

The History of the Country Park, 1966–2005: Towards a Renaissance?

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ABSTRACT *The origins of the Country Park are examined and the implications of those origins are analysed. Country Parks are followed through to the present, including their enthusiastic sponsorship by the Countryside Commission, their role in local authority policy and practice, and the decline noted in the 1999 House of Commons Select Committee inquiry into Town and Country Parks. In the last two years, the Country Parks Network, administered by Green Space and funded by the government, has shown the tenacity of the Country Park, and there are encouraging signs from the Countryside Agency of renewed interest, and its hopes for a 'Renaissance in Country Parks'. A summary of this period is also included, but an assessment of the effectiveness of its initiatives must wait for more time to pass.*

KEY WORDS: Leisure, honeypots, gateways, drift, renaissance

The Original Idea of the Country Park, 1966–1968

In the 1960s, among many politicians and policy makers there was a widespread perception of an imminent crisis in the countryside, precipitated by several social factors, chief of all the growth of leisure and recreation. In an influential article, Michael Dower wrote of what he called “the fourth wave”:

Three great waves have broken across the face of Britain since 1800. First the sudden growth of dark industrial towns. Second, the thrusting movement along far flung railways. Third, the sprawl of car based suburbs. Now we see under the guise of a modest word, the surge of the fourth wave which could be more powerful than all the others. The modest word is *leisure*. (Dower, 1965, p. 123)

The language is surprisingly dark and pessimistic given that the growth in leisure, or freedom from oppressive labour, was popularly viewed as one of the expected benefits of the widely embraced technological revolution of the 1960s. In 1971 a Countryside Commission report on Country Parks foresaw, in slightly less apocalyptic terms, a threefold growth in countryside recreation in the next 30 years due to “the centrifugal tendencies affecting our mobile and affluent society” (Zetter, 1971, p. 4).

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An increase in leisure time from one and a half or two days to three or four days per week by the year 2000 was widely predicted (Holdaway, 1971, p. 34). In the late 1960s, a pattern of increasing population, increasing income, increasing mobility and a rise in occupational class and educational status was widely predicted (Holdaway, 1971, pp. 28–29). This was the Golden Age of ‘the pleasure drive’, the era still of the *Shell Book of Britain* and the roadside picnic, but with private cars becoming cheaper and the new road network expanding. The Government Social Survey *Planning for Leisure* in 1969 recorded that 40% of those visiting Box Hill had started off without the intention of making it their destination, while half the remainder (3%) were going on to another place; and 44% of visits to commons were incidental to the purpose of “a drive into the country” (see Holdaway, 1971, p. 40).

This widespread belief in the imminence of a leisure society went hand in hand with fear for the future of the countryside’s special qualities. New leisure and mobility were viewed as a threat, eloquently expressed in Dower’s alarming metaphor. He subsequently elaborated on it, writing of “people like ants, scurrying from coast to coast, on holiday, swarming out of cities in July and August by car, coach, train and aeroplane to a multitude of resorts and hidden places throughout the isles of Britain” (Dower, 1966). In 1974 the Countryside Commission’s report *New Agricultural Landscapes* stated that: “While some recreational activities and wildlife conservation coexisted with little conflict until recently, the increasing intensity of both agriculture and recreation now threatens their coexistence on the same land” (quoted in Aitchison *et al.*, 2000, p. 64).

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949

The seed of the idea of Country Parks had been sown as early as 1929 when the Addison Committee on National Parks set out a vision for two types of National Park: areas selected by reason of their outstanding interest to the nation as a whole, and areas [such as the Peak District or Cannock Chase] conveniently situated in regard to industrial centres, to which it was desirable to provide a large measure of access. However, by the time of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, the vision had been watered down, leaving National Parks focused solely on areas of nationally important landscape which almost by definition were remote from conurbations and urban influence, and not on areas easily accessible to town dwellers.

1966 White Paper, Leisure in the Countryside

A series of conferences entitled ‘The Countryside in 1970’, held in 1963, 1965 and 1970, helped to focus the sense of threat referred to above. The first two prompted a government response in the form of the 1966 White Paper entitled *Leisure in the Countryside*. The White Paper proposed the establishment of Country Parks and picnic sites with three objectives:

- to make it easier for those seeking recreation to enjoy their leisure in the open without travelling too far and adding to congestion on the roads;
- to ease the pressure on the more remote and solitary places;
- to reduce the risk of damage to the countryside. (HMSO, 1966, p. 4)

As noted by the Countryside Commission itself in 1971, these “do not reveal a very positive attitude to the encouragement of recreation”. The first is about preventing congestion while the second and third “see country parks as part of a defensive strategy” (Zetter, 1971, p. 5). Above all, they embody, in a disconcerting echo of Michael Dower’s simile of the ants, the idea of Country Parks as a ‘honeypot’, which later became explicit.

