



SHARED HORIZONS

Statement of Policy on
Protected Landscapes in
Northern Ireland

February 2003



**FOREWORD BY
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As a relative newcomer to Northern Ireland I have been struck by its large areas of unspoilt countryside and its extraordinary range of landscapes. The outstanding scenery in such places as the Mournes, the Causeway Coast and the Fermanagh Lakeland matches anything to be found in these islands. I am quite certain that such scenery deserves to be appropriately recognised by statutory authorities and cherished by the public at large. It is an important natural resource and one which if disfigured cannot readily be recreated.

These landscapes are the result of centuries of sensitive husbandry of the land by farmers and landowners. In the face of changing social and economic conditions however, it cannot be taken for granted that they will not change. The influences on farming today are complex and international. The countryside is a

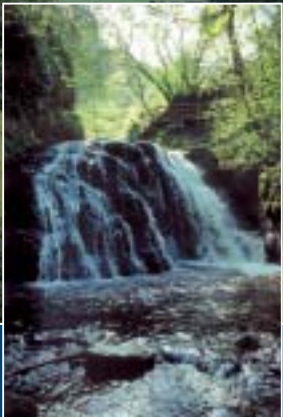
dynamic entity and government must encourage the natural growth and development of rural communities. To ensure that development is sustainable, it is vital that we recognise the economic, environmental and social value of a diverse and enriching countryside.

For this reason I believe the designation and management of *Protected Landscapes* is an important aspect of the work of the Department of the Environment. I am confident that this statement will generate an enhanced interest in this subject amongst all the parties involved in the management of such areas. It sets out the Department's intention to complete the designation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and to establish management structures in these areas that will help deliver measures to conserve and enhance their special features and to promote their enjoyment.

This statement also refers to National Parks. I intend to

progress the work set in train by the devolved administration to establish Northern Ireland's first National Park in the Mournes. I believe the Mourne Mountains and surrounding countryside are fully deserving of this accolade but I want to test the views of the public, and local people in particular, before coming to a final decision.

We are very fortunate to have some wonderful scenery in Northern Ireland and a countryside that has a rich cultural heritage. I hope that this statement, and the initiatives that will follow its publication, will encourage their appreciation and enjoyment by both our own population as well as by visitors from other parts of the world.





INTRODUCTION

This statement sets out the issues associated with the protection and sustainable use of Northern Ireland's finest areas of rural landscape or countryside and indicates the way in which the Department of the Environment plans to address them. These areas fall within the internationally recognised description of *'Protected Landscapes'*.

These areas are valuable not just for their scenery but also for their cultural heritage, biodiversity and, increasingly, as an economic asset. In the public's perception, such areas and the scenic landscapes they cover are what make the Northern Ireland countryside so special. It is, therefore, important that they are appropriately recognised and managed in a positive and co-ordinated way; it is also important that the local population, who after all own most of the land concerned or have a direct interest in it, are involved as fully as possible in these processes.

The statement considers the rationale for statutory designation and how the areas concerned can subsequently be managed. In doing so, it sets down the current role of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) of the Department of the Environment (the Department) in these matters and outlines future action based on the opportunities and challenges presented. Specifically, the statement seeks to illustrate:

- why the protection and management of our special landscapes is important;
- what EHS currently does, both through its own actions and in partnership with others, to manage this resource and facilitate the sustainable use of these areas; and
- what the future plans of the Department are with respect to designating and managing further areas of high landscape quality and reviewing the status of some of our existing areas.

The current legislative basis for the Department's actions is the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order (NI) 1985 (NCALO). This provides that, as well as designating the finest landscape areas as either *Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) or National Parks*, the Department may take steps to manage them for the purposes of both conservation and recreation.

However, such landscapes are invariably large areas of countryside, in multiple ownership and use. As a result, the management process is indirect and needs to involve, inform and empower as many people and organisations as possible. Working together, the hope is that there can be created a common agenda or *'shared horizons'*.

BACKGROUND TO THE DESIGNATION AND MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED LANDSCAPE AREAS.

Landscape in itself is difficult to value objectively. Much of what is valued in a landscape is a melange of natural features and social and cultural history, which is highly evocative and thus important to people. The poignancy of this is outwardly reflected in art, poetry and song and inwardly in a sense of pride, belonging and comfort, all reinforcing this feeling of 'value'. Increasingly this value is also being realised in economic terms with the overt marketing of landscape for tourism and as a pleasant place to recreate or live.

