



Brecon Beacons Park Society, Wales

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1. Aims and actions of the Brecon Beacons Park Society

The Brecon Beacons Park Society was established in 1992 and currently has over 700 members who pay the small membership fee (€8 to €22 depending on age, private person or family membership). It is one of the few Friends of National Parks organisations in the UK, whose membership is growing. We are registered as a Charity, do not have large financial resources, and are run entirely by volunteers.

Our aims are:

- To advance the enhancement, protection and conservation of the countryside and other amenities of the Brecon Beacons National Park for the benefit of the public.
- To advance the education of the public in the ways in which to achieve the above including the provision of opportunities for healthy recreation and in particular walking.

We take forward our aims through:

- Monitoring Development Proposals

We assess both commercial and domestic development proposals for their suitability within a National Park, supporting those which are appropriate and sustainable and opposing those that are inappropriate. Typically there are around 500 proposals annually.

- Tracking and Influencing Government Policy

Members of our executive committee spend a considerable amount of time talking to and communicating with members and ministers in the Welsh Government to help move government policy in directions beneficial to the Brecon Beacons and other National Parks in Wales. More on this topic later under *"A Threat"*.

- Running Projects to the Benefit of our National Park

In collaboration with the Park Authority (the management body for the National Park) and other organisations, the Society runs projects to help protect the special qualities of our park. More on this later under *"A Success"*.

- Help people Enjoy and Learn to Love our National Park

The Society has created and now helps to maintain the Beacons Way, a 160 Km long walking route over the mountains. We also run an extensive Guided Walks and Events programme, which is recognised as one of the best in the UK, with over 200 guided walks per year available to both our members and the general public. This is the Society's primary recruitment channel, and we believe that if we help people enjoy our National Park they will grow to love it and wish to protect it for future generations.

Additionally the Society is represented on the Board of Trustees of the Forest Fawr Geopark, which is a section of the Brecon Beacons National Park of particular geological significance. The Society has a representative also on the board of the Brecon Beacons Trust, which administers a fund of 1.4 million Euros for the support of appropriate projects in the Brecon Beacons National Park.

2. The Brecon Beacons National Park

Our National Park, the **Brecon Beacons National Park**, is located in south/mid Wales. It is 1350 square kilometers in area, has 32,000 residents within its boundaries. About 2 million people live less than one hour's drive from this great landscape and recreational facility.

