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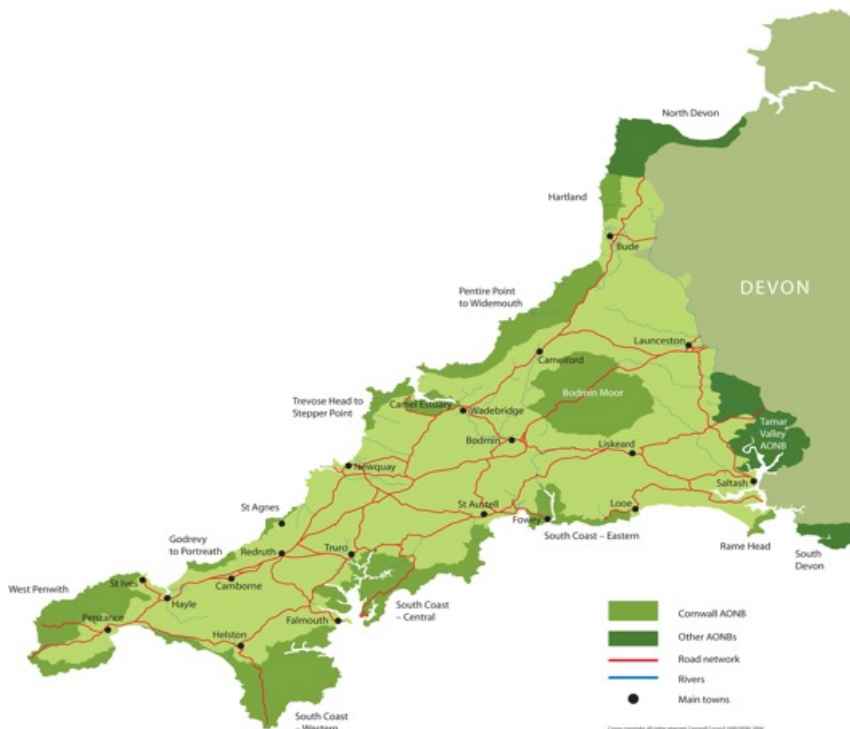
Benefits of creating a National Park for Cornwall

Exploring the benefits of creating a National Park for Cornwall, U.K.

One of the principle aims of the activities of Pro-Natura, a non-profit non-governmental organisation, is to improve the lives of local communities in many rural areas around the world (see pronatura.org). Cornwall in England lies at the extreme South West of the United Kingdom and is classified as one of country's poorest regions. As a consequence Cornwall continues to receive designated support from the European Union. It is therefore of major concern to the people and their elected representatives to improve livelihoods in what is predominantly a rural area. Indeed, neither the single city of Truro nor any of the towns in Cornwall exceed a population of 23,000 while Cornwall's most beautiful lands, nearly a third of the region, are classified as an 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) a protected-landscape designation defined by law. It is against this background that Pro-Natura UK has been exploring the potential benefits of creating a National Park for Cornwall.

The Cornwall Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

There are 46 designated AONBs across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, outstanding landscapes whose distinctive character and natural beauty are considered important enough for it to be in the Nation's interest to safeguard them for all to enjoy (see landscapesforlife.org.uk). The Cornwall AONB comprises 12 separate areas covering a total of 958 square kilometres (370 square miles).



Cornwall AONB areas shown in slightly darker green - see cornwallaonb.org.uk

Pro-Natura UK

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The Cornwall AONB, created in 1959, has a continuous coastal footpath and is a major asset for the local economy attracting millions of visitors and locals. The area is managed through a 'management plan' by a small team of officers (the AONB Unit) and a 'partnership' consisting of local elected representatives, business people, representatives of designated agencies (e.g. Natural England) and local non-government organisations (e.g. Wildlife Trusts). This partnership is currently in the process of establishing a new organisation, a 'Charitable Incorporated Organisation' with appointed trustees to provide a legal independent entity to complement their work (see cornwallaonb.org.uk).



Spectacular cliffs typical of the Cornish Coast

Crucial features in the successful management of the AONB include planning development to be sustainable and prioritizing the needs and culture of the people who live and work there. In the Cornwall AONB there are many economic activities including agriculture, fishing, tourism, creative industries, horticulture, marine businesses, renewable energy and businesses related to the knowledge economies.

The National Parks of Great Britain

There are fifteen National Parks across Great Britain as a whole (i.e. England, Wales and Scotland), which in 2011 attracted approximately 75 million visitors, a major asset for their local rural economies (see nationalparks.gov.uk). These National Parks, similar to AONBs, were designated due to their beautiful countryside, wildlife and cultural heritage. Management is achieved through the creation of a specific 'National Park Authority' consisting of local elected representatives, business people, designated agencies (e.g. Natural England) and local non-government organisations (e.g. Wildlife Trusts), which provide leadership, scrutiny and direction in conjunction with paid staff such as rangers, planners and education teams. Again similar to AONBs, crucial features in the successful management of a National Park include planning sustainable development and prioritizing the needs and culture of the people who live and work there.