Northern Ireland's rural landscape is well known for its green and lush character symbolised by small fields and abundant hedgerows. It is synonymous with the image of a clean and healthy environment, a good place to live, work or visit. In fact this landscape is incredibly varied. The Department's publication, *'The Northern Ireland Landscape Character Assessment 2000'* (the LCA) identifies no fewer than 130 distinct landscape character areas reflecting the richness and influence of geology, soil, climate and man. The patterns that we see today in the landscape have evolved gradually over thousands of years but the pace of

change is now more rapid than ever.

An understanding of landscape character is a useful starting point from which landscape quality can be assessed. Landscapes that are valued or prized for their high scenic qualities are usually recognised by some form of designation which sets them apart from the wider countryside.

The original thinking behind designating any form of protected landscape in the United Kingdom dates from the period of great social change during and just after the Second World War. The twin objectives were to protect large areas of lowland countryside from urban development and to identify many of the remote upland areas

of England and Wales as National Parks for conservation and recreation. Many of the objectives of designation were to be achieved through the newly established planning system. The land would thus remain largely in private ownership, in contrast to many other countries where large tracts of important landscape remained in the ownership of, or were acquired by, the state.

Similar thinking was subsequently reflected in the first parallel piece of Northern Ireland legislation, the 1965 Amenity Lands Act (ALA). AONBs designated under that Act attracted additional, though modest, planning controls, over what was

very largely private land.

In retrospect, it should be remembered that throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s, rapid suburbanisation had led to widespread urban sprawl, increasing pressures on the rural hinterland of all the cities of the United Kingdom and indeed much of the rest of Europe. At the same time, changing patterns of recreation, based on the growth of personal income and the use of the private car, meant that even the remoter areas were coming under increasing visitor pressure, albeit seasonal and often confined to specific locations. Very much as a reaction to this, landscape protection was largely based on

imposed controls and consequently was often resented by sections of the local population, particularly in remote areas suffering economic decline.

There are still intense pressures for development in many rural areas of Northern Ireland, particularly close to urban centres. Yet there is also evidence of abandonment of isolated rural dwellings and farm holdings as fewer people find full-time employment in farming. The Northern Ireland population is one which is becoming increasingly distant from its rural roots, but wants more opportunities to enjoy the countryside for both passive and active recreation.



The countryside has faced major changes in the last few decades. Membership of the European Union and new and emerging trends in world trade have led to fundamental changes in how agriculture is funded and in the economics of different farming activities. This has inevitably impacted on the landscape of Europe with a move towards larger and more intensive, specialist farms. Recently there has been a shift in emphasis in support funding towards protecting the rural environment, wildlife and the social fabric of rural areas. This trend is likely to continue.

Running through both European Union and national

policies, there is a desire to maintain rural communities and to help disadvantaged regions. Various programmes under the EU Structural Funds have made a significant impact in this regard. The priority today is not simply one of pure price support for agricultural output but one which embraces a wider range of measures, including managing and protecting our natural environment, encouraging economic diversification, empowering rural communities, and facilitating social cohesion.

The foot and mouth outbreak in 2001 highlighted just how much the economy of some rural areas has changed and how there has

been a significant shift in the balance between income derived from tourism/recreation and that derived from agriculture. In some English National Parks tourism related income can be 20 times higher than agricultural income. It is likely that income generated from recreation and tourism in Northern Ireland will increase, both in real terms and in proportion to that derived from agricultural production. This is especially true in those areas which have a well developed tourism infrastructure and are well placed to meet the growing demand for access and the enjoyment of recreational pursuits in the countryside.



The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) provides a strategic focus that will guide future development in order to promote a balanced and equitable pattern of sustainable development across Northern Ireland to 2025. The wise and sensitive use of the rural environment is a key element in the promotion of more sustainable patterns of development. Protecting landscapes of regional and national importance for both aesthetic and economic reasons is included within the strategic guidance on the environment contained within the RDS.

THE DESIGNATION OF AREAS OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY

The only designation currently in use in Northern Ireland to identify areas of high landscape quality is that of Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. This designation has had an unusual history in that it has appeared twice in legislation, first, as previously noted, in the 1965 Amenity Lands Act and latterly in the 1985 Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order. However, within these two pieces of legislation, the designation has meant different things. Those AONBs designated under the 1965 Act were so designated as the basis for planning controls. However, the 1985 NCALO

designation is much more orientated towards positive management. This is reflected in Article 5 which states that the Department may formulate proposals for an AONB for:

- conserving or enhancing the natural beauty or amenities of that area;
- conserving wildlife, historic objects or natural phenomena within it;
- promoting its enjoyment by the public, and
- providing or maintaining public access to it.