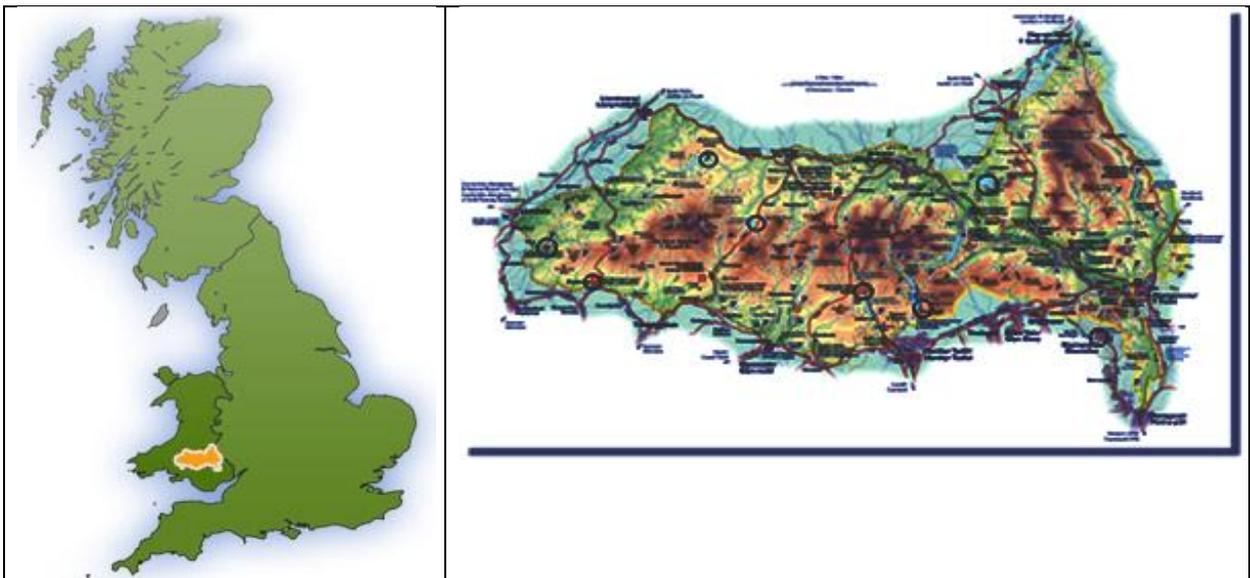


Fig 1: BBNP location in the UK.

Fig 2: Brecon Beacons National Park.

The management of the Park is the responsibility of the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, which has 24 members with 15 drawn from local government and 8 appointed by the Welsh government to balance local and national considerations.



Fig 3: The Black Mountain Area of the Brecon Beacons. Photo: VisitWales.

The Brecon Beacons National Park, like all other National Parks, faces many threats. but also has had many successes.

3. Friends Society meets threats and successes

The remainder of this paper gives information on a particular threat and how the Society is helping to address it, and a major success of the Society's and how we are endeavouring to propagate this success across Wales.

A THREAT: The Welsh Government's Attitude to National Parks

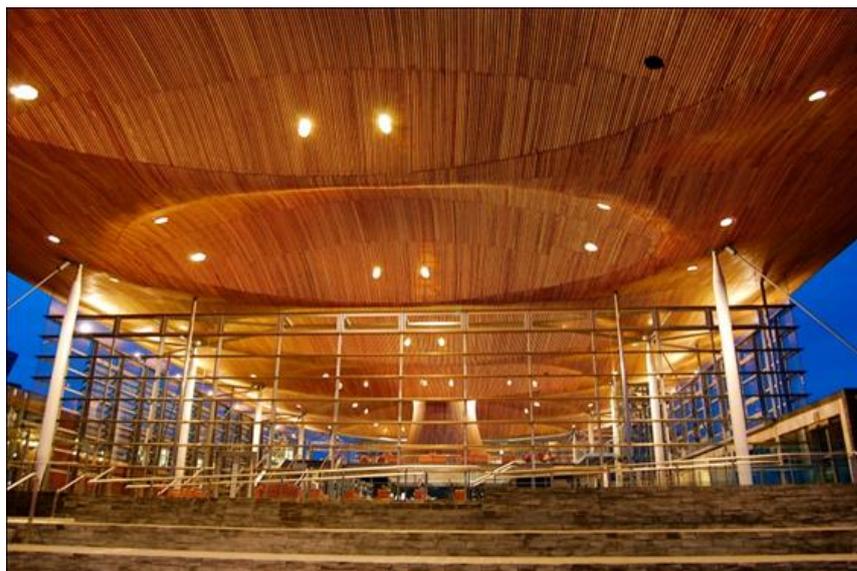


Fig 4: The Senedd, the Welsh Parliament building. Photo: Public domain.

The Welsh Assembly (Parliament) has recently gained primary legislation powers which allow it to create laws for Wales. This is a new tool for the politicians, who are keen to exercise this new power. The result being that many new laws are being created in parallel that do not appear to form a co-ordinated whole. Some of these are admirable, such as a move towards an ecosystems services approach, but several are not beneficial to National Parks because they centralise some planning decisions. In all of these new laws there is very little acknowledgement of the special qualities of National Parks.

Recently a new government structure has been put in place. Multiple government bodies with conflicting mind sets have been amalgamated into one. Some were previously acting as guardians of the environment and National Parks, and others had been quasi commercial organisations using the resources of the countryside. This new organisation Natural Resources Wales (NRW) appears to be focussed on utilizing natural resources rather than protecting them with sustainable use for the future.

Wales no longer has a Minister for the Environment, but now has a Minister for Natural Resources use. The Minister for Natural Resources has imposed very large cuts to the budgets of National Parks and additionally has commissioned a far reaching review of National Parks' Purposes, Duties, and Governance, which will be very influential on the long term future of our National Parks.

