Understanding Natural Beauty

About the meaning of Natural Beauty in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (NP&AC Act)

Guidance for relevant authorities

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Dr Sally Marsh is co-director of the High Weald National Landscape, a Fellow of the Landscape Institute and sat on the Natural England Landscape Advisory Panel, advising on national landscape policy, designation strategy, and protected area reform. Her PhD thesis, '[Natural Beauty: a term fit for public policy in the 21st century?]', examines how the legislative term "Natural Beauty"- established under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 - has evolved and affected conservation policy outcomes.

In this Briefing, Dr Marsh explores the origins of National Landscapes and sets out that natural beauty is about peoples' interaction with the natural world over time and that assessing natural beauty requires a holistic approach.

Key points

- The beauty of nature has been an enduring and shared value in Britain for at least the last 100 years.
- Natural beauty in the context of protected landscapes is not just about wildlife but about peoples' interaction with the natural world over time and how this manifests, both in the landscape around us and in our own health and happiness.
- Policy based around natural beauty situates people's emotional relationship with nature at its heart, offering a philosophy, narrative, and vocabulary which can help reconnect with the natural world, an approach considered essential by The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) to achieving global nature and climate goals[1].
- Assessing natural beauty requires a holistic approach closely aligned with modern systems thinking – understanding outcomes through exploring the factors and interrelationships which create them.
- As a non-instrumental value associated with universality and social justice, natural beauty is a concept that can align with fair, inclusive and participatory forms of decision-making.
- The wording of National Landscape's original purpose – preservation and enhancement of natural beauty – suggests that the precautionary principle, 'do no harm', was intended to be at the forefront of land use decisions in these areas.

[1] IPBES (2024). The thematic assessment report of the underlying causes of biodiversity loss and the determinants of transformative change and options for achieving the 2050 vision for biodiversity: Summary for policymakers. IPBES secretariat, Bonn, Germany.

Introduction

Natural beauty was embedded in protected landscape legislation through the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (NP&AC Act) which made provision for the designation of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), now called National Landscapes, alongside National Parks. There are 46 National Landscapes in the UK designated by reason of their outstanding natural beauty and with a legal purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty[2]. These areas now cover roughly 15% of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

'[The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Bill's] objects broadly are, first, to preserve and enhance the beauty of the countryside'

Mr Silkin, National Parks Bill Second Reading, Hansard HC Deb (31 March 1949). vol 463, col. 1470.

Who is this Briefing for

This Briefing provides an introduction to the intended meaning of *natural beauty* in legislation for:

- Relevant authorities under the protected landscapes duty who, in exercising or performing any function that affect National Landscapes in England, 'must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty'[i3]. These include any Minister of the Crown, any public body, any person holding public office, and any statutory undertaker.
- Local authorities with land in a National Landscape who have responsibility to review and publish the statutory AONB Management Plan; National Landscape Partnerships who prepare it jointly on their behalf[4], and decision-makers who must consider the AONB Management Plan as material consideration in planning decisions.
- Anyone interested in a thriving future for nature and people in National Landscapes.

Scope of approach and limitations

This Briefing explores what the protagonists[5] of the NP&AC Act 1949 understood by natural beauty. In this Briefing, natural beauty refers to a specific concept in UK law distinct from general aesthetic concerns regarding the beauty of nature. This Briefing:

- does not comment on legal precedent or planning case law which may be built upon interpretations of natural beauty developed in the latter half of the 20th century.
- does not reflect a solely philosophical contemplation of the beauty of nature or the environment more generally, nor does it necessarily reflect present day usage of the term in common language.
- recognises that language is mutable and the meaning of terms such as *natural, beauty*, *landscape,* and *countryside* has changed over time, requiring understanding of these terms to be situated in the context they were used.

[2] The NP&AC Act 1949 used the phrase 'preservation and enhancement'. *Preservation* was replaced by *conservation* for National Landscapes through the Countryside Act 1968 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

[3] Section 85 of the Countryside and Right of Way Act 2000 as amended by the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act 2023. Further information: National Landscapes - Guidance for relevant authorities: CRoW s.85 duty to 'seek to further the purposes'

[4] See Management plans for protected landscapes in England - GOV.UK

[5] Includes writers and social commentators such as Clough Williams-Ellis, Patrick Abercrombie, George Macauley Trevelyan, and Vaughan Cornish, along with civil servants and the authors of the main government commissioned reports.

Origins of the term *Natural Beauty*

The idea of natural beauty has long-established origins in philosophy[6] and English Romantic poetry. Use of the term natural beauty in relation to landscape preservation is often attributed to William Wordsworth[7] who used natural beauty and the beauty of nature interchangeably in his writings[8]. Natural beauty was the dominant term used to represent the purpose of landscape preservation prior to the 1940s. Subsequent reports and parliamentary discussions also used related terms such as landscape beauty, characteristic landscape beauty, and countryside beauty[9]. Natural Beauty, however, was the term chosen for the legislation.

