

ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Monday 5 February 2007

Session 2

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ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2007, Session 2

CONVENER

*Maureen Macmillan (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)

Mr Alasdair Morrison (Western Isles) (Lab)

*Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Mr Andrew Arbuckle (Mid Scotland and Fife) (LD)

Alex Fergusson (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale) (Con)

Trish Godman (West Renfrewshire) (Lab)

Jim Mather (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP)

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Dr Kate Adamson (Association of Cairngorms Community Councils)

Roland Bean (Perth and Kinross Council)

Professor Ian Brown (Pitlochry Partnership)

Andrew Bruce Wootton (Atholl Estates)

Geoff Crerar (Blair Atholl and Struan Community Council)

Nigel Hawkins (John Muir Trust)

Jane Hope (Cairngorms National Park Authority)

Beryl Leatherland (Mountaineering Council of Scotland)

Doreen MacIntyre (Mount Blair Community Council)

Dave Morris (Ramblers Association Scotland)

Lin Muirhead (Blair Atholl Area Tourism Association)

Peter Rawcliffe (Scottish Natural Heritage)

John Rennilson (Highland Council)

Dr Iain Robertson (Cairngorms Campaign)

Councillor Sheena Slimon

Bill Wright (Perthshire Alliance for the Real Cairngorms)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Mark Brough

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Katherine Wright

ASSISTANT CLERK

Jenny Goldsmith

LOCATION

Atholl Arms Hotel, Blair Atholl

Scottish Parliament

Environment and Rural Development Committee

Monday 5 February 2007

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:00*]

Cairngorms National Park Boundary Bill: Stage 1

The Convener (Maureen Macmillan): I welcome committee members, witnesses and members of the public and the press to this meeting of the Environment and Rural Development Committee in Blair Atholl. We are delighted to be here and look forward to an interesting and productive meeting.

Apologies have been received from Alasdair Morrison and Elaine Smith, who are unable to be with us.

I welcome John Swinney, who is a local constituency member of the Scottish Parliament, and Mark Ruskell, who is a regional MSP. Pete Wishart, who is the local member of Parliament, hopes to join us, but he is not here yet. We hope that he will turn up later.

I remind everybody to turn off their mobile phones so that the meeting will not be disturbed. I see people searching for their mobile phones in their pockets to ensure that they are turned off.

Today, we continue consideration of the Cairngorms National Park Boundary Bill, which is a member's bill that was introduced by John Swinney. The Environment and Rural Development Committee has been appointed as lead committee to consider the bill at stage 1. Our task is to consider its general principles and to report to the Parliament, recommending whether those general principles should be agreed to.

Last week, we had an introductory session on the bill, during which we took evidence from John Swinney. Today, several witnesses with expertise or an interest in the issues that the bill raises will give evidence. We are pleased to have a local meeting, which is easier for interested people to attend.

All the witnesses have provided helpful written submissions, which are publicly available on the committee's web page for people to peruse. The committee issued an open call for written evidence and received several other submissions, which have been circulated to members. They are also on the committee's web page for the benefit of the public.

John Swinney is not a member of the committee, but as the member in charge of the bill he is entitled to attend and participate in proceedings. That said, he cannot vote when the committee considers its conclusions on the bill.

There will be two parts to the meeting. First we will hear from people who are involved with local businesses and from local community representatives, then we will hear from environmental and recreational bodies and the public agencies that are involved.

In between our sets of witnesses, we will take a break from the formal meeting for around half an hour, when tea and coffee will be served in a room next door. During the break, committee members will have a chance to chat informally with members of the public, who may wish to express views to them. That will be a chance to network and for people to talk to MSPs outside the formal meeting.

There are two panels of witnesses for the first part of the meeting. Panel 1, which I welcome, consists of Andrew Bruce Wootton, who is general manager of Atholl Estates; Lin Muirhead, who is chairperson of Blair Atholl area tourism association; Geoff Crerar, who is chair of Blair Atholl and Struan community council and a small business owner; and Professor Ian Brown, who is chair of the Pitlochry partnership.

Committee members have had the chance to read the witnesses' submissions, and I invite them to ask questions.

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): It is great to be in Blair Atholl, which is in a beautiful part of Scotland. Part of the northern part of the Cairngorms national park is in Moray, which I represent. It is great to be here to discuss the park's southern boundary.

I want to kick off by discussing tourism, which is clearly a relevant issue for the first panel. I ask Lin Muirhead from Blair Atholl area tourism association, as well as the other witnesses, to comment on the extent to which you exploit the fact that your area is the "Gateway to the Cairngorms", as you mention in your submission. How would you get any additional benefit if you were officially part of the national park? It seems to me that—quite rightly—you are already exploiting the fact that you are at the gateway to the Cairngorms. Are you forgoing any additional benefits by not being a formal part of the park?