Areas designated as AONBs under the ALA do not cease to be so designated by the repeal of that Act unless they have been





superseded by a subsequent designation made under the NCALO. However, although these ALA designations have little practical effect, their continuation has created some confusion, for example where AONBs are coterminous with countryside policy areas in statutory Area Plans.

In 1985, on the passing of the NCALO, the Department set out to re-designate AONBs. To date, only four areas have been re-designated, namely Mourne; the Causeway Coast; the Antrim Coast and Glens, and the Ring of Gullion (see Appendix). These AONBs are judged to fall within **Category V - "Protected Landscapes"** - of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classification of Protected Areas (see table 1). In Category V areas objectives relating to the protection of cultural values, the promotion of public enjoyment and the fostering of the social and economic well-being of local communities sit alongside nature conservation.

Table 1 IUCN Categories of Protected Areas

I Strict Nature Reserve/Wilderness Area - protected area managed mainly for science or wilderness protection.
II National Park - protected area managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation.
III Natural Monument - protected area managed mainly for conservation of specific natural features.
IV Habitat/species Management Area - Protected area managed mainly for conservation through management intervention.
V Protected Landscape/Seascape - protected area managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation and recreation.
VI Management Resource Protected Area - protected area managed mainly for the sustainable use of natural ecosystems.

Progress in the designation of AONBs has been slow in recent years, due partly to a lack of dedicated resources, but also reflecting a difficulty in getting the message across about the benefits of AONB designation. The objective of seeking consensus on the area to be designated has meant that the process is necessarily protracted. It has required the identification of boundaries (which are invariably different from those of the 1965 designation because of the different rationale), public consultation, and formal consultation with the district

councils concerned. Consensus could not be reached on the proposal to designate two AONBs in Fermanagh - Erne Lakeland and Fermanagh Caveland - on which EHS consulted widely during 1996/97. Although there was wide support for the AONBs from some sections of the community, the designations were strongly opposed by those who felt that they would be followed by more restrictive planning policies which would be harmful to rural development in the County. Despite these difficulties, there

remain strong arguments for AONB designation. It has the advantage of giving the Department the basis for addressing the full range of issues associated with protecting these areas and for promoting their public enjoyment and sustainable use. Such management is becoming increasingly important as pressure on these areas for recreation grows and changes to agricultural practice, and thus the landscape, become more significant.

Increasingly, those responsible for protected areas are seeking ways of achieving sustainable use of natural resources, securing healthy rural economies and strong rural communities that are

in tune with conservation and public recreational access in these areas. Designation of our most scenic areas as AONBs acknowledges that these areas are special and is a tangible step towards achieving this objective.

To help achieve the sustainable management and facilitate the enjoyment of our finest areas of countryside, the Department will proceed with the designation of AONBs under the provisions of the NCALO and complete this work as quickly as resources allow.

It is important to make the process of designation as inclusive as practicable in terms of public participation. While this will undoubtedly make the process of

designation lengthier, it will further help to establish a better understanding of the issues and the opportunities presented.

The Department will, in all cases, endeavour to reach a consensus on the designation of AONBs. In the event of significant opposition, it will only proceed if it is satisfied that the grounds for objection are spurious or not relevant to the purposes of AONBs as defined in the NCALO.

The purpose, value and implications of AONB status will be explained through publications and other measures by EHS.

EHS will be pro-active in making people aware of the benefits of AONB designation.

From an economic perspective, the potential for increasing tourism based on enjoying our countryside, particularly the most scenic areas, is considered to be high, given that so many people have avoided visiting Northern Ireland over the last thirty years. However, such tourism and use often come at a price.

Unplanned and uncontrolled use has impacted adversely on many scenic areas and habitats across the world. It also has the potential to go against the needs and wishes of those that live and work in the areas concerned, so much so that resentment and conflict often arise. The strategic management arrangements that AONB designation can attract can clearly help in dealing with many of these issues.

There is a widespread feeling that pressures on the countryside for recreational use are also not at a significant level here (when compared to England and Wales). This too has coloured public

perception about the need for and value of AONB designation.

