be left to manage the area as they saw fit without outside interference;
- the existing administrative framework in the form of the Cairngorms Partnership should be given more time and funding to work; and
- other mechanisms would be more effective - for example, a sustainable mountain strategy for all Scotland or a redirection of public funds towards the Cairngorms.

**3-12** A number of other respondents also expressed strong concerns over the approach to National Parks which was being developed in Scotland and about its implications for the long-term future of the Cairngorms, including:

- the apparent conflict between conservation and economic development which is enshrined in the aims of the proposed Park;
- too much attention was being given to local people and their views in an area which should be managed primarily for national interests;

- designation would attract more people to this wild and fragile area and would damage it; and
- the proposed powers or funding would be insufficient for the Park Authority to manage the area properly.

**3-13** Finally, one or two respondents suggested that more than one Park was needed to cover the area, while others did not recognise the Cairngorms as being particularly special, when compared with, for example, the north and west of Scotland. The view was also expressed that the Government's approach to National Parks was piecemeal and uncoordinated, and that a larger number of Parks should be established in Scotland, using a more strategic approach.

**3-14** In commenting on the case for a National Park, a number of more general comments was made about the future management of the area. These views are summarised in Section 8 of this report.

### SNH view as natural heritage adviser

**3-15** Following widespread consultation in 1998, SNH advised Government that a National Park should be designated in the Cairngorms area. This advice was based on our view that statutory designation of a National Park would have several advantages over the existing voluntary arrangements for the integrated management of the area through the Cairngorms Partnership. These advantages included the longer term perspective, the clear lines of accountability and the need for a stronger focus on the co-ordinated planning and management of this nationally important area which, in turn, could strengthen the protection and sustainable management of the natural heritage. In the consultation document issued in December 2000, we suggested that, since we had given our advice, further impetus has been given to the case for a National Park as a result of several new or enhanced challenges facing the area.

**3-16** We agree with Ministers that the general area of the Cairngorms meets the three conditions from the Act. The area is of outstanding national importance for its natural heritage. The natural heritage contributes

significantly to the distinctive character and coherent identity of the area. Designation of a National Park would be the best way to meet many of the special natural heritage management needs of the area and would provide a strong statutory basis for the long term conservation of the area's natural resources. On this basis SNH strongly supports the establishment of a National Park in the Cairngorms area.

### Discussion

**3-17** The consultation exercise has shown that there is widespread general agreement that the Cairngorms area does meet the conditions for establishment of a National Park. There is considerable support from almost all stakeholder groups, both within the area and across Scotland. And there is evidence that support for the designation locally has increased significantly over the last four years since the proposal was first mooted by Lord Sewel in September 1997. In view of these findings, there would seem to be a strong case for designation of a National Park in the Cairngorms area.

**3-18** At the same time, there is a number of individuals and organisations, as well as some communities, who either oppose the designation in principle, or who do not see a strong case for it. These views came most frequently from land-owners and land managers, notably from estates, but also from other bodies, including Aberdeenshire Council. In contrast to Loch Lomond & the Trossachs where there was virtually no opposition to the proposal to establish a National Park, such interests from a small but significant minority. One option for consideration by Ministers may be to delay the designation of a National Park and allow more time for discussion of the long term future of the area, particularly among those who own or manage land.

**3-19** However, in the light of the extensive series of consultations that have been undertaken in the area in recent years, and the views from some respondents that the designation has been a long time in coming, it is questionable whether many of the issues raised by those who are still to be convinced by the proposal can be effectively addressed in the absence of a National Park itself. It is difficult to accept that the

views of those who remain to be convinced of the benefits, or of those who oppose designation, should outweigh the larger number of those who support the establishment of the Park, both locally and nationally.

### **Reporter's Advice**

**On the basis of the consultation we have undertaken, we note that the level of support for a National Park has increased significantly since we last consulted in 1998. The general area of the Cairngorms meets the three conditions for the establishment of a National Park as set out in the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. A statutory approach to achieving integrated management of the area has the support of most consultees. We therefore recommend that a National Park should be designated in the Cairngorms area.**

**It should be noted, however, that a significant minority of those who participated in the consultation exercise are either not convinced of the benefits of the proposal, or oppose the designation of a National Park in the area. If Ministers wish to proceed with the draft Designation Order, further work will be required to build support for the National Park, particularly at the local level and amongst the land management community, and also to promote trust and understanding between national and local interests. This work should proceed in parallel with the preparation of the draft Designation Order and subsequent steps to establish the Park. It will require to be continued well into the life of the proposed National Park Authority.**

### **SNH advice as natural heritage adviser**

SNH strongly supports this recommendation.