The Society is countering the Welsh Government's ambivalent (at best) attitude to National Parks through collaborative action with multiple other organisations supportive of National Parks.

The three Friends of National Parks Societies in Wales took the lead in forming the Alliance for National Parks Cymru (Wales) as the primary support body for National Parks in Wales. The Alliance membership covers the three Friends' Societies, the Campaign for the Protection for Rural Wales and the National Association of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and many other organisations in Wales that are supportive of National Parks. Additionally the three National Park Authorities attend meetings as observers. This is a powerful advocacy group with many contacts in the corridors of power in Wales.

Additionally National Parks Wales is the association of Welsh National Park Authorities, which co-ordinates the responses of the governing bodies of our National Parks to legislation consultations and collaborates closely with the Alliance.

The Campaign for National Parks is the leading support organisation for National Parks in England and it collaborates with and supports the Alliance in Wales.

One action taken was the production of a major report "Valuing Wales' National Parks" which highlights the economic benefits generated by our National Parks. The findings of the report include:

- National Parks are 20% of the land area of Wales
- 12 million visitors per year contributing 1.4 billion Euros to the Welsh economy
- 95% of people surveyed considered National Parks to be important to them
- Carbon sequestering within National Parks is worth more than 25 million Euros per annum

The report has gained considerable positive publicity for National Parks and provided a major body of evidence that has been useful in making the case for the benefits of National Parks in the 21st century.

Members of the Alliance have been very active in responding forcefully to consultations on new legislation impacting on National Parks, giving evidence to government committees, and lobbying

people of influence to endeavour to shape government policy to be positive on rather than detrimental to National Parks in Wales. But we still ask ourselves; are we winning?

The report of the Review of Designated Landscapes including National Parks has been published and it is very positive in its recommendations. Almost all of the Alliance suggestions on how our National Parks should be supported and managed have been taken up in one form or another.

However the Minister for Natural Resources kept the report confidential for over three months then announced the formation of a Working Group to look at the recommendations. The formation of this Working Group could be positive in that it allows stakeholders to influence the uptake of the recommendations of the report. However the manner in which the working group has been initiated suggests it could be a tactic to delay the report till it bio-degrades.

The Alliance as an organisation and some of our member organisations in their own right have been invited to participate in this Working Group. So we do have an opportunity to try to persuade the Welsh Government to take up the recommendations of their own review. We shall see if our lobbying and persuasion strategy, which worked with the Review of National Parks, is also successful in getting its recommendations acted on. If we are unsuccessful the escalation would be to launch a media campaign.

SUCCESS 1: Controlling Light Pollution and creating the Brecon Beacons International Dark Sky Reserve.



Fig 5: The dark skies of the Brecon Beacons. Photo: Michael Sinclair.

The Brecon Beacons National Park contains the only truly dark skies in south Wales and provides excellent night sky experience opportunities to people living in the most heavily populated area of Wales, which lies immediately south of its boundary. The growth of light pollution associated with these centres of population is a threat to the quality of the night sky of the Park. Light pollution is a global problem as well as a local one.

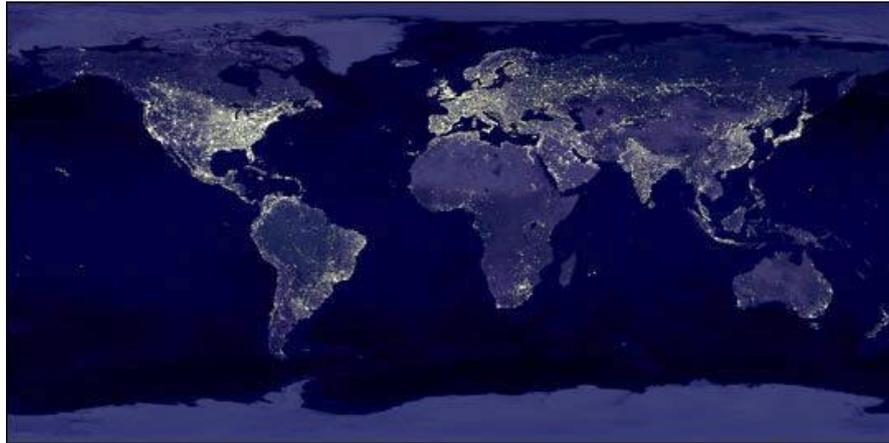


Fig 6: Global Light Pollution. Image: International Dark-Sky Association.