The first aim set out in the White Paper meant that the key considerations were accessibility by car and ability to withstand the pressure of heavy use. But the defensive function of the Country Parks—“to ease the pressure on the more remote and solitary places”—was widely understood. As it was put by one contemporary commentator:

If the increasing pressure on remote areas of the countryside is to be relieved before the scenery becomes a victim of its own beauty, alternative areas must be provided where recreation on a massive scale can take place without harm to the environment. To put it another way; if our national parks or areas of outstanding natural beauty are to survive in anything like their present form, visitors from the town must be persuaded to use alternative spots for the enjoyment of the countryside. (Bonsey, 1969, quoted in Holdaway, 1971, p. 6)

Country Parks were even located near to National Parks “for those who slip through the net” and as a further defence against the countryside “being invaded”. The aim was to “concentrate car-based recreationists in certain areas... establishing recreation as another land use, together with agriculture and forestry” (Holdaway, 1971, p. 6). The philosophy was symptomatic of the age’s faith in planning and in a biddable nation: Nan Fairbrother wrote enthusiastically about Country Parks in her influential *New Lives, New Landscapes*:

In the countryside urban recreation and farming now need this clear-cut division, for though there will always be country-lovers who find their own country way and keep their peace with farmers, urban recreation as such needs its own legitimate areas... Such parks should contain their users, and provided their boundaries are efficient, adjoining land can be safely farmed. (Fairbrother, 1970, pp. 91–92)

The language exemplifies the Domesday attitude towards the increasing mobility of the urbanite and the threat perceived in the very notion of ‘recreation’. It also hints at a view of Country Parks as secondary, expendable landscapes in the defence of the deep England of the mountains and the deep countryside, the National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs).

The Countryside Act 1968

The White Paper formed the basis of the Countryside Act 1968. This was the first piece of legislation to deal with amenity and recreation over the whole countryside (the 1949 Act precedes it but had a restricted remit), and one of its key ideas was that of the Country Park. The Act provided for central government to grant aid the establishment of new parks and the improvement of existing ones; it also provided for grant aid to private bodies or individuals running Country Parks.

The Act also established the Countryside Commission out of the old National Parks Commission, set up in 1949. Sections 2(2) and (3) of the Act lay a duty on the new body to keep under review all matters relating to:

- (a) the provision and improvement of facilities for the enjoyment of the countryside;
- (b) the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside;
- (c) the need to secure public access to the countryside for the purposes of open-air recreation.

It is worth noting that the Commission's remit very clearly focused on visitors to the countryside rather than the rural community itself, and on the landscape—the aestheticized consumable—rather than the working countryside, or what would now be termed the rural economy.

Countryside Commission, Policy on Country Parks and Picnic Sites, 1969

The Countryside Commission's guidance, *Policy on Country Parks and Picnic Sites*, was published in 1969, and gives a useful snapshot of the initial idea of Country Parks. It set out criteria for recognition as a Country Park, which included being:

- (a) readily accessible for motor vehicles and pedestrians;
- (b) provided with an adequate range of facilities, including as a minimum, parking facilities, lavatories either within or adjacent to the park, and a supervisory service;
- (c) operated as a single unit and managed by statutory bodies, or private agencies or a combination of both. (pp. 3–4)

Priorities for funding would include:

- (a) encouraging the provision or improvement of Country Parks in areas where the present facilities appear inadequate ...;
- (b) encouraging the improvement of areas already in use for recreation which could be converted into Country Parks ...;
- (c) encouraging development of Country Parks on land at present derelict or under used (pp. 4–5)

The guidance recommended that promotion and publicity would be essential to enable the whole concept of Country Parks to be widely understood and accepted, including providing a standard symbol for all recognized Country Parks. Badging was seen as important for:

- (a) maintaining standards;
- (b) assembling data on recreation facilities to assess priorities on grant;
- (c) publicity and promotion.

If recognized, the site would be awarded the Commission's copyrighted symbol, and there would be a systematic reappraisal every few years.

Apart from the reliance on private transport, the other notable characteristic is the emphasis on a strategic, regional approach to provision. It is also worth noting the intention to achieve reliable standards across the whole family of Country Parks sponsored by the Commission.

Picnic sites were part of the same legislation and grant programme, based on the White Paper's suggestion that:

There will be places in the countryside and on the coast where a country park would not be justified, but something better than a lay-by is needed by the family who want to stop for a few hours, perhaps to picnic, or to explore the footpaths or simply to sit and enjoy the view and fresh air.

The guidance stated that: "the difference between a country park and picnic site is essentially one of scale The precise dividing line must necessarily be an arbitrary one".

The Role of the Country Park

Recreation

The role of the Country Park was to provide a location for what the Countryside Recreation Research Advisory Group categorized as "informal countryside recreation", defined in 1970 as "recreation, the main aim of which is relaxation which requires little in the way of special skill or organization, which lacks any competitive element and which requires a countryside location for its full enjoyment" (Zetter, 1971, p. 1).

The Commission stated in its 1971 report on *The Evolution of Country Parks Policy* that "the attributes of people who predominate in this type of recreation in England, speaking very generally, are that they reside in urban areas, are middle class, own cars and have young families" (Zetter, 1971, p. 2). More contentiously, it also saw the Country Park as the locus for the working-out of "an ambivalent attitude to the countryside" among visitors for whom it was a new experience. It noted of "day camping" with a caravan or tent at Clumber Park, that it was intended "presumably to maximize the visitor's number of home comforts without actually staying at home", and suggested that a "schizophrenic attitude . . . a love-hate relationship exists between different sections of society and the countryside", as well as general anxiety over "leisure time for self-improvement or hedonistic use" (Zetter, 1971, p. 2).

Protection of High-Quality Land

It is worth noting that the use of Country Park designation as a means of protecting high-quality landscapes, or strategic areas of open countryside, was not mentioned in early guidance from the Commission. It was not until 1987 that their potential "for safeguarding existing parkland" was recognized (Countryside Commission, 1987a).

As a result it is noticeable that Country Parks, the bulk of which were laid out before 1987, where located in historic parkland, rarely cover the complete designed landscape or anything like it. Many—for example Cannon Hall near Barnsley—extend to only a small part of the parkland, with the result that they have contributed to fragmented ownership and its concomitant problems.

