

Surrey Hills Symposium 13 November 2024

John Watkins' Speaking Note

Next 75 years of National Landscapes

The National Landscapes Association is a charity and non-profit membership organisation. The team at the National Landscapes Association advocates, communicates and fosters collaborative action which supports the UK's network of National Landscapes to be as effective as possible. We champion the interests of National Landscapes with governments and coordinate the delivery of national projects.

National Landscapes are the largest of the designated landscapes family with 46 areas covering 14% of the land of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The family represents a vastly diverse range of landscapes from the Isles of Scilly, the Kent Downs, Northumberland Coast, Cannock Chase and the vastness of the North Pennines.

National Landscapes are also the nearby nature for the majority of the population. Over a million people live in a National Landscape, and two thirds of people in England can reach a National Landscape in half an hour.

Our vision at National Landscapes Association is for:

Beautiful landscapes where nature and people thrive together

Lets unpack two key words. Beautiful. Thriving.

Beautiful: We can be a little coy about using the word beauty. But natural beauty is about so much more than scenery. It is also much more than nature. And this is important.

It is landform and geology, plants and animals, the historic environment and culture.

All of these combine to form a living patchwork where outstanding natural beauty isn't only found in nature, but in communities working together to grow and change and thrive.

Thriving: It means tackling climate change; feeding the nation while restoring nature; ensuring clean, plentiful drinking water; safeguarding against drought and flooding; growing a sustainable, resilient rural economy; and delivering health, wellbeing and employment opportunities to all people.

What of the next 75 years? We're currently concerned about the next six months, and then the next five years. That's because the foundational core funding for the teams who care for these places is only secure until March. We're then looking at a one year settlement and then maybe, just maybe, a four year settlement after that.

When it comes to National Landscapes, successive governments have pursued an agenda of hyperbole and platitudes, whilst shirking responsibility for the chronic lack of resources and perverse policies which frustrate the ambition and potential in these landscapes.

Will we see this change any time soon?

Everything we do is about the long term, yet we're locked into a system which is obsessed with short-term cycles with the expectation of short-term high return. Nature and landscapes are something of a longer term prospect.

A few months back we launched our national arts programme, Nature Calling. Yes, I said an arts programme. You may be wondering why we're messing around with art in the middle of a nature and climate emergency?

Because landscape is place as perceived by people. Perception is individual and cultural. We create our own response to place, meaning we are in fact creators of our own unique landscapes.

The Landscape Review of 2019 rightly called out the lack of diversity in the environment sector and in those who engage with and have a voice in the leadership and decision making in National Landscapes and National Parks.

This is a result of, and perpetuated by, the perception of place and what is important and valuable being defined and driven by a narrow and 'traditional' set of cultural values, not representative of a diverse and multi-cultural nation.

Where, then, does the legitimacy for claiming 'national' landscapes or 'national' parks come from?

Art is a means whereby people can connect to place on their terms. Defining their relationship through their own lens, their own unique cultural experiences and values. In turn, this art can influence those whose voice and power still dominates the sector. Challenging norms, tropes, and ways of working.

Generation Green, which is a programme providing young people with a chance to visit and enjoy the outdoors, has the potential to shape the future of National Landscapes.

An opportunity to try an outdoor activity via a community group opened out a world of experiences, friendships and a career for me. It was 'just' a chance to have a go at something which otherwise seemed inaccessible and alien.

This was forty years ago. I still remember it. The fear, exhilaration, the nervous laughing, the relief when it was all over. Then the incomprehensible wish to do it again.

Did everyone that day turn into outdoor and nature enthusiasts? No. But I did.

An opportunity. That's what I was given. This is what Generation Green is giving. And I'm delighted the National Landscapes Association is a part of this brilliant coalition.

Creating opportunity for connection and working with art and artists is a means of discovering and appreciating a richer understanding of what is important and special in these landscapes.

These national landscapes.

It isn't for me to determine what these landscapes will be like in 75 years. But it is for me to harness and enable our best endeavours to foster a rich and well informed discussion leading to decisions which reflect the values and needs of society.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act in Wales sets a statutory framework for decision making and I believe this is an approach we should all adopt whether we are caught by that Act or not. Decisions must:

- take account of the long term
- help to prevent problems occurring or getting worse
- take an integrated approach
- take a collaborative approach, and
- consider and involve people of all ages and diversity.

If we do that, bring in more voices with passion and our best game, then we have little to fear about the future of these amazing places and their communities.