It is of note that the UK Government's National Planning Policy Framework (2012) states, 'great weight should be given to conserving landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and AONBs, which have the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.' The Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the public body that advises the Government on nature conservation states, 'AONBs have equivalent status to National Parks as far as conservation is concerned' (jncc.defra.gov.uk).



Racing of pilot gigs, a traditional Cornish sport

What are some of the principle differences between an AONB and a National Park designation?

1. A National Park is managed by a designated National Park Authority, which is a planning authority in its own right. The land-use planning in an AONB is the responsibility of the local authority.
2. A National Park Authority's primary focus is to prioritise the needs of the area of the National Park and local residents, while a local authority is subject to a broader national policy agenda and is focussed on a wider geographical area.
3. A National Park Authority must promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area of the National Park by the public. No such primary duty exists for AONBs.



4. The 15 National Parks are funded by the UK Government via DEFRA (the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) to a total of c. £75.03 million annually (2012-13). In contrast the 46 AONBs (of England, Wales and Northern Ireland) are funded by a combination of national (75-80% via DEFRA) and local sources (20-25%) receiving a total of c. £6.6 million from DEFRA to English AONB Partnerships in 2013 (a further £10.2 million was generated from other sources such as Local Authorities, Heritage Lottery Fund, European Union and business sponsorship).



Leisure activities are part of the economy in the AONB

What are the potential benefits of creating a National Park for Cornwall?

1. Studies have shown a National Park designation leads to the creation of jobs as well as an increase in sustainable economic development. Key findings of four of these studies include the following conclusions:

(a). ‘Prosperity and Protection: The economic impact of National Parks in the Yorkshire & Humber regions (2006)’ reported:

- National Parks bring sustainable economic benefits for businesses within the Park boundary, just outside the boundary and for the region as a whole.
- Benefits come from the National Park designation as well as the inherent landscape quality.
- There is no evidence that businesses as a whole in National Parks are subject to undue restrictions compared to elsewhere (with residents not deterred from applying for planning and the proportion granted either commensurate with or slightly higher than the England average).
- ‘Every reason to suppose’ that National Parks elsewhere produce similar effects ‘as would any National Park designation in the future.’
- These findings deserve to be widely known and taken into account concerning the creation of new National Parks.

(b). ‘Contribution of the Peak District National Park to the economy of the East Midlands (2008)’ reported:

- The high quality environment and landscape of the National Park has ‘a very positive effect on the performance of businesses located there.’
- In addition to landscape quality the National Park designation itself brings economic benefits ‘likely to extend further than the Park boundary to businesses in surrounding market towns.’

(c). ‘Valuing England’s National Parks (2013)’ reported:

- National Park Authorities are ‘uniquely placed to continue supporting sustainable economic growth in National Parks’ and ‘have a good track record of working with business, helping them to add value and grow, supporting skills development, investing in infrastructure, and attracting visitors.’
- Benefits to English National Parks also come through National Park Authorities supporting initiatives to address specific challenges faced by local communities e.g. the need for apprenticeships, affordable housing and broadband/mobile communication.

(d). ‘Valuing Wales’ National Parks (2013)’ reported:

- The three National Parks in Wales receive 12 million visitors each year generating £1 billion annually with 85% planning approval rates commensurate with other Welsh Planning Authorities while the designated areas are described as ‘well-being’ factories providing carbon and water storage.
- The economic benefits of the Welsh National Parks ‘spill over’ beyond the park boundaries, a phenomenon referred to as the ‘halo effect.’



2. While acknowledging the economic benefits outlined above, the creation of a Cornwall National Park Authority would also directly create more than 100 good quality jobs including rangers, planners and education teams. Currently the Cornwall AONB Unit has 4 staff (in comparison about 150 people work for Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority in West Wales).

3. A Cornwall National Park would allow the towns lying adjacent to the designated area to be promoted as 'gateways' to the National Park thereby supporting urban regeneration (see reference to the 'halo effect' in 1 (d) above). For example, Helston could be promoted as a 'gateway' to the Lizard Peninsula section of the Cornwall National Park; Penzance as a 'gateway' to the Penwith Peninsula section of the Cornwall National Park; and St Austell as a 'gateway' to the Roseland Peninsula section of the Cornwall National Park.

4. The creation of a Cornwall National Park Authority would involve creating its own planning department thereby alleviating the pressures on the structures of Cornwall Council for planning and administration.

5. Given a National Park Authority's exclusive focus on the area of the National Park, the new body would be in a better position to focus on specific local needs resulting in more local accountability.