Ecology

The habitat value of Country Parks was likewise little recognized in early thinking. A study in 1991 referred to important habitat types being “surprisingly well represented” in Country Parks; some Country Parks, it went on, “even contained or adjoined areas designated SSSI [Sites of Special Scientific Interest] or local and national nature reserves” (Hampton, 1991, no pagination).

This omission has been well rectified by modern management planning which tends, given the education and training of many Country Park managers, to be strong on nature conservation.¹

Early Country Parks

Throughout the 20th century, long before the 1968 Act, areas of countryside around urban areas had been acquired by local authorities for public benefit. Durlston Head and its cliff-top walks were acquired by the Swanage Urban District Council in 1921; in Bristol, the parks and woods of Blaise Castle were acquired in 1926, and those of Ashton Court in 1951. Around Barnsley, Wakefield and Doncaster, the 1950s saw the public acquisition of large parts of several country house estates: Bretton Hall, Cannon Hall, Wentworth Castle and Cusworth Hall.

In the 1960s, there was gathering momentum behind the aim of acquiring land for recreation. Prior to the 1968 Act, other legislation was used to enable such projects, Country Parks in all but name. Six hundred and thirty-eight acres of the 17 000-acre Studley Royal estate were purchased by the West Riding County Council in 1965 under the provisions of the Open Spaces Act 1906. Emberton Park in Buckinghamshire, a water park based around disused gravel workings, was created on land acquired by Newport Pagnell Rural District Council and the County Council under powers in the Physical Recreation Act 1937. Weald Park was bought by Essex County Council in 1952 under the powers of the Essex County Council Act of 1933. Normanby Hall had been offered to Scunthorpe Council by the owner for a peppercorn rent in 1964, and the Council was able to take the lease under the powers of the same 1937 Act, but also the 1944 Education Act.

Growth in the first two years after 1968 was slow, but between 1970 and 1972 it accelerated, although this reflected not new Parks founded, but increasing qualification of existing sites for badging. There was a second dip after 1977 then a levelling-off for the next 14 years, although slowing after 1987. By 1991, 210 had been established (Hampton, 1991), and by 1995 it was a proud boast that with its ‘partner organizations’ the Commission had 220 Country Parks and 260 picnic sites throughout England, attracting some 30–40 million visits per year (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, *passim*). It has been suggested that by then the Commission’s aims for Country Parks on a national scale had been fulfilled.

However, given the problems identified below, this is perhaps an optimistic reading (Groome & Tarrant, 1985).

Partnership

The Country Park programme was built on the notion of an active partnership between the Commission, which would offer up to 75% funding towards a range of capital and revenue costs in a project, and the applicant, usually a district or county authority, or a consortium formed by both and sometimes other bodies. But grant aid finished in 1992, and although the Commission for some time continued to attempt to support Country Parks in kind, the withdrawal of funding “resulted in many partner organizations inferring that the Commission no longer considers country parks, picnic sites and recreation sites as important components of recreation provision” (Groome & Tarrant, 1985, p. ii).

The Commission support was genuinely a partnership, giving not only some £14.5 million in grant aid between 1974/75 and 1993/94, but also advisory and other support by its staff to an estimated value of £1–1.5 million, together with additional consultancy advice, research, training and publications.²

The Development of the Idea of the Country Park, 1968–1992

By 1991, three broad philosophical phases could be identified in the development of Country Parks: first, the aim of containment, which resulted from the influential fear of a recreation explosion in the 1960s; second, a reorientation towards social concerns and the Country Park user; and third, a shift from the ‘honeypot’ role towards that of ‘gateway’ (Hampton, 1991).

First Phase: Honeypots

The first phase, characterized by the now generally discredited notion of the honeypot, has already been described in the preceding pages. By 1978 it was seen as divisive: “the spectre of a countryside divided into small recreational, zoo-like Country Parks and large non-recreational areas is to be avoided”, and it was perceived that there was an urgent need to integrate recreation with other land uses, quite contrary to the vision described by Fairbrother and others (Gilg, 1978, p. 227).

The basic premise of the honeypot concept proved false as the 1970s progressed. Fears that rural areas would be overwhelmed by townspeople proved to be unfounded in the wake of the oil crisis and the economic slowdown of the mid 1970s (Blunden & Curry, 1988, pp. 146–147). In 1999, the Countryside Agency summarized the period thus: “The main reason for encouraging the establishment of Country Parks was the desire to ease the pressure of public use of National Parks and other sensitive areas. There is no evidence that this happened”.³

Second Phase: Reorientation and Partnership

In the early to mid 1970s there was a dawning, “recognition that Country Parks were failing to deliver countryside recreations to that part of the community

(working-class city dwellers) most in need of it” (Hampton, 1991, no pagination). This period was characterized by initiatives such as subsidized transport schemes and active promotion beyond the existing participants. There were various attempts at recreation–transport initiatives from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, encouraged by the Commission and by the Regional Councils for Sport and Recreation, but research showed that around a sixth had been abandoned by the mid 1980s (Blunden & Curry, 1988).

The early emphasis in Country Park development had been on the provision of quiet rural surroundings with a minimum of facilities. However, a series of experiments into management techniques and studies of particular parks such as Cannock Chase and Tatton Park led to more emphasis being placed on providing specialized facilities and a promotional strategy after 1974, when the Countryside Commission published its *Advisory Notes on Country Park Plans* (Countryside Commission, 1974). The emphasis on rural locations—often accessible only by car—diminished, in favour of urban fringe areas. From 1977 some of the Regional Councils for Sport and Recreation played a greater role in the attempt to plan the distribution of Country Parks more strategically (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, para 2.6).