Natural beauty in law has never been exhaustively defined[10], although the NP&AC Act 1949 did explain that it should include characteristic natural features and the flora and fauna thereof[11]. Such wording suggests that any interpretation should encompass more features than those listed. This is reflected in the text of the draft Bill.

'In this section references to preservation [of natural beauty] shall be construed as references to the preservation of characteristic natural features, flora and fauna and the protection of buildings and works of architectural or historical interest, together with the maintenance of the efficient use for agricultural purposes of land devoted to use for those purposes'

Draft of the Bill presented to Parliament, March 1949, The National Archives, T 227/43.

What is encompassed by the term *natural beauty*?

Natural beauty as intended by the NP&AC Act 1949 is a holistic concept. It includes interaction between the physical and the mental, the natural and the cultural. Human processes are placed alongside natural processes as forces shaping landscapes with our emotional response to nature at the centre of things.

'The landscape to be preserved is the joint product of nature and of human use over many generations; it cannot be preserved in anything like its present aspect unless that human use is kept fully going'

John Dower, National Parks in England and Wales, 1945, p. 19.

In relation to its conservation and enhancement, the concept of natural beauty in the NP&AC Act encompasses three main themes[12]:

Distinctive landscape character

A [National Landscape] may be defined as a tract of country the existing character of which it is desired to preserve as far as possible, either for the singular beauty of its landscape or for its high scientific interest, but more usually for a combination of both'

Report of the Wild Life Conservation Special Committee (England and Wales), 1947, p.67.

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[6] See e.g., Immanuel Kant's theory of natural beauty in *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 1790.

[7] See e.g., MacEwan, A. & MacEwan, M. (1982). *National Parks: Conservation or Cosmetics?* London: George Allen and Unwin.

[8] See Wordsworth, W. (1906). Guide to the Lakes. 5th edn. London: Henry Frowde.

[9] See Holdaway, E. (2007). *Origins and Intentions of the 1949 Act: Natural Beauty.* Countryside Council for Wales.

[10] Natural England (2021). *Guidance for Assessing Landscapes for designation as National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in England*.

[11] NP&AC Act 1949, S114(2).

[12] See Marsh, S.E.M. (2024). Natural beauty: a term fit for public policy in the 21st century? Exploring changes in the meaning and measurement of natural beauty in AONB policy since 1949. Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, University of Kent.

Landscape character can be understood as an expression of the underlying physical geography of a place modified over time by layers of human activity. The interaction of geology, climate, natural processes and human activity creates a distinctive pattern of vegetation, animal life, and built features: a palimpsest imbued with cultural associations. The first National Parks Committee proposed that selection of areas of countryside[13] for protection should include 'at least one supreme example of each principal type of scenery' representative of Britain[14].

Protecting these landscapes and their cultural associations from harm was seen to be an important legacy for future generations, but they were not to be fossilised. The NP&AC Act 1949 was part of a trilogy of planning acts[15] introduced by the Minister for Town and Country Planning (Mr Silkin) which, together, were intended to provide a strong framework to resist harm to natural beauty and ensure good design.

'[Protected landscapes] must not be sterilized as museum specimens'

Report of the National Parks Committee, 1947, p.8.

Wildlife and features of interest

'The interest and beauty of [National Landscapes] are so largely derived from their underlying geological formations and from the richness of their flora and fauna'

Report of the National Parks Committee, 1947, p.52.

High biodiversity and healthy populations of characteristic species underpinned protected landscapes designation. The second National Parks Committee (1947) recognised that the conservation of wildlife and its scientific study could not be achieved solely by protecting the smaller, most vulnerable patches of land as nature reserves. Many valuable habitats containing complex communities of wildlife (such as chalk grassland) depended upon traditional agricultural practices persisting at scale. These larger areas were identified for designation as Conservation Areas (now called National Landscapes) in the Committee's report[16]. The continuation of low-input food and timber production systems was considered vital to secure their wildlife value.

The abundance of wildlife in these areas, which allowed people to experience nature at close quarters, was a regular theme in social commentary and Government reports prior to the NP&AC Act. However, the scope of what was intended to be protected included many other features of interest. Historic and archaeological artefacts, vernacular buildings made with local materials and artisanship, distinctive settlement patterns, dialect, place-based industries, artistic relationships, and many more are all referenced in the explanations provided by the National Parks Commission for designating what are now called National Landscapes.

An emotional response to nature

'We should be able to enjoy the peace and spiritual refreshment which only contact with nature can give'

Mr Silkin, National Parks Bill Second Reading, Hansard HC Deb (31 March 1949). vol 463, col. 1469.

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[13] In the NP&AC Act, the raw material for natural beauty was the 'countryside'. Traditional countryside, considered to represent the combined works of nature and people, was culturally accepted as being natural in the first part of the 20th century.

[14] National Parks Committee 1931, p.20.

[15] Which also included the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 and the New Towns Act 1946.

[16] Identified by the National Parks Committee (1947), drawing on the report of the Wild Life Conservation Special Committee (1947), for designation as Conservation Areas which were renamed in the NP&AC Act 1949 as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), now called National Landscapes.

