

**Date:** 13 December 2022

**Report:** REPORT ON UK NATIONAL PARKS CONFERENCE 2022

**Purpose**

1. To provide a report on the UK National Parks Conference, held in Exmoor National Park in September 2022.

**RECOMMENDATION**

2. That Members note the report.

**Background**

3. Members Neil Heseltine, Julie Hutton, Mark Corner and Richard Good attended the National Parks UK Conference in September 2022, held in Exmoor.
4. Their report is attached as the Appendix.
5. Further information can be obtained via the [conference website](#), including a copy of the conference programme, the conference overview report and audio recordings of the plenary sessions.

**Clare Tamea**  
**Committees Officer**  
25 November 2022

### UK National Parks Annual Conference

#### Exmoor National Park

The Conference theme was, “We need our finest Landscapes to be places of natural beauty which look up and outwards to the nation they serve. In essence, we’ve asked not ‘what do national landscapes need?’ but ‘what does the nation need from them today?’ ”. The conference aimed at addressing the vital role national parks should play in supporting the health and wellbeing of the nation today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The conference was based in Dunster and held across 27-29<sup>th</sup> September. It was very well organised by the staff and it was an incredibly busy programme. There were over 120 delegates including sponsors, DEFRA, National Parks England, Natural England, AONBs as well as delegates from each park.

#### Day 1

After arrival delegates were offered a study tour of Dunster Castle followed by the evening welcome at Dunster Tithe Barn, which included speeches from National Parks Partnerships Revere <https://revere.eco/> and Julian Glover OBE.

We also heard from Exmoor Young Rangers and Soraya Abdel-Hadi an adventurer, sustainable business champion and founder of All The Elements

<https://www.alltheelements.co/about>

#### Day 2

The delegates were offered a choice of Study Tours across the area showcasing all aspects of the Park’s work.

Julie Hutton chose a tour about the economy of the area. After a short update on how the Park is working with businesses we visited a company in the Park, who are manufacturing equipment to support the science industry automating a number of tests saving time and money. Their challenges are that they are growing fast and may not be able to relocate within the Park. This was followed by a visit to a farm where they are introducing natural capital processes. The day ended with a lovely coast walk with the volunteers, where we saw stunning views and the Welsh coast.

Mark Corner joined the Living Landscapes Tour which focused on supporting the socio-economic backdrop of communities. The tour visited the NT run Holnicott Estate, met

with Exmoor Young Voices and local housing groups and visited the Cutcombe livestock market to meet with local farmers. The extent of engagement with and involvement of young people was impressive, facilitated by a detailed database, and help is offered in seeking affordable housing including assistance in looking at self-build opportunities.

The farming community are positive about the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme but frustrated at the lack of clarity with the emerging ELMS.

Neil Heseltine joined the Community, Collaboration, Communication tour group:

Our day started with a hair-raising minibus journey through hedge-lined lanes of Somerset to the tiny hamlet of Simonsbath in the heart of Exmoor NP. Our first stop was a previously dilapidated former primary school and adjoining cottages which the NP had purchased and, whilst respecting its history, completely renovated into a communal space which had then been handed over to a local community trust to run as a focal point for the small local community. In conjunction with the woodland garden around it, it was now used regularly by a variety of users from biodiversity groups and Pilates to small outdoor concerts.

We then had a short walk around the corner to meet a young dynamic duo who had taken on the running of Simonsbath Sawmill since it had been brought back into use with the help of a variety of funding schemes by Exmoor NP, their passion and enthusiasm was infectious. Whilst there we also met a couple of young businesspeople, one producing local wine and the other arranging bespoke dining experiences using foraged and local produce. They stressed that the success of all the businesses was, partly, as a result of collaboration between these 3 businesses, amongst others, enabled by the support they had been given by the NP, mainly in the form of linking them together and being able to share their experiences in the setting up of a small, rural business.