The 1974 advice on the importance of management plans for Country Parks, *Advisory Notes on Country Park Plans* (Countryside Commission, 1974), was the last policy guidance specifically on Country Parks issued by the Commission. It described a sensible approach to management planning: understanding the site, formulating objectives, implementation, funding and partnerships.

These excellent intentions were, however, stymied as local authority budget cuts began to bite. By the end of the 1970s the Commission was discovering serious problems of on-going resourcing by its partner organizations. Its 1978 report on a survey of management of Country Parks gave a depressing picture of dislocated management and under-funding (Countryside Commission, 1978). It found a fundamental accounting problem: “It has not been possible to determine the relative importance of countryside matters—principally because local authorities do not seem to present their financial expenditure in a way which is designed for scrutiny by others” (Countryside Commission, 1978, p. 3). It also found a problem of split responsibilities between planners and estates, recreation and education; and a well-nigh impossible role for the head of the countryside section in trying “to persuade urban interests to look outside their boundaries and to allay the fears of rural interests about the threat of mass recreation” (p. 4).

In districts, Country Parks were found to be “way down the list of priorities” for the Recreation and Amenity Committee (Countryside Commission, 1978, p. 5). Because a Country Park was often attached to another type of leisure resource, there was a tendency for a site to be managed by several different people.

This separation might not be serious at the district level because the various departments are usually under the control of the Director of Leisure Services. Rivalry between departments appears to be strong, and one could see that in such conditions no coherent management or marketing strategy is likely to emerge; each section head is likely to continue in his traditional function at a distance from the customer. (Countryside Commission, 1978, p. 5)

The report noted that “almost all authorities are content to manage parks without reference to any outside interest group”; this was justified sometimes on grounds that it was undemocratic to involve interest groups, but mainly on grounds that “the parks were too small; nothing much happened, and as a consequence there would be little for a committee to talk about” (Countryside Commission, 1978, p. 6).

Budgeting was inconsistent and rarely cost-centred: “For one large country park it was a definite policy of the officers not to identify costs on a site by site basis, for fear that this may encourage jealousies between councillors” (Countryside Commission, 1978, p. 12). There was a serious lack of money available for maintenance works: the survey found that at only four out of 27 parks examined “is there any significant element within the revenue expenditure for maintenance and minor capital work expenditure” (Countryside Commission, 1978, p. 13; corrected to “three” on p. 16). As for capital spending: “The whole programme [of capital investment] has been knocked on the head in recent years by the cutbacks in capital spending and the cash limits imposed on local authorities by central government” (p. 15).

Thus, at the same time as awareness was growing of the need to expand from a resource-based approach to Country Parks to an outcome-based approach in terms of Parks delivering on strategic aims, there was growing evidence of their being undermined by lack of resources both for physical maintenance and development and for strategic planning.

The 1980s have been summarized as the period during which the impetus for creating Country Parks declined, as the Commission’s reliance on the designation and its protection of the ‘marque’ fell away. This apparent loss of interest also reflected a change in policy focus from site management to an area management approach to problems in the countryside, a change flagged up in the 1982 Prospectus and developed in *Enjoying the Countryside: A Consultation Paper on Future Policies* (Countryside Commission, 1987b; see also Scott & Holdaway, 1995, para 2.7).

Third Phase: Gateways

The 1980s did see the rise of the concept of Country Parks as ‘gateways’ for the urban population to the wider countryside. It is clear from the contemporary documents that the word was meant to be understood both physically and metaphorically. In the 1987 consultation *Enjoying the Countryside: A Consultation Paper on Future Policies*, published under the ‘Recreation 2000’ banner, the Commission stressed that the countryside “is *potentially* available for all to enjoy” (Countryside Commission, 1987b, para 6). Yet, in practice, countryside visitors still tended, as ever, to be white, middle-class car owners, the least frequent users being the unskilled or unemployed, and those from ethnic minorities or poor-quality housing, and those dependent on public transport (Countryside Commission, 1984).

In 1987, the Commission published *Policies for Enjoying the Countryside* (Countryside Commission, 1987c) which, although pointing out that Country Parks attract only 10% of countryside visits, and the fact that their cost falls predominantly on the public sector, nevertheless reaffirmed its faith in the ability of Country Parks to

- take large numbers of visitors who want a convenient place in which to relax within reach of major centres of demand. This relieves the pressure of visitors on the surrounding countryside;
- be the venue for a range of sporting activities, especially water-based ones, which are enhanced by a countryside location . . .;
- be the instrument for restoration of derelict land, and also for the continued maintenance of existing parkland

It also added a new and important fourth function for Country Parks, discussed below:

- to be gateways from which the public can explore, via the rights-of-way network, the wider countryside beyond, with all its features of villages, churches and pubs, as well as farmland and woods (Countryside Commission, 1987c, paras 51–52).

The subsequent Recreation 2000 report, *Enjoying the Countryside: Priorities for Action*, also published in 1987, added that there would be Commission support for new Country Parks where the proposals meet some or all of the following criteria:

- there was evidence of demand which could not be managed on other open spaces in the area;
- access by public transport was available;
- the park could be used for a wide range of countryside activities, with particular attention to the needs of the disabled, the elderly, children and newcomers to the countryside;
- the park was a means to securing access to an attractive or historic parkland and to the maintenance of the landscape (Countryside Commission, 1987a, p. 12).

These criteria show how far the Country Park idea had progressed since 1966; they emphasize: public rather than private transport; the needs of minority groups and non-participants in countryside recreation; and conservation of high-quality landscape.