As a result, it could be argued that the value of our AONBs, both as special places and as the basis for sustainable economic development, has been underplayed. Whilst individual places of note have been marketed or developed for tourism, the wider landscape surrounding such areas is often neglected or ignored to the potential detriment of those 'jewels' themselves. AONB designation and management offers a more integrated approach whereby environmental, recreational and local community interests are seen as being interdependent.

Although the objectives of AONB designation are based on wider environmental considerations than simply control of development, the effect of AONB designation on planning is often misunderstood. The Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland includes a specific policy that is applicable to all AONBs. Policy DES4 requires

development proposals in AONBs to be sensitive to the distinctive character of the area and the quality of its landscape, heritage and wildlife. In applying this policy due account is taken of the needs of local communities and the need to sustain the economic and social well-being of those living in AONBs.

There is no presumption that AONB designation will automatically result in areas of strict planning control such as Countryside Policy Areas or Green Belt designation. The inclusion of such policies in Area Plans will follow the process of countryside assessment which takes into account aspects such as landscape character and development pressure.

Further steps clearly need to be taken to counteract these perceptions about AONBs and to promote the opportunities presented by designation and locally driven management.





MANAGEMENT OF AREAS OF OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY.

Although EHS is responsible for their designation, the task of managing the countryside within the AONBs is spread amongst many bodies. Sharing information and agreeing a common agenda are therefore important aspects of management and in all four AONBs designated since 1985 this has been one of the main management activities.

However, AONB designation also creates a platform for the full and formal consideration of local issues through the preparation of a management plan or strategy. Such plans can also consider in detail the nature and format of locally tailored management structures. Together these can better facilitate the sustainable management of the areas concerned.

The establishment and operation of appropriate local management arrangements for all AONBs will be promoted and

facilitated by EHS in co-operation with other departments, agencies and relevant district councils

EHS has, in its activities within the existing AONBs, attached great importance to creating appropriate and inclusive structures and developing methods of delivering 'management' of the countryside and countryside issues in ways that:

- make clear that such matters are not the sole responsibility of any individual Department;
- seek to empower local communities;
- create and facilitate a partnership approach;
- enhance the prospects for external and/or private sector funding;
- build on the economic potential of protected landscapes in a sustainable way to create economic growth, encourage community involvement and empowerment, and make conservation an integral consideration and activity.

The Department has been at the forefront of establishing and facilitating structures that can achieve these aims. One such example is the ***Mourne Heritage Trust***, a body that EHS took the lead in establishing and whose activities it continues to support. The Mourne Heritage Trust was set up to allow a co-ordinated approach to the management of Mourne AONB. A range of interests are represented on the Trust and it works to sustain and enhance the natural and cultural heritage and tourism opportunities of the Mourne area.

More recently, the ***Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust*** has been formed and brings together eight district councils and representatives of the tourism and farming industries, environmental groups and community organisations. The Trust is responsible for advancing a strategy to promote sustainable tourism and establishing a framework to safeguard the

important natural and cultural heritage of the area.

Despite some successes in all four 'new' AONBs, EHS has limited resources and must therefore work in partnership with others to make things happen. The need to establish initiatives and create formal Trusts and Partnerships in respect of special areas often reflects the limited powers, lack of capacity, and small geographic scale of the current local government structure.

Management structures for AONBs are likely to vary in nature depending on local circumstances. However, the underlying aim in each case should be to develop and facilitate partnerships that deliver

conservation of the natural and built environment and enhanced recreation provision, in an efficient, effective and inclusive manner.

It is considered crucial that EHS should continue to be involved in initiatives that relate to the sustainable use of our special landscapes. Whilst many of the issues to be tackled in rural areas lie well removed from its core remit, the need to ensure environmental sustainability means, however, that it has an important and ongoing role to play. Its statutory powers to conserve and manage protected landscapes give it an obvious locus.

Within all existing and new AONBs, EHS will work in

partnership with all relevant government departments and district councils and, in full consultation with the local community, to produce management plans or strategies to cover these special areas.

A management plan has a vital role in engendering commitment towards action and the deployment of resources in support of common goals. Such plans provide an opportunity for all organisations operating within an AONB to sign up to policies, proposals and action programmes needed to achieve successful, cohesive and positive management. These plans or strategies should address the



broad range of issues affecting the conservation of landscapes, biodiversity and cultural heritage within the AONBs. They should also provide for appropriate forms of economic growth and set the framework for the development of sustainable tourism initiatives.