However it is not just our view of the stars that is affected, other negative impacts of light pollution include other issues:

- Environmental

In the UK 830 million kg of CO₂ pollution is produced in generating the energy wasted by streetlights alone which is surely unacceptable in these days of green awareness and global warming.

- Economic

1400 Million Euros is wasted annually in generating the energy which is subsequently wasted by directing light into the sky to illuminate the rest of the universe. This is the annual running costs of 57 rural hospitals!

- Wildlife

Migrating birds are disoriented by light pollution and their navigation system malfunction. Also as the length of day is a trigger to when to breed. Light pollution disturbs breeding cycles causing young to be born at the wrong time of year.

Many insects are attracted to streetlights and other external lights and die in vast numbers disturbing the base of the food chain.

Concern over these negative impacts of the growing problem of light pollution triggered the creation of the Brecon Beacons Dark Sky initiative. This was a two year joint project led by the Brecon Beacons Park Society in collaboration with the Brecon Beacons Park Authority and other partners, whose objectives were to:

- Combat the growing encroachment of light pollution into the Brecon Beacons National Park and the surrounding area;
- mitigate the adverse effects of this pollution;
- raise awareness and understanding of this special quality of the National Park;
- gain International Dark Sky Reserve status for the National Park; and
- spread the message on controlling light pollution across Wales to gain its benefits for all.

These objectives were achieved through a strategy of engagement with local communities, government bodies, and concerned organisations to form multiple partnerships to raise awareness of, and help address the issue of light pollution.

The initiative received very high profile support from Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales. Then came also support from the Minister of the Environment, and VisitBritain which is the primary tourism organisation for the UK.



Fig 7: Prince Charles, Prince of Wales - Project supporter . Photo: Public Domain.

Organisations participating in the Dark Sky Initiative include several Universities in Wales, local Astronomy associations, Wildlife organisations, and lighting managers in local government. However the most important partners were our local communities who took very little persuasion that protecting the quality of the night sky was a good thing to do. They really got on board with the project with many Star Parties and Festivals being organised by villages and also by local businesses appreciating the commercial opportunities that dark skies bring.

Our Dark Sky Education and Outreach programmes reached over 2,000 school children and a further 3,500 young adults through outdoor activity centres.