This was a welcome affirmation of support, and a target priority for action in 1987 was “a new approach to country parks to be adopted over the next five years” (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, para 2.7). However, with hindsight, some reservations are already evident in the two policy statements, and it is worth bearing in mind that the 1987 consultation paper had stated that “The rights of way system was referred to in the Recreation 2000 discussion paper as posing perhaps the greatest opportunity, and the greatest challenge, in the provision of informal recreation”, and this now became increasingly the main focus of Commission work on access (Countryside Commission, 1987b, para 39).

Despite the affirmation of support, there was an ominous—and on reflection baffling—note in the consultation paper that was not reproduced in the later policy statements: “We expect our support for capital works for new sites and for improvements in the quality and range of facilities at existing ones to be broadly maintained, but to decline as a proportion of the total recreation budget” (Countryside Commission, 1987b, para 63). The writing was on the wall, and the

following years saw a dwindling commitment of funds, with a decreasing proportion of grant funds allocated to Country Parks and picnic sites. Research has shown the scale of the decline in spending, from 1974/75 when almost 60% of all Section 9 grants were directed to Country Parks and picnic sites, to the early 1990s when Country Parks and picnic sites represented only between 1 and 2% of Section 9 spending (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, para 3.2.2). Grants to Country Parks were originally offered at a rate of up to 75% but, by 1984, projects were being prioritized, with 50% towards high-priority projects, 33.3% towards medium and 25% towards low.

The Commission generally made urban fringe sites high priority, but even so the gateway idea was starved of funds to implement it. “Thus, while the Commission’s new policy was to promote the gateway role of country parks, it was no longer giving country parks priority for grant aid and, at the same time, it was withdrawing from grant-aiding rangers” (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, para 2.7).

The notion of a Country Park acting as a physical and metaphorical gateway originated with Operation Gateway set up by the Commission and Nottingham County Council [sic] in 1983 to examine low countryside use by some communities in Nottingham, and then to devise a scheme to overcome the majority of these barriers. The scheme was based around local Country Parks, and involved subsidized transport routes, community liaison, events for particular social and cultural groups, leaflets in various Asian languages, and more prominent signposting of the Parks. An evaluation concluded: “It was judged to be very successful, but funding ceased after a year and there has been no follow up” (Straw, 1994, p. 14). However, another study warned of the thresholds which prevented participation, from lack of money to complicated timetables and uncertain waits for buses with children, and reported that: “the process was much slower, more labour-intensive and required longer lead in times than had been anticipated” (MacLeod & Shaw, 2000, p. 65).

This trend reached its zenith with the 1992 paper *Enjoying the Countryside: Policies for People*, which shifted the emphasis from resource management to reducing economic and social barriers to visiting the countryside (Countryside Commission, 1992). Further methods of enhancing the gateway role in relation to intellectual as distinct from physical access were proposed, including:

- providing jargon-free literature with positive images of all social and cultural groups;
- developing a customer-oriented approach to site management;
- employing a better representation of all social groups.

It is important to stress this metaphorical dimension as it is noticeable that, in more recent Countryside Agency texts, the concept seems to be weighted towards the purely physical aspect of access.⁴ Even at the time when the Commission was giving strong advice on the role of Country Parks as ‘Gateways’ to the wider countryside, research found that “the implications and awareness of this concept vary between Country Parks” (Straw, 1994, p. 6).

The key to this aspect of the gateway function was identified as data on users and non-users. The 1994 study on the gateway role of Country Parks concluded that: “In general it was found that visitor profiles were not collected on a regular basis if at all

and that the quality of the data collected was often poor". It went on: "Country Parks tend to provide services targetted at visitors that already visit the site and not at people from under-represented sectors of the catchment area, hence operating against the gateway principle" (Straw, 1994, p. 6). The report recommended that the Countryside Commission should consider providing grant aid for the collection of regular visitor profiles and the production of an advisory booklet detailing how to collect visitor profiles (Straw, 1994, p. 7).

Despite this policy shift, the gateway idea did not develop. In fact, the gateway function seems to have shrunk to its purely physical role in terms of rights-of-way networks. It is arguable that recent trends in the perception of the countryside and new thinking on social inclusion would make reviving the idea in relation to a renaissance in Country Parks timely.

Nature Conservation

Despite being set up originally with a recreational role very firmly in the forefront, good management of Country Parks has seen their oasis value for nature conservation develop throughout the period since the late 1960s. Important habitats were often included in the new Country Parks: heathland, ancient woodland and marshland were "surprisingly well represented" (Hampton, 1991); some parks even contained or adjoined areas designated as SSSI or local and national nature reserves; a total of 28 nationally rare species were found in just the 62 parks surveyed in a study by Martin Hampton (1991).

Nor was recreation found to be at odds with conservation; indeed, given user surveys at the time and subsequently, which highlighted enjoyment of the "natural" character of Country Parks, "conservation must be an aim if recreational objectives are to be fulfilled" (Hampton, 1991, no pagination). Hampton continues: "the problems of compatibility are not as deep-seated or as widespread as might previously have been presumed . . . Serious clashes are few and far between".

Hampton concludes that Country Parks are in an ecological sense well equipped to act as gateways, and that this can be reconciled with their role as

recreation orientated sites which can absorb high numbers of visitors. There are still solid grounds for providing a network of intensively-managed sites, particularly in the urban fringe and particularly aimed at those social groups which experience difficulty in gaining access to the wider countryside. (1991, no pagination)

Country Parks 1992–1996

The early to mid 1990s saw the Commission increasingly interested in 'customer care' in the countryside. Following the 1989 review *Welcoming Visitors to Country Parks* (Countryside Commission, 1989), the Commission published *Visitors in the Countryside—Consultation Paper* in 1991, which promoted "means of improving visitor information and their confidence, understanding and care for the countryside" (Countryside Commission, 1991, para 2.8).