Both the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) have key roles to play in encouraging and facilitating rural economic activity through the development of tourism infrastructure. District councils have important functions relating to recreation and access to the countryside.

DARD also has a key role in conserving the rural environment, particularly on farmland and within forests. Through its Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) and the Countryside Management Scheme (CMS) it offers incentives to the farming community to maintain and enhance biodiversity, water quality, landscape and heritage

features on the farm and generates a greater awareness of the benefits of practical conservation management. The five designated ESAs were chosen on the basis of their landscape and wildlife habitats and their boundaries closely correspond with those of existing or proposed AONBs. The forestry sector places great importance on landscape in the planning and design of high impact operations within AONBs and this is supported by Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regulations.

Consideration has already been given to the potential there is to use tourism as the basis of economic growth in many rural areas, including areas such as the Sperrins not yet designated as AONBs under the 1985 legislation. Many such areas are also economically and socially disadvantaged and disproportionately affected by the decline in the agricultural sector. One of the aims of the recently introduced

Natural Resource Rural Tourism Initiative (NRRTI) is to encourage and support such development in qualifying areas; namely the Mourne, South Armagh, Fermanagh, the Sperrins and the Antrim Coast and Glens. Through NRRTI, which is funded by the European Union through the Peace II initiative, EHS, DARD, NITB and DCAL are working together to create a strategic approach towards tourism based on the natural resources of these areas.

However, in all these areas it is fundamentally important that the development of our tourism infrastructure is truly sustainable. Methods must be found to ensure that full consideration is given to the environmental, economic and social implications of any proposals, as well as to how developments ultimately impact on each other. It is in no one's interest to have some sites and locations used beyond their capacity or to direct investment and infrastructure to wholly



inappropriate locations.

In this context, EHS places great value on the preparation of management plans or strategies and will work closely with other bodies in their preparation. These will be non-statutory documents designed to complement and inform statutory Area Plans and the planning process. They will cover issues and matters to do with co-ordinating and facilitating the sustainable use of the environment not normally covered in detail by such statutory Plans. They may also address other factors of landscape change such as forestry, farming and the design of rural dwellings.

Initiatives such as the Countryside Access and Activities Network that facilitate the protection and sustainable use of our protected landscape areas and the wider countryside will be supported through the grant aiding functions of EHS.

Through the NCALO and the Access to the Countryside (NI) Order 1983, the Department is also

tasked with facilitating both the enjoyment and appreciation of the whole natural environment and access to the countryside for informal recreation. There are many ways in which EHS has used its grant aiding functions to achieve these objectives.

For example, EHS has, in partnership with the Sports Council, established a framework for co-ordinating recreational use of the whole of Northern Ireland's countryside through the creation and co-funding of the ***Northern Ireland Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN)***. CAAN is an umbrella organisation which seeks to bring together all those groups and bodies with an interest in countryside recreation. The Department attaches considerable importance to the role of CAAN and its sub-groups and is committed to facilitating its operations.

Sharing and producing information, publishing guidelines and codes, promoting good practice and responsible use, are all

fundamental to the sustainable use of our countryside. CAAN, through working in partnership and in an open, accountable manner, has made considerable inroads into managing the way that a very broad spectrum of users relate to and use the countryside. There is also an important role for CAAN in the preparation of countryside recreation strategies for protected landscape areas and for other important natural resource areas. Such strategies can help to inform a range of decision-makers, encourage local action and help target resources.

EHS also provides grant-aid, training and advice directly to district councils on matters relating to access to the countryside, particularly with respect to the provisions of the 1983 Access Order. However, EHS increasingly sees opportunities for CAAN to take the lead on training, advice and services to local authorities and to act as a forum for discussion and debate.

NATIONAL PARKS.

The USA was the first country in the world to establish National Parks in the second half of the 19th century. The aim was to protect wilderness areas, maintaining them in a pristine state, and minimising any human impact. The conservation of wildlife and natural features was paramount, but the recreational enjoyment of the areas by the public was also a consideration. Many other countries have since followed the American lead and have protected their most precious areas by designating them as National Parks. These areas vary, however, in their nature and purpose; what the term “National Park” means to one nation can, in practice, be different from how the term is applied in another.

The National Parks of England and Wales are widely regarded as coming under the same IUCN category (see table 1) as AONBs in Northern Ireland, namely Category V. At the time of their original

enabling legislation their purpose was to:

- preserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area, and
- promote their enjoyment by the public.