Lin Muirhead (Blair Atholl Area Tourism Association): First of all, welcome to Blair Atholl, everybody. It is nice to see so many people from the tourism association here. We have really only started to consider ourselves as a gateway this season, as progress has been made towards our getting into the Cairngorms national park.

As you have seen, we have a leaflet entitled "Gateway to the Cairngorms". We are a strong tourism association, with 94 members, and the local community appreciates that tourism is important for its economy. We represent that community, and the community looks to us to try to get Blair Atholl into the national park. It is detrimental to Blair Atholl not to be in the national park, because of all the traffic that bypasses it. It is of the utmost importance for us to come into the national park.

We have so much to offer tourists when they come here, whether they are families or individuals. We have golfing, bowling, hillwalking and five Munros. When people come from the south and approach the Killiecrankie bypass, they see a beautiful vista in front of them. People who come from Glasgow or Edinburgh, who travel for about an hour and a half, must think that this is somewhere special and that they are heading for the national park, but there are no signposts for the park anywhere, and they bypass us, wondering where they are heading. The kids are anxious, and they want a cup of tea and the toilet. They pass through all the mountainous scenery, which is not in the national park. That is one reason for our inclusion, considering the issue from a grass-roots perspective and forgetting about all the other issues involved, such as the boundaries. Our area is the natural gateway to the Cairngorms. Blair Atholl can only benefit from that.

This is also the historic gateway. I do not know whether members realise that five historic routes start in Atholl and go through the Cairngorms. Anybody who wants to walk or cycle those routes starting from the gateway, which is in Dalwhinnie at the moment, has to come back to Blair Atholl to start the routes through Glen Tilt, the Minigaig pass and so on. That is another important factor, as are the beautiful flora and fauna and everything else that has an affinity with the Cairngorms in this area.

Professor Ian Brown (Pitlochry Partnership): One of the issues that we in Pitlochry face is that we are in the Cairngorms—we are so close that we might as well be in the park. We would have no problem if the existing national park was called the north Cairngorms national park. A significant part of the Cairngorms is not within the current area of the park, however.

A lot of our business involves adventure activities, such as mountain bike riding. I have an old colleague—let us call him Ross—who recently went up to Braemar and rode all the way through the Cairngorms down to here, but he did not realise that he had left the Cairngorms when he was at the top of a mountain. When he got here, he had a drink, and he had to get carried back to Pitlochry—but that is another story.

The current boundary is preventing us from exploiting what we actually are. Blair Atholl recently wanted to put a sign on the road saying "Gateway to the Cairngorms"—not "Cairngorms National Park". That is a simple fact. If one looks out the window here, one sees the Cairngorms. People were told that they could not possibly have that sign, because Blair Atholl is 30km—that is only 18 miles—from the Cairngorms national park boundary, and the public would be confused. I do not think that the public are confused, and I do not think that people in highland Perthshire are confused. We know where the Cairngorms are. However, the legislation has set up a conflict, which will continue.

The Pitlochry partnership is about to put advertisements in the *Sunday Herald* boasting about our proximity to the Cairngorms—members will see them if they buy the newspaper in three or four weeks. The advertisements will appear and we will continue to advertise in that way. We must do that, because the simple fact is that we are here.

I endorse everything that Lin Muirhead said about the advantages of the area for tourists. Pitlochry provides a resource for the national park because it is a special size and is in a special location—it is a natural pre-gateway to the national park. The national park is depriving itself of those advantages at the same time as the legislation is creating inevitable conflict.

Andrew Bruce Wootton (Atholl Estates): We must consider the issue from a tourist's point of view. For people who come from a foreign country and who know nothing about the geography and history of the area, unless an area is officially in the park it will, to their knowledge, be outside the Cairngorms. So, as Lin Muirhead suggests, despite the scenery here, people will be persuaded to continue on their travels until they see the sign for the national park. That is how a foreign tourist will think, despite the fact that we do not accept that distinction. To us, we are naturally and historically the gateway to the Cairngorms but, to those who have never been here before, that will not be the case.

Geoff Crerar (Blair Atholl and Struan Community Council): I endorse what has been said. We have a natural gateway and we must be aware that creating an artificial or synthetic gateway somewhere else confuses the public and results in conflict and a waste of energy that should be spent on promoting the area as a whole.

Richard Lochhead: Those answers were interesting. The submissions show clearly that most people believe that there is neither rhyme nor reason to why the Government excluded the area in the first place and why Scottish Natural Heritage's proposals on the boundaries were

ignored. The witnesses obviously feel strongly about that. Were you given any explanation at the time? What is your understanding of or theory to explain why the Government took the decision to exclude what is a beautiful part of the Cairngorms area from the official park?