Enjoying the Countryside: Policies for People undertook to “develop a method to enable managers of major recreation sites to review the welcome offered to visitors in ways that lead to an improvement in the quality of the visitor’s experience” (Countryside Commission, 1992, p. 7). It is notable that the text takes pains not to use the phrase ‘Country Parks’. The promised methodology materialized in 1995 as the checklist published as *The Visitor Welcome Initiative*, which came with the note that it “is purely voluntary in nature. It comes with no associated grant package and no hidden agenda” (Countryside Commission, 1995, no page numbers). While phrased positively, the note is a further signal of the Commission’s withdrawal not only from funding for Country Parks but also from seeing them as a distinct brand forming part of its own agenda.

In 1992 the Commission declared a moratorium on its funding for recreation sites (B2 programme), although some specific projects were supported through other programme areas such as Access to the Countryside (B6), Promoting Understanding (D1) and Promoting Voluntary and Community Action (D3), and the Commission continued to direct resources towards Community Forests and the National Forest (C7 and C8).

A review of B2 was proposed in the 1991/92 Corporate Plan but did not occur. Recreation sites remained a corporate programme area, until dropped in the Corporate Plan for 1995/96, but this drift created “a policy vacuum . . . in relation to country parks and picnic sites in the contemporary countryside recreation context”; it also created the widespread perception that the Commission has “abandoned the resource as well as the concept” of the Country Park (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, para 2.8).

Scott & Holdaway concluded that “It was not feasible to assess fully the impacts of the withdrawal of the Commission’s support” but flagged up “significant adverse implications”. It highlighted, for example, delay or abandonment of essential refurbishment schemes, the closure or ‘moth-balling’ of some sites or facilities, reductions in staff, low staff morale and adverse implications for users (e.g. lower-quality provision, fewer visitor programmes, and risks to vulnerable groups resulting from fewer ranger patrols and higher charges (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, p. ii).

Withdrawal of support also resulted in many partner organizations inferring that the Commission no longer considers Country Parks, picnic sites and recreation sites as important components of recreation provision (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, p. ii).

The report stressed the important existing role of Country Parks, the vital contribution of the Commission, and the potential for enhancing that role (Scott & Holdaway, 1995, Recommendation 3).

Despite the eloquent and well-reasoned advocacy in this report, Country Parks did in fact slip off the Commission’s agenda. The 1996 Ten-Year Strategy, *A Living Countryside*, made no mention of them at all (Countryside Commission, 1996a). They disappear from Commission and Countryside Agency literature, and opportunities for valuable data collection on the role of Country Parks, such as the 1998 UK Day Visits Survey, have been missed.

This period then can be summarized as one of stagnation. Most Country Parks survived the withdrawal of Commission funding, but many suffered, and there was a widespread and disheartening perception that the Commission no longer believed

that Country Parks served a useful function, even if the Commission argued that they had simply decided that their scant resources could be better used elsewhere. Commission thinking diverted to other, newer projects, such as Community Forests, Green corridors, Millennium Greens and the Countryside Character Programme. Country Parks struggled not only with the disappearance of Commission grants and advice, but also with an identity crisis which ironically the Commission helped to provoke.

Country Parks 1996–2000

The latter half of the 1990s was characterized by an absence of policy statements or direct financial commitment to Country Parks, although some of the Commission's publications offered useful general good-practice guidance for managers with the resources to take up the advice.⁵ Two pieces of extended research did look more closely at the state of Country Parks: Land Use Consultants' *Sustaining the Quality of Countryside Sites for Recreation* (1996) and David Haffey & Countrywise's *Countryside Recreation Sites: Condition Survey* (1997); both ring some alarm bells, but only faintly.

The 1996 report, for example, concluded that predictions of a tidal wave of leisure in the countryside had not been fulfilled and that in some cases total annual visitor numbers had fallen (para 12.2), while there had been no change in the demographics of countryside users, who remained predominantly the same mobile middle classes (para 12.5). The 1997 report painted a depressing picture not of any crisis, but rather of gradual decline and lack of inspiration. At the majority of sites, the recommendations of the Commission's much-vaunted Visitor Welcome Initiative "are not being acted on, except where they happen to coincide with other management objectives.... In general, managers do not appear to be taking active and deliberate steps to create a more welcoming environment" (Haffey & Countrywise, 1997, Executive Summary, s. 12).

The most interesting study of Country Parks took place in Scotland, where Kit Campbell Associates produced *The Wood, Not the Trees: Value for Money in Scottish Country Parks* for Scottish Natural Heritage in 1997 (Kit Campbell Associates, 1997). This expressed more sharply than anything south of the border the sense of a looming crisis underlying the general inertia. It included a memorable metaphor:

There is something of a time bomb hidden in country parks—and it is ticking. The main development took place in the early eighties. Probably around the end of the nineties and the start of the next century there will be a need to renew or replace significant infrastructure elements of parks. (p. 7)

The report has grave warnings about the ability of local authorities to fund the necessary infrastructure refurbishment that is looming; the threat to existing investment if ranger services are cut; the possibility of piecemeal selling off of portions of Country Parks in an attempt to generate essential funds, closure or conversion to golf courses or even agricultural use (Kit Campbell Associates, 1997, p. 14). It paints a grim picture when it concludes that it is clear

that park owners, at least in the public sector, will find it increasingly difficult to maintain the standard of service they have been able to provide in the past . . . There are various initiatives being considered by park owners which may help them to overcome this problem, but some—such as selling off land or allowing commercial developments—may change the nature of parks forever. (p. 15)

The Countryside Commission report *Countryside Recreation: Enjoying the Living Countryside* (Countryside Commission, 1999a), included in its list of tasks “rejuvenating country parks”. However, for all its hearty tone, the absence of financial commitment and the onus put on local authorities is striking (Countryside Commission, 1999a, p. 10).⁶

Also in 1999, the Commission produced *Linking Town and Country: Policies for the Countryside in and around Town* (Countryside Commission, 1999b). This again sought to put the onus on others, acknowledging that provision and management of some Country Parks “is still poor” and suggesting, rather feebly, that “private sector enterprises, such as canoe clubs, cycle hire or riding schools, could provide the trigger for revitalizing some country parks” (p. 9). It advised that local authorities should make better use of Country Parks as gateways for physical access to the wider countryside and promote public/private partnerships for recreation sites. For its part the Commission volunteered only to identify best practice in attracting new sources of funding to Country Parks (p. 10).