It was not until the 1995 Environment Act that the National Park Authorities were formally required to, “seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the Park, but without incurring significant expenditure in doing so.”

Being more recent, the Scottish experience is of particular interest to Northern Ireland. After many years of debate on the subject, in 1997 the Government declared its intention to legislate for National Parks in Scotland and that the first parks would be Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and the Cairngorms. From the outset it was stated that Scottish National Parks would have a “third purpose,” namely the promotion of the social and economic well-being of local communities.

The question of designating some areas in Northern Ireland as National Parks has become topical. Many of those advocating National Parks see them as an effective marketing identity with potential economic benefits.

Others point to more rigorous conservation policies that are usually associated with National Parks. While, unusually, the 1985 legislation makes no actual distinction in the status of AONBs and National Parks, there remains a strong perception that National Park is in some way a superior and more effective designation. The very term “National Park” suggests both national importance and a national commitment to safeguard its special qualities.

The case has been put forward that National Park status for some of our AONBs would not only provide economic benefits to the local community through increased tourism, but would also require considerable increases in management resources, thus



generating further new jobs and services. Over time, this could shift the focus of the local economy of the areas concerned towards a 'conservation economy' as has happened in the Lake and Peak Districts of England, albeit not on a similar scale.

Another important benefit emerging from the experience of National Park status elsewhere is the concept of a "first stop shop." Countryside management often involves a complex range of issues and a multitude of agencies. Locally-based, and well-informed National Park staff could provide a valuable point of contact for farmer, villager or visitor alike. National Park Authorities could act as facilitators and advisers on the functions of other public bodies that are relevant to National Park purposes.

The fact that some of the finest landscape areas of the Republic of Ireland are designated as National Parks, and that they are very successfully marketed for tourism,

would seem to add substance to the case here. However, circumstances in the Republic are quite different. There the areas designated as National Parks are wholly owned by the State and have no indigenous population; they are also small in size relative to the landscapes in which they are located.

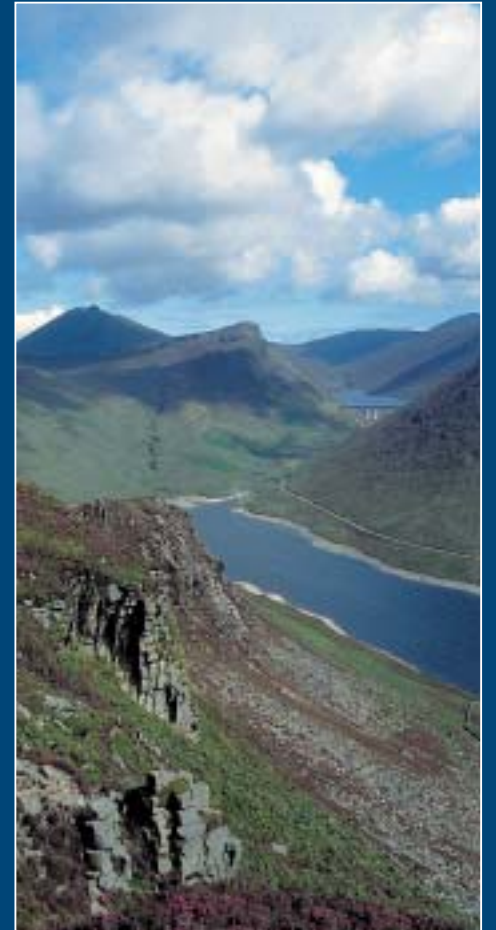
In order to inform and advance this debate, EHS commissioned the Europarc organisation to carry out a study on the potential benefits, costs and management implications of establishing National Parks in Northern Ireland. This study has concluded that National Parks, if properly established and resourced, could undoubtedly create opportunities for a more holistic and integrated approach to landscape management, economic development and social gain.