6. A more locally focussed integrated management regime (as mentioned in 5 above) would also have other benefits. For example, it would provide a body to allow better co-ordination of the many existing agencies and stakeholders within the boundary of the Cornwall National Park while improving management of the environment and levels of biodiversity, which have been suffering dramatic falls across the UK in recent years (see Natural England report 'State of the Natural Environment 2008').

7. The globally recognised status of a National Park would provide increased opportunities to recognise and understand the distinctive character of the landscape especially the unique Cornish culture and heritage found within its boundaries, the Cornish having been designated a 'minority status group' in 2014 under the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.



Fishing, a traditional Cornish way of life

Some history of a National Park designation for Cornwall

The Dower Report (1945) sought to create the National Parks of England and Wales and included parts of Cornwall in its Division 'A' list thereby confirming Cornwall met all the necessary criteria (note: in contrast the recently created National Park for the South Downs was in the Division 'C' list while Devon, the county neighbouring Cornwall, attained two National Parks, Dartmoor and Exmoor).

Despite this, the Hobhouse Report (1947) excluded Cornwall from the list after careful consideration, stating: *'the reason is not because we regard the scenic quality and recreational value of the Cornish Coastline as falling short of National Park standards – on these grounds it fully deserves its selection – but on account of serious administrative difficulties in the way of its treatment as a National Park . . . Even so we should not recommend its omission from our selection of National Parks except on the supposition that an alternative method of conservation will be made available under the Conservation Area scheme...'*



The breath-taking coastal scenery of Cornwall



Following this the 'National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act' (1949) sought to embody Hobhouse's proposal for 'conservation areas' through the creation of 'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty' with the Cornwall AONB designated in 1959.

However, the idea of a National Park for Cornwall has continued to be debated over the years, especially in the light of massively improved communication and the establishment in 2009 of a unitary administrative authority in Cornwall. For example, in 2008, Professor Robert Tregay, an eminent landscape and environmental planner, gave the annual 'Cornwall Lecture' addressing the question 'Could Cornwall have it all?' while emphasising the economic value of the landscape and exploring the idea of a National Park designation for Cornwall.

What sort of National Park might there be for Cornwall?

In the 1950's a geographical area similar to the Cornwall AONB was made into a National Park with the designation of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park in Wales (the darker green shows the Park area).



Map from Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority - see pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk

Like the Cornwall AONB, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park includes numerous unconnected geographical areas, much coastline and inland areas. This National Park shares a very similar terrain to Cornwall with a continuous coastal path and spectacular scenery (see pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk).

Thinking about some of the practicalities

Initially, it is clearly essential to hold consultations at local venues in Cornwall to inform, assess interest and stimulate discussion. As mentioned, since 2009, a unitary authority, Cornwall Council, has administered the region as a whole that greatly facilitates decision-making processes. Therefore, should a decision be made to create a National Park in Cornwall, for ease of administration, the current geographical area of the Cornwall AONB could simply be re-designated and transferred to a new Cornwall National Park Authority consisting of existing AONB infrastructure along with the Cornwall AONB Partnership with all or some of these structures simply moved to the new management regime and modified or expanded as necessary.



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Such an approach would maximise the benefits already accrued through the excellent work of the existing team. However, these suggestions are only a starting point since, should a National Park be formally proposed, local communities would need to be at the vanguard of determining if they wish to be 'in' or 'out'. Ultimately, a decision would need to be made by the UK Government in Westminster based on what Cornwall's people and politicians want and such a decision would also be based on the recommendation of Natural England.

What is the possible downside to the creation of a National Park for Cornwall?

Similar to all beautiful areas whether designated as an AONB, a National Park or just magnificent to look at and live in, there are potential downsides in the form of high house prices, pressure to build, increased migration, high visitor numbers and development at the edges. However, it can be argued that most of the potential downsides to creating a National Park are already with us in Cornwall (one of the fastest growing areas of the country) and are likely to continue. Nonetheless there are many specific advantages to establishing a National Park Authority for Cornwall as outlined above.



A village festival of traditional boats

Overall conclusions

The creation of a Cornwall National Park would contribute a globally recognised status worthy of the spectacular beauty that is the natural coastal and inland scenery of Cornwall while giving proper recognition to the distinctive character of the landscape as well as the unique Cornish culture and heritage. In summary, as outlined above, the creation of a Cornwall National Park would trigger inward investment for local people, create jobs, increase appropriate sustainable economic development and urban regeneration in nearby towns, improve accountability to local people, provide a more specific locally focussed management regime for the beautiful lands while alleviating the administrative burden currently falling on Cornwall Council.

At the moment the geographical area of the Cornwall AONB has, as far as conservation is concerned, a status equivalent to a National Park but without any of the obvious benefits that would be brought about through full National Park status.

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