Aesthetic experience is a crucial component of natural beauty. This experience involves the interaction between an individual's sensory-motor perceptions, emotion/valuation, and knowledge/meaning systems which commonly manifests as an emotional response to being in nature. The feelings such as joy, delight and calm that can ensue were considered important to the health and happiness of the nation.

Help[ing] people to enjoy these beautiful areas …[is] just as much a part of positive health and wellbeing as are the building of hospitals or insurance against sickness'

Mr Silkin, National Parks Bill Second Reading, Hansard HC Deb (31 March 1949). vol 463, col. 1493.

Choosing natural beauty as a central focus for protected landscape legislation also hints at the idea of moral good – the creation of 'social wealth for the benefit of all'[17] – and of valuing nature's aesthetic qualities for its own sake rather than any instrumental value (such as economic benefits) it might provide[18].

'[Protected landscapes] should be for people – and especially young people – of every class and kind and from every part of the country, indeed of the world'

John Dower, National Parks in England and Wales, 1945, p.13.

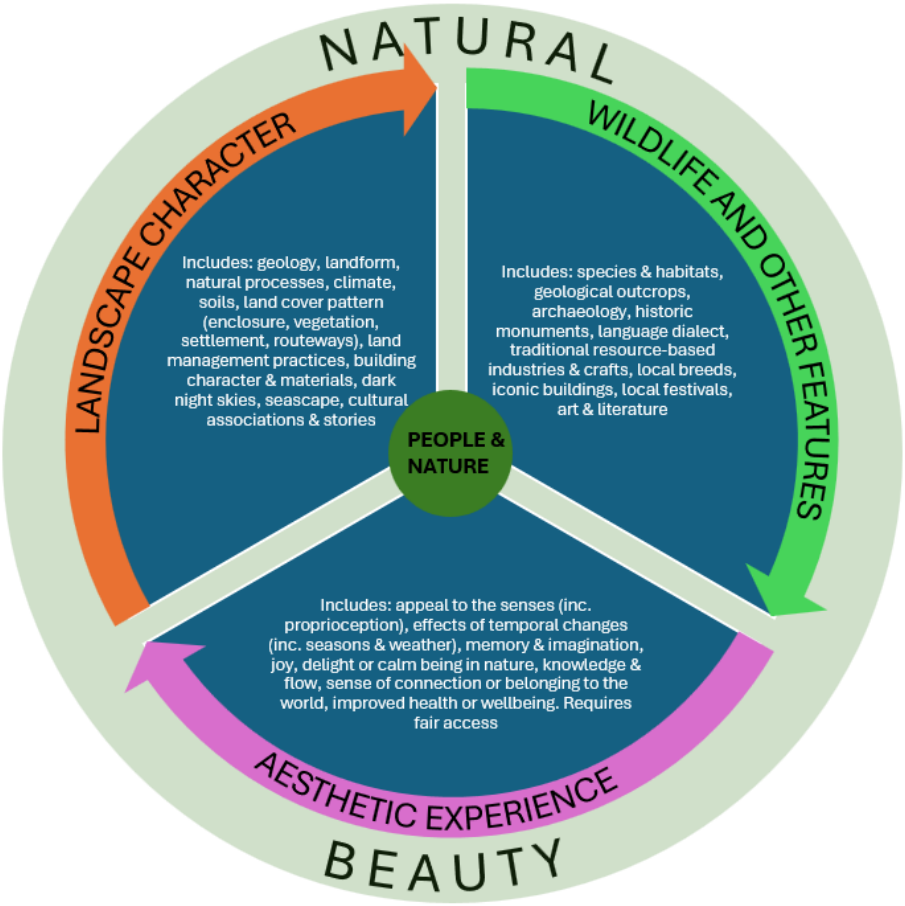

Fig. 1: Components of natural beauty

[17] See Keynes, J. M. (1938). Art and the State. In: Williams-Ellis, C. ed. *Britain & the Beast*. Letchworth: Temple Press, pp. 1-7.

[18] Brady, E. (2003). *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

How should this Briefing be used?

This Briefing summarises the intent of the NP&AC Act 1949 with regard to the scope and meaning of *natural beauty* in relation to the legal purpose of its conservation and enhancement. Each National Landscape has a distinctive natural beauty. Further information can be found in the relevant management plan. Assessing the effects of any actions (harmful or beneficial) on natural beauty requires it to be considered holistically with all aspects treated equally. For further advice and guidance about individual National Landscapes contact the relevant National Landscape Partnership.

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About National Landscapes Briefings

National Landscapes Briefings offer a summary of key findings and recommendations arising from National Landscapes' action and insight.

About the National Landscapes Association

We are a registered charity that supports the mission to conserve and enhance natural beauty in National Landscapes and other protected areas. National Landscape teams across the UK work to achieve a sustainable balance of priorities at the landscape scale. One of our key aims is to support and develop a network of ambitious National Landscape teams and partnerships that have a strong collective voice and a positive impact on the places for which they care.

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