Based on the Scottish experience, the study sets out five criteria for developing an appropriate National Park model for Northern Ireland:

- **natural heritage importance.** The area should be of outstanding importance for its natural heritage.
- **coherent identity.** The natural resources of the area should have both a distinctive character and a coherent identity.
- **support.** There should be local and national support for the area to be designated a National Park.
- **needs and benefits.** The integrated approach to management should meet the special needs of the area and provide more benefits than other approaches.
- **scale and complexity.** The area should be large enough to secure the long term future of the natural resources and enable the pursuit of multiple objectives. Having established these criteria, the study's authors concluded that, on the grounds of their landscape, biodiversity and

cultural value, National Park status would be appropriate for one or more areas within Northern Ireland that are currently designated as AONBs. The study also recommends that the Mourne Mountains is the area most suited for National Park designation for the following reasons:

- the area merits National Park status in recognition of its outstanding landscape, biodiversity and cultural value;
 - the area is of sufficient scale to secure its long term future and affords the opportunity for integrated management;
 - there is already in place a community based management structure in the form of the Mourne Heritage Trust; and
 - the Mourne Mountains have a well established tradition of access and outdoor recreation.
- This recommendation was accepted by Mr Dermot Nesbitt, the Minister for the Environment in the Northern Ireland Executive. On 25 September 2002 he announced





his intention to set up a National Park in the Mourne and to establish a steering group to advise on the details of the boundary and management structure.

Proposals will be put forward by the Department for consultation on new primary legislation enabling the establishment of a model of National Parks that are appropriate for Northern Ireland.

The exact nature of National Parks required in Northern Ireland needs further detailed consideration. A similar debate in Scotland following the 1997 announcement led to the introduction of the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. This legislation sets out the aims of the Parks in Scotland, their method of designation and the purpose and functions of the Park Authorities. On the basis that most commentators regard the provisions for National Parks in NCALO as being wholly inadequate, the Department envisages that similar primary

legislation will be required for Northern Ireland.

To take forward the designation of a National Park in the Mourne, the Department will publish and consult on detailed proposals for the Park boundary and the functions of a management authority.

The establishment of a National Park in the Mourne could potentially affect a number of government departments and agencies as well as local councils. This proposal has come at a time when a review of public administration including local government is underway. For these reasons a steering group comprising representatives from a range of public and voluntary bodies will be established to take forward the research and consultation needed to underpin the designation.

Of paramount importance is the need to assess the degree of public support for the proposed National Park. This can only be

done properly when the extent and nature of the Park and the functions of its management authority can be specified. The establishment of the Park will require significant additional resources from Government and it is hard to envisage this happening if the level of support is not considerable.



CONCLUSION

The appreciation, enjoyment and use of the countryside are topical issues. With farming facing an uncertain future many in the rural community are looking to diversify. Thus there are increasing pressures to use the natural and historic heritage as the basis for economic growth based on recreation and associated tourism.

The pressures on our countryside are all too evident - pressures that threaten to disfigure those areas which are most valued for their scenery and natural beauty. These are fragile landscapes which cannot absorb new developments indefinitely without changing their distinctive character. The key to conserving landscapes is understanding this character and seeking to manage change in ways which ensure that their quality and value are sustained for future generations to use and enjoy.

The protection of outstanding landscape areas is an increasingly

important activity for the Department of the Environment and is closely tied to conserving biodiversity, promoting sustainable development and raising environmental awareness. It is an area of activity where there are many parties involved at various levels, including other Departments, local government and the voluntary and private sectors. It is also an area where the land-owning community can expect to play a role. Building relationships and a joint agenda is a time consuming and delicate task but it is not only considered necessary to proceed on this joint basis, it is arguably fundamental to success.

This statement highlights the value of protected landscapes and sets out the steps which the Department is currently taking and plans for the future. In terms of resources, it is clear that the capacity of the Environment and Heritage Service is limited relative to the size of the task.

The completion of the AONB designation programme and the establishment of one or more National Parks are likely to take several more years. By working in conjunction with others and delivering management initiatives through partnerships and locally based mechanisms, much, however, has been and will continue to be achieved.

APPENDIX: AONBs IN NORTHERN IRELAND

RING OF GULLION

Date of designation 1991

Area 15353 ha

The Ring of Gullion is a unique geological landform, unparalleled elsewhere in the British Isles. The heather clad bulk of Slieve Gullion mountain lies at the centre of the AONB, which takes its name from the encircling ring of lower rugged hills. Rich wildlife habitats of heath, bog and woodland contrast with the neatly patterned fields and ladder farms. Slieve Gullion's reputation as Ireland's mountain of mystery arises from its rich associations with Irish legends and myths.

CAUSEWAY COAST

Date of designation 1989

Area 4200 ha

The Causeway Coast, particularly the Giant's Causeway itself, must be the Province's most renowned area internationally and boasts the only World Heritage Site in Northern Ireland. It is a place of extraordinary beauty encompassing 18 miles of dramatic coastline, a rich and fascinating wildlife and a wealth of geological marvels. This natural beauty is made all the more impressive by the small harbours, fisheries and farms delicately poised on the storm-torn coastline. A rich and fascinating wildlife thrives on the offshore islands and rocks, amid the cliffs and sand dunes, and within the farmed countryside.

