

Report from Members of the YDNPA Delegation to UK National Parks Conference 2026

Purpose

1. To inform the Authority of the programme and matters arising from the 2026 UK National Parks Conference.

Background

2. Every two years the 15 National Park Authorities in the UK meet to consider our role in society, how we are addressing key challenges, and to share ideas.
3. The 2026 Conference was hosted by the Cairngorms NPA in Aviemore from 16-18 September. The theme for the conference was “People and Nature Thriving Together”.
4. The Authority was represented at the Conference by: Derek Twine (Chair); Lizzie Bushby (Deputy Chair); Neil Heseltine (Member Champion for Recreation Management); Katie Norgate (Co-opted Young Member); and Gary Smith (Acting CEO).
5. As well as Members and key officers from the 15 National Park Authorities, there were representatives and contributors from a wide range of other bodies, including: Council for National Parks Defra; National Lottery Heritage Fund; National Parks England; National Parks Partnership; Wildlife Trusts; Woodland Trust; Youth Hostel Association; local project partners, and the Conference sponsors.
6. The conference programme included speakers, discussion groups, Q&A sessions, informal networking opportunities, and a range of field trips to see the nature recovery work being done in the Cairngorms National Park by the NPA and many local partner organisations.

What we personally learned

- Always keep in mind the “big picture”. People, place, nature and economy are inter-related and inter-dependent, not just connected. (DT)
- Nature is not a nice to have – it’s fundamental to our national security, resilience, prosperity, food security etc. (LB)
- Nature restoration needs landscape scale, and needs pace. (DT)
- There is a tension between national parks as exemplars, and the need to deliver more resilient landscapes across the *whole* UK. How can we share knowledge/expand our work/upskill others? (LB)

- Full community engagement, especially the younger generation, will increase ownership and long-term sustainability of nature regeneration. (DT)
- Emphasise the Power of Place. (DT)
- It is always helpful to hear differing perspectives as we did in the panel discussion, and to hear views that can take us out of our comfort zone, and out of our own national park bubble. The views expressed from the various organisations were to be expected and lacked some fundamental knowledge of how national parks work, but it's still useful to remind ourselves that there are competing interests out there with regards to land use. Disappointing that the proposed new national park in Scotland fell by the wayside due to public perception of what it would bring and a shift in political will. (NH)
- The YDNPA is one of 3 national parks which had taken on board the recommendation from the previous conference (to ensure wider participation). This highlighted to me that there is still more to be done across the other national parks. (KN)
- Sometimes it's possible to get the right answer to the wrong question, and we must challenge ourselves to ask better questions to lead to innovative, resilient solutions. (LB)
- The importance of a 'just transition' – leaving no-one behind – and the learning we can take from the [No Time to Lose](#) report. (LB)
- The importance of language to engage others – is a project about “river restoration” or water quality/flow? (LB)

What we can do differently at YDNPA

- Ensure opportunities to share “the big picture” with our staff, our Members and our partners at all times, celebrating successes and enthusing about our ambitions (DT)
- To work at pace, we're going to get things wrong. Consider what we would do if we weren't afraid of failing? (LB)
- Consider how our work can influence landscape *outside* the YDNPA – river catchments, cities, towns, etc. (LB)
- Consider water, in the sense of whole river catchments and how to manage flow when drought and floods are more common in our work/future MPs. (LB)
- We do so much work across all forms of diversity with our officers, staff and visitors of National Parks, but at Chair, CEO and Member level, this is still very sadly lacking, and we have to do better. (NH)
- Ensure participation with different communities of people is long term so that their involvement is more meaningful and has a lasting impact. (KN)
- When considering involvement opportunities, think about whether the level of participation could be increased by one step up the ladder, using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation as a framework. (KN)
- There is a need for more disabled access on trails in national parks and more accessible accommodation. As an Authority, we need to continually challenge

ourselves to consider whose voices may be missing, what barriers may exist and what we can do differently to ensure participation is genuinely inclusive. (KN)

- Extend our reach into University Departments for research opportunities across all disciplines, with win-win potential and mutual benefits. (DT)
- The need for broader conversations and sharing with national landscapes. We share so many common challenges, and it would be great to have a joint conference. (LB)

Significant personal highlights

- The opportunity to attend the conference, enjoy the Cairngorms, a place where 'people and nature can thrive together,' enjoying the rugged mountainous landscapes, a steam train journey, a ceilidh and cycling on e-bikes, and be part of the team representing the Yorkshire Dales. (NH)
- The Durrel Trust's vision and delivery at Dalnacardoch – they are regenerating and transforming an upland moorland former shooting estate: developing a sustainable rural economy by integrating farming, deer management, nature recovery and tourist opportunities; with emphasis on community engagement for social cohesion. (DT)
- Craig Bennett (CEO of the Wildlife Trusts) issued a challenge to us with regards to nature not thriving as it should be in our landscapes. It's a home truth that we really need to hear. It was a message of appreciation of the work we are doing but that, together, we all have to do more. However, it was a message that seemed to lack the appreciation of how we, as the NPAs, need to work closely with farmers and landowners in order to achieve the recovery needed. (NH)
- The undoubted highlight was the dementia centre, an amazing example of how people and nature, and active travel, can all thrive together, to the mutual benefit of all. Brilliant people doing brilliant things for other people within nature. This is the kind of work that National Parks from across all 3 nations are doing day in and day out and don't get anywhere near the amount of appreciation or recognition that they should. (NH)
- Learning of the exciting and ambitious embryonic proposal for a NPUK Nature Academy for young apprentices, staff, volunteers, young rangers, etc. A clear vision and nascent business model are in place, now it needs a funding plan. (DT)
- Prompted by the conference attendees appearing significantly less diverse than two years ago, a strong call-to-action that we must not relax our attention for wider engagement and involvement. (DT, NH)
- The reinforcement across presentations and discussions of co-creation and "Giving Voice" to those who are marginalised (DT); specifically
- Championing the importance of youth voice and participation to other National Parks and sharing my experience at YDNPA, as well as having the opportunity to answer questions about the co-opted role. There was an interest shown by many in exploring how they can create more meaningful opportunities for youth people within their own National Parks. (KN)

- I was introduced to forest bathing for the first time, which, personally, I enjoyed, not everybody was quite so enthusiastic! It was great to truly immerse ourselves in the woodland, the trees and forest were mesmerising at times, and it showed how important it is to take a moment to pause - then downhill all the way back to the hotel! (NH)
- Working in a team with others on my fieldtrip to build a leaky dam. There's something incredibly positive about physical exertion and achieving something new as a team in a beautiful place. (LB)
- Speaking to many people who are already connected with and excited about our new Chief Executive! (LB)