

UKELA Wild Law Weekend in the Lake District, May 2018

19 members of UKELA spent a weekend in the Lake District based at the Coppermines Youth Hostel near Coniston - from May 25th to 28th. Two full days were spent in the hills, the first going up Helvellyn with Pete Barron of John Muir Trust who worked in the Lake District National Park (LDNP) as a Ranger for 25 years and the second in a circuit of the hills west of Coniston. Discussions were held in the evenings on various issues related to the National Park including a presentation by Julia Aglionby, a Board Member of Natural England, about sheep farming and common land. It was agreed that a summary of the views of the group should be prepared which may be helpful in developing UKELA thinking on the various issues which arose – for example in commenting on the forthcoming review of English and Welsh National Parks.

The LDNP was set up in 1951 and is the largest NP in England and Wales. The primary statutory purpose of a NP is “To conserve and enhance its natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage”. The LDNP has been less than successful in achieving this as there has been a major loss of biodiversity and a large decline in jobs associated with agriculture since 1951. This has been caused mainly by less diverse farming practices encouraged by subsidies, with one result being an increase in sheep numbers to levels which damage upland vegetation and wildlife.

Brexit provides an opportunity to develop sensible policies for Agriculture to promote farming practices which bring a wide range of public benefits such as restoration of lost natural habitats and wildlife along with improved public access. Continued financial support by the taxpayer is justified for hill farming (which is otherwise uneconomic) but only if it delivers these benefits.

The LDNP Authority has development planning powers but has no control and little influence on farming and forestry which are the key land uses dictating the landscape and nature conservation interest. It would be good if in future NPs had a greater control of these land uses.

The NP has been successful in attracting large and still increasing numbers of visitors but these have brought impacts such as traffic problems and severe erosion of hill paths. Large sums have been spent on path repair and maintenance but recent cut backs risk this problem getting worse. If sufficient resources are not provided to deal with these impacts then consideration should be given to reducing promotion of the NP to the wider public.

Large scale Re-Wilding (or Ecological Restoration as it is also known) is not thought politically feasible in the Lake District but there is scope for moves in this direction. Future priorities should include the following:

- Restoration of flower rich hay meadows
- Creation of more natural woodland and improvement in the condition of existing remnants.
- Reduction of sheep numbers to allow recovery of upland vegetation

These developments could be done at a modest scale initially, learning from the experience and ensuring gradual change. They would provide more employment than sheep farming and

bring socio-economic as well as environmental benefits. Achieving these would need very long term and consistent policies as well as appropriate land management.

The LDNP was recently designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO for its cultural landscape. It is important that this designation does not result in continuation of the status quo as regards rural land use or prevent improvements to the natural qualities such as those mentioned above.