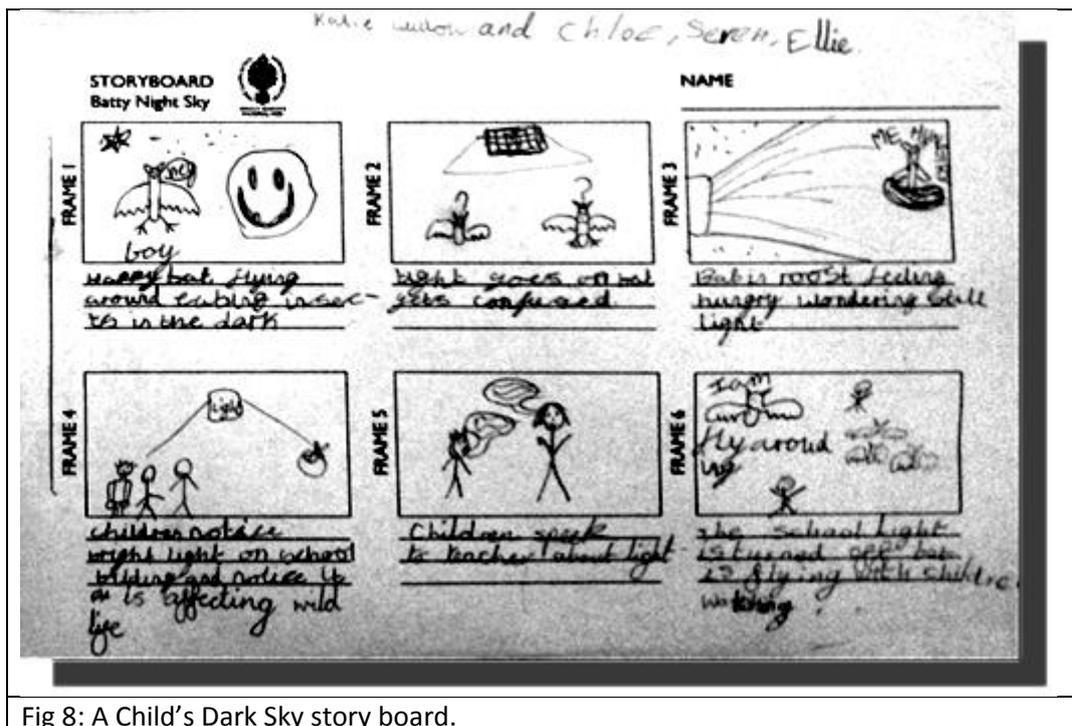


Fig 8: A Child's Dark Sky story board.

The overall approach that was taken by the initiative was to use the International Dark-Sky Association's (IDA) criteria for International Dark Sky Reserve status as guidelines for good practice on control of light pollution, but we also hope that in so doing we would gain recognition from the IDA.

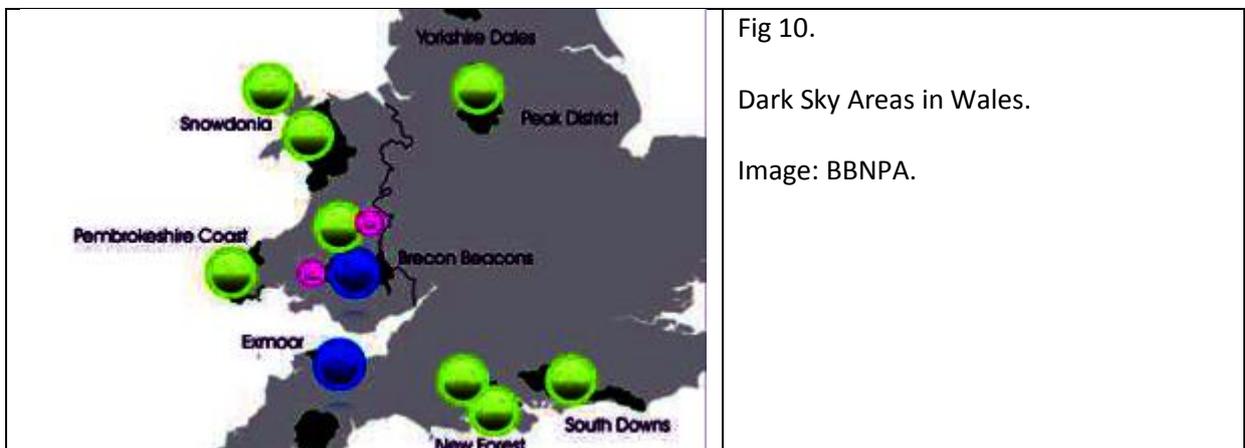
Success 2: The Brecon Beacons National Park became the 5th International Dark Sky Reserve in the world.

Since gaining this very prestigious status we have been very busy building on this success. An observatory for public use has been established in the Park with over 1000 people enjoying its facilities in the first year of operation.



Fig 9: The first image from the Brecon Beacons International Dark Sky Reserve Observatory; Andromeda and satellite galaxies. Image: BBNPA.

The tremendous media coverage of this project generated 2.8 million Euros worth of free publicity for the area. Local businesses have leveraged from this to considerable commercial advantage. After that there has been considerable interest by other areas in the benefits being seen in the Brecon Beacons as a result of controlling light pollution.



As result of our encouragement of other organisations to follow our lead, 20% of the land area of Wales now controls external lighting to protect the quality of our night skies.

Now to address the other 80%!

See more in internet:

<http://www.breconbeaconsparksociety.org>

<http://www.breconbeacons.org>

<http://www.afnpcymru.org.uk>

<http://www.nationalparkswales.gov.uk/npw/policy/national-parks-wales-open-for-business>

<http://darksky.org>