This was all pretty thin, and later in 1999, when the new Countryside Agency gave evidence to the Environment Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee’s Environment sub-Committee inquiry into Town and Country Parks, it was challenged forcefully on it.⁷ The Agency opened their evidence with an emphatic statement that “country parks are now at risk of neglect and decline, just like urban parks were in the 1960s and 1970s. Action is needed now to ensure that they have a better future”. It gave a ringing endorsement to the continuing relevance of Country Parks:

We believe that they continue to provide a crucial place for people to visit and enjoy. Indeed, around 50 million visits are made a year to country parks. They are unique in providing a safe environment. They are somewhere people can experience the countryside and have a sense of being away from it all, knowing what they can do, where they can do it and essentially feeling secure. (q. 388)

Interestingly, the language of the last sentence has echoes of the very earliest thinking on Country Parks as a kind of corral for those ignorant of the ways of the real countryside.

The Agency affirmed its desire to lead a renaissance of Country Parks (q. 403–407), but at the same time very firmly ruled itself out of being the “banker” for this renaissance (q. 403). It stated: “it is our role to generate enthusiasm, improvement, get that renaissance going. It is not our role to be on the ground further developing country parks. That has to rest with the local authorities and private bodies that own and operate them” (q. 407). This difficult position was defended against hard questioning by the Committee (q. 404–408).

The witnesses were frank about the failures in the old Countryside Commission’s approach to Country Parks: the theory of providing initial “leg-up” money and then

withdrawing “does not necessarily stand up” (q. 395). As a result there had been “a loss of momentum in a number of sites”. Nor did the honey-pot theory hold water: “this theory that you could redirect people [from the deep countryside] by ambushing them”. Terry Robinson remarked that: “I do not think there is any evidence that this works very well” (q. 399).

In response the Committee recommended that “a financial commitment is required in order to make [the Agency’s] leadership effective” and that therefore the Agency “reviews its present allocation of resources to country parks and specifically considers offering grants towards the repairs which are now becoming necessary” (ETRA Committee, 1999, Volume I, p. xii).

In the following year, 2000, the Agency Board considered a paper on ‘Designed Landscapes & Country Parks’, prepared by the Recreation and Tourism Branch. This proposed a joint programme with English Heritage, funded by a bid in the comprehensive spending review, to support designed landscapes and Country Parks. It linked Country Parks to the Urban White Paper, and proposed a bid to the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) for a programme of grants to designed landscapes and Country Parks (Countryside Agency, 2000).

The proposed objectives included not only restoration and improvement but also “improved standards of management and visitor welcome in country parks” (Countryside Agency, 2000, p. 4). Despite its more dynamic language, the report did not deliver its ambitions—the government rejected the bid under the Central Spending Review and NOF declined to fund the proposed parks and designed landscapes project.

Something needs to be said of the impact of the Countryside Commission’s transformation into the Countryside Agency following its merger with the Rural Development Agency. When launched on 1 April 1999, the Countryside Agency had announced its aim “to be a champion for the English countryside” (Countryside Agency, 1999, p. 15). To do so it would focus on the social, economic and environmental well-being of the English countryside. Its priorities were: “to show how to tackle rural disadvantage; to improve transport in rural areas while taming the car; to demonstrate a new approach to agriculture; and to increase the amount and quality of access to the countryside” (Wakeford, 1999, no page numbers).

Work on access, the last, and for Country Parks the only relevant item, focused mainly on rights of way and the preparation and implementation of the new Countryside and Rights of Way legislation. Otherwise, the Agency focus was largely—a legacy of the Rural Development Agency rather than the Countryside Commission—on rural communities rather than visitors. This did not augur well for Country Parks.

The annual *State of the Countryside* reports, welcome though they are, did not specifically recognize Country Parks as part of the countryside. Indeed, it was disappointing that the proposed indicator of ‘how people use the countryside’ was formulated with the English Tourism Council, because tourists (defined as visitors who spend one or more nights away from home) are only a small element of present Country Park use. Similarly, the annual Leisure Day Visits research, to which the Agency subscribed, omitted Country Parks as a type of destination. Thus, during this period, despite increasing warning bells and some good intentions, Country Parks failed in the competition to make it far up the Agency agenda.