ANTRIM COAST AND GLENS

Date of designation 1988

Area 70600 ha

The coastline of County Antrim from Ballycastle to Larne and the world famous Glens of Antrim contain some of the most beautiful and varied scenery in Northern Ireland. The area is dominated by a high undulating plateau cut by deep glens which open north and eastwards to the sea. It is an area of contrasts: gentle bays are separated by blunt headlands; exposed moorland gives way to sheltered valleys; wide open expanses to enclosed farmland. Slemish Mountain rises abruptly, its wildness in sharp contrast to the neat fields of the Braid Valley below. Rathlin Island, lying offshore to the north, is rich in historical, geological and botanical interest.



APPENDIX: AONBs IN NORTHERN IRELAND

MOURNE

Date of designation 1986

Area 57012 ha

Famed in song and close to the heart of everyone in the Province are the Mourne mountains and their hinterland. It is one of the most picturesque mountain districts in Ireland. The twelve peaks include Slieve Donard, which at 850m is Northern Ireland's highest mountain. Beneath the cluster of fine peaks, cliffs and rock pinnacles, the mountain slopes descend through moorland, woodland, field and farm before meeting the coast. Slieve Croob lies as a northern outlier to the main massif.

STRANGFORD LOUGH

Date of designation 1972

Area 18647 ha

Strangford Lough is an almost landlocked area of sea set within a diverse lowland topography. Within the lough, tips of drowned drumlin hills create a spectacular myriad of islands, while, on shore, the hills form a pleasant rolling landscape. At the northern end of the lough, Scrabo hill and tower form a prominent landscape feature which can be seen from miles around. The lough is of international importance for wintering wildfowl while the shores, woodland, meadows, streams and marshes, together with the well tended farmland provide landscape diversity and great nature conservation interest.

SPERRIN

Date of designation 1968

Area 101006 ha

Lying in the heart of Northern Ireland the Sperrin AONB encompasses a largely mountainous area of great geological complexity. Stretching from the Strule Valley in the west to the perimeter of the Lough Neagh lowlands in the east this area presents vast expanses of moorland penetrated by narrow glens and deep valleys. In its south the Burren area is noted for its lakes, sandy eskers and other glacial features. The area is rich in historic and archaeological heritage and folklore.



APPENDIX: AONBs IN NORTHERN IRELAND

LECALE COAST

Date of designation 1967

Area 3108 ha

The coastal area between Strangford Lough and the Mournes has a low, sometimes sandy, rocky or grassy shoreline. Its southern tip lies along an extensive sand and dune system at Dundrum Bay. Stretching from Dundrum Bay to Strangford village, the coastline is a place of delightful coves, dramatic headlands and secluded sandy beaches. Nature Reserves such as that at Killard and Cloghy Rocks offer the opportunity to quietly observe nature and the Lecale coast is famed for its colonies of seals.

NORTH DERRY

Date of designation 1966

Area 12950 ha

The Sperrins end in the north with a zone of cliffs overlooking the north Atlantic, serving as a final reminder of the area's turbulent volcanic past. The severe skyline of the cliffs at Binevenagh make a breathtaking contrast with the outstanding expanse of Magilligan Strand. This is one of the finest beaches in the Province and stretches for 8 km, from Downhill to the narrows of Lough Foyle. The steep, round-topped grassland hills and the sandy shoreline are the dominant features, separated from the rocky shore of Donegal by just one kilometre of sea.

LAGAN VALLEY

Date of designation 1965

Area 2072 ha

Focused on the course of the River Lagan, this AONB is within easy access from the large population of the Belfast Urban Area. Most of the AONB now lies within the Lagan Valley Regional Park which was designated in 1967. The riverbank scenery, meadows, woods and the pleasant pastoral land of the Lagan valley make this a peaceful haven. The area has a rich heritage, not only through its impressive monuments such as the Giant's Ring, its Early Christian raths and the remnants of fine estates, but also its important industrial archaeology related to linen production and the old Lagan Canal and its towpath.



AONBs designated under the Amenity Lands Act 1965

AONBs designated under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order 1985



Our aim is to protect and conserve the natural and built environment and to promote its appreciation for the benefit of present and future generations.



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