Lastly, we headed into the hills to visit the NP owned outdoor centre at Pinkery. Set in hundreds of acres of classic Exmoor moorland you couldn't think of a better place for the school children of surrounding areas to be able to experience the open countryside. We were treated to one of the most convincing arguments as to why we should be treating climate change seriously by 15-year-old Archie, one of the nature rangers, and the obvious enjoyment that the children got from learning and communicating about the environment and the natural world was clear to see.

What struck me most about the day was that these were all National Park owned properties, and this is obviously very different to the situation that we have here in the Dales. This allowed the Exmoor NP to be able to showcase best practice and be an

exemplar to all around in a brilliant way without having to come to an agreement with a third party, which seemed to be an enviable position to be in. It was pointed out to us that this didn't come without its problems and it wasn't all sweetness and light, but still great examples of different ways of working with all the various groups of people that we engage with.

With the current economic pressures, it has been suggested that Exmoor NP may have to sell of some of these assets just to balance the books, that would be a real shame, especially at a time when the people of these various communities will need them most.

The evening was hosted by Horner Farm, who looked after us really well. They are building an agro-ecological farm. Driven by the climate emergency and biodiversity loss they are managing the farm in a way that delivers healthy soils, abundant wildlife and contributes to a thriving community.

We heard feedback from all the tours and were fed great food including beef from the farm, which was lovely and our Chair enjoyed many slices!!!!

Nick Giles from OS, one of the sponsors spoke to us about his passion for the outdoors and Stanley Johnson (Dad of Boris) entertained us - he is a neighbour of Exmoor's Chair, so has been a great support.

### Day 3

Back at the Tithe Barn there was a presentation by Dextras, a local light bulb manufacturer and sponsor of the conference, who have offset their production by planting trees on the owner's estate in Exmoor.

This was followed by four speakers, Daniel Raven Ellison, Guerrilla geographer and founder of Slow Ways who said "*The majority of people are not where we are, and National Parks need to engage with urban areas. SlowWaysUK is a great opportunity in a practical way to link National Parks and urban areas. National Parks need strength, power, energy and leadership*". Sarah Mukerjee: formerly of the BBC and CEO of Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment, "*National Parks shouldn't be exclusive citadels, they are paid for by the taxes of the whole nation. National Park Authorities can't assume that continued public funding is a given. They need to think about the unthinkable: who would campaign for them if they were under threat? We need connections with urban areas so that they become ambassadors and protectors*".

Minette Batters, President of the National Farmers Union urged the conference to not "*allow there to be a rift between farming and the environment. We can deliver living,*

*breathing landscapes and provide high quality, carbon neutral food*". But as well farmers have to run profitable businesses - and they are under immense pressure. Tony Juniper, Chair of Natural England used the phrase "*Think Global, act local*", but crucially added the word "*compromise*". *National Parks' governance constraints clearly make compromise tricky - as for very good reason local oversight is baked in. It evidently makes it very hard to prioritise the bigger picture and speak with one voice*".

A 'panel' session took questions from delegates. They were joined on the panel by Dr. Rosie Plummer, non-exec Board Member at Natural Resources Wales and Jenny Gibbons, Team Leader for National Parks at the Scottish Government.

The morning was concluded with a lovely film, "National Parks Green Pathways – Generation Green On Screen", presented by NP UK Communications  
<https://vimeo.com/737857055>

### Some of our take-aways

What can we take away from the conference for our Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority? Here are a few of our thoughts:

- On the key issues of nature recovery, climate change, landscapes for all, and green economic recovery, the need to work more actively in partnership with others, with a greater sense of ambition and urgency.
- The need for NPs to have an even stronger collective national voice moving forward, particularly in the current political climate (funding etc). Also, could we help push for a more visible champion for the collective?
- How important it is to work in partnership and try and get as much collaboration going as possible. Could we form a northern English NPs forum for example? Face to face meetings enable collaborative conversations.
- Can we do more to engage and hear the voices of young people, perhaps learning from Exmoor NP and others?
- As a board, do we give ourselves enough space to focus on the big, strategic issues? For example, should we give members the opportunity to suggest / champion items for the Authority meetings?

Julie Hutton, Mark Corner, Neil Heseltine and Richard Good  
October 2022.