Country Parks 2002–2005

Following the Select Committee report, the Countryside Agency commissioned research from the Urban Parks Forum (now Green Space) and the Garden History Society to investigate the potential for “a renaissance in Country Parks”. It also set up a Country Parks Renaissance Advisory Panel (endearingly known as CPRAP), which later became the Country Parks Advisory Group). The research was presented in July 2003 in a report entitled *Towards a Country Parks Renaissance* (Urban Parks Forum & Garden History Society, 2003). The Agency welcomed the report, referring to Country Parks as “one of our forgotten treasures”, and acknowledging that “country parks need more support if the contribution they make to recreation, the environment, the rural economy and the viability of villages, towns and cities is to be sustained or further improved”.⁸

In May 2004, the Agency published its own conclusions in a Research Note *Towards a Country Parks Renaissance* (Countryside Agency, 2004). At the same time the Agency offered funding to the Urban Parks Forum, which had set up a self-help network for Country Park staff in 2001. This has become the Country Parks Network (CPN), which has now established itself as a valuable tool for managers.⁹ Ninety per cent of England’s Country Parks are now in the Network; a bi-monthly newsletter is distributed and regional events started in 2005. Two advisory panels, a strategy group and a delivery group, formed out of the original Advisory Group, steer the Network and advise the Agency. In addition, the Agency has championed three pilot projects as part of the Renaissance research in 2002, tapping into the Heritage Lottery Fund, to demonstrate standards for Country Park management. Standards are the subject of further pilot projects currently being developed with the CPN. The Agency has also set up its own Country Parks web site.¹⁰

Conclusion

It is true that, to modern eyes, the tone of the original rationale for Country Parks “now seems somewhat patronizing and the solutions high-handed” (Aitchison *et al.*, 2000, p. 64). The basis of the idea on private transport also now flies in the face of sustainability. The premise of the desirability of excluding people from the deep countryside and its richness of experience seems inequitable. The spectre of the zoo-like Park still seems repellent; new thinking on physical access and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 demolish once and for all the ideas expressed by Fairbrother of fencing-in the urban visitor.

However, the Commission’s failure in the early to mid 1990s to do more to explore specifically the value of Country Parks is significant. Their role had changed markedly since the late 1960s, and much that was socially progressive and environmentally beneficial had already been achieved. The Commission’s decision to pull the plug on funding in 1992, and then simply to drop them entirely from its future plans in 1996, was based largely on the Recreation 2000 exercise which had mingled expressions of support for Country Parks with questions about being more ‘selective’, and which in retrospect sent out a confusing message (Countryside Commission, 1986). The work needed to establish the benefits of Country Parks in terms of the progressive agenda of that period was not adequately resourced (Jeremy Worth, pers. comm., 2 May 2002).

The capacity of Parks to sustain themselves without support was not assessed as it was in Scotland, and the legacy of this half-hearted withdrawal is still with us. The appearance of official indifference cast a long shadow over Country Parks, from which they are now only just beginning to emerge.

References to Country Parks in the policy work of the Commission of the later 1990s is characterized by a dawning sense that they are in need of attention and a lack of ability or willingness to invest in them directly. However, since the Renaissance report in 2003, the Agency has to its credit directed significant resources towards Country Parks. While no longer able to offer major capital grants, it is now actively supporting the CPN, and making clear that it recognizes the contribution Country Parks make to its strategic aims and other programmes, such as its work on the urban fringe.¹¹ The effectiveness of the various initiatives under the Renaissance umbrella in reviving the fortunes of Country Parks, in a way comparable to the revival in urban parks, will no doubt be the subject of future assessment.

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Notes

- 1 "The quality of habitat management was found to be extremely high and none of the Parks visited fell below a satisfactory (Grade C) standard. At many sites there was tangible evidence of active management and enhancement works and considerable attention was often given to wildlife conservation interests. There were no instances in which recreational use of the Parks appeared to seriously conflict with conservation interests, except in a few very localized cases" (Haffey, 1997, para 7.9).
- 2 Figures from Scott and Holdaway (1995, paras 3.2.2 and 3.3).
- 3 Memorandum by the Countryside Agency, House of Commons Environment Committee, inquiry into Town and Country Parks, 1999, HC477-II.
- 4 For example, Memorandum by the Countryside Agency, House of Commons Environment Committee, inquiry into Town and Country Parks, 1999, HC477-II, p. 35, para 17.
- 5 Some useful advice was contained in, for example, *Site Management Planning* (CCP 527) (Countryside Commission, 1998), *Market Research for Countryside Recreation* (CCP 491) (Countryside Commission, 1996b) and *Delivering Countryside Information* (CCP 447) (Countryside Commission, 1994). In 1999, the Commission produced *Countryside Recreation: Enjoying the Living Countryside* (CCP 544) (Countryside Commission, 1999a) and *Linking Town and Country: Policies for the Countryside in and around Town* (CCP546) (Countryside Commission, 1999b), which mention Country Parks in passing.
- 6 The report reaffirmed Country Parks' strategic contribution, and also acknowledged that some Country Parks were "showing their age". It set out a vision of a "renaissance" of Country Parks, "on a par with the best equivalents in mainland Europe and North America", and stated that "A new breed of country parks should emerge providing for recreation, sport and health promotion". It flagged up the need for development plans for Country Parks to enhance facilities and identify "new ways of raising income through visitors, sponsorship, dual use and other means", as well as new sites to fill gaps in provision (Countryside Commission, 1999a, p. 10). The Countryside Agency action would, the report went on, identify best practice in fund raising, define standards and review national and regional patterns of provision. It also urged action by others: local authorities should seek new investment, transport

- planners should create better physical links to Country Parks, and planners should use planning gain to release land for recreation near towns and cities.
- 7 House of Commons Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs (ETRA) Committee (1999). All subsequent quotations are taken from Volume III, pp. 58–63.
- 8 Press release, 10 July 2003.
- 9 See <http://www.green-space.org.uk/countryparks>
- 10 See <http://www.countryparks.org.uk>
- 11 The Agency's Corporate Plan 2003/06 aims for "a recreational infrastructure which can easily be enjoyed by everyone" (B2), and "a vibrant and diverse urban fringe providing a better quality of life" (B3).

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