Professor Brown: We have no comprehension or understanding of that at all.

Richard Lochhead: You were not given an official explanation.

Lin Muirhead: No; nothing.

Mr Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The answers were interesting. There seems almost to be unanimity that the proposals would bring great tourism benefits. From the submissions that we have read, there also seems to be a fair degree of unanimity that the change of boundaries is a good idea. However, although Andrew Bruce Wootton offered some support for the proposal, his submission contains one or two reservations and mentions one or two specific problems. The first relates to the proposed political representation under the bill. You feel that not enough political clout would come with the bill, as it would give the area only one nominee on the national park board. Is that correct?

Andrew Bruce Wootton: Yes. We run a business and are largely responsible for managing a large area of land that does not have a huge rate of return per acre. As a marginal business, we are obviously concerned about facing a greater administrative hurdle. From the submissions that have come from the north, it is clear that a welcoming hand is not being held out to our area. Given that we might not exactly be welcomed and that we would have light representation on the national park board, we are concerned that we might face hurdles, for example in development control when we applied to undertake work. That might arise because we would clearly be assisted into the park rather than invited.

Mr Brocklebank: You have other concerns about the possible extra costs that you would have to absorb, including a particular issue with what might be involved in possible payment for the existing ranger service.

14:15

Andrew Bruce Wootton: Yes. In our submission, we have identified the running costs of the business, much of which provides either an environmental or a public benefit. Obviously, one hopes that inclusion in the park would result in greater visitor numbers. Those numbers would have to be managed whether or not they paid. We have listed some of the costs that we currently face in undertaking such administration. The most

significant costs, which are largely recovered through visitor income, are on the land management side, and the largest area is medium to high-level moorland. At the moment, the majority of the income comes from country sports, but the majority of work that is carried out is related to land management—deer control, heather moorland management and road maintenance, for example. If we could not benefit through the normal revenue streams for one reason or another—regulation or land management restrictions—it would place a significant financial burden on our business. That is fairly obvious, but it is important to take it into account.

Mr Brocklebank: Are you able to quantify those costs in thousands of pounds?

Andrew Bruce Wootton: The area is quite large, so one expects that it would be quite expensive to manage. The approximate costs of the moorland management, deer control and environmental protection would be in the region of £250,000, for labour, housing and vehicle costs. At the moment, that is largely covered by visitor income, but that assumes a situation in which we are able to let a certain amount of sport take place. Whether or not we let the sport take place, there would still be a management burden involving work to keep the land in good order and species control that the park would require us to do.

Peter Peacock (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I also want to follow up on the evidence that you submitted. One argument that recurs from those, including John Swinney, who want to extend the park is that there is a requirement to create a buffer zone for the existing park boundary. In your evidence, you argue that that is not required, because the way in which you manage the land in effect creates a buffer zone. Will you say a little more about that?

Andrew Bruce Wootton: We support the park, its objectives and the inclusion of highland Perthshire, subject to some areas of concern. The point in our submission is that, because of the way in which our part of the area is managed, and because of our existing close ties with the national park, one could call Atholl Estates a buffer zone in itself. One could suggest that using that area as the buffer is safer than using an area outwith Atholl Estates that perhaps does not have holistic management and an existing communication network with the park authority and agencies north of the county border. We do not use that as a reason to be against the park; we are just picking up a point in the consultation paper, that inclusion in the park would provide that buffer zone. Our point is simply that a buffer zone already exists, whether or not we are in the park.

Peter Peacock: I want to pursue a separate point. In its evidence, the Mountaineering Council of Scotland argues that, if the area that John Swinney suggests is not in the national park, people will have to rely purely on the good will of the estate that you represent for their protection, the protection of the land and so on.

Will you clarify two points about that? First, I take it that there is no intention to remove that good will and that the long-term intention is to manage the estate in much the same way as it is managed today, but will you confirm whether that is true?

Secondly, even if you were within the park, would not you still require to show that good will, given that your ownership structure would not change because you were a member of the park? You would still be the employer of rangers and other services. In that context, you would largely continue your current practices. In your submission, you argue that those practices—to some extent, at least—equal if not exceed the standards that are required in the park. Is it your intention to remove that good will? Secondly, would good will still be required even if you were within the park?

Andrew Bruce Wootton: Clearly, there is an element of good will, but there is also good land management and good business practice. Our practice on Atholl Estates is not seen as generous or above and beyond what would normally be required. It is good, reasonable and progressive land management, which benefits us through healthy markets, a healthy visitor trade and good long-term property maintenance and management. Obviously, compliance with the law is also an issue, but even if it did not exist there would still be benefits to be had from people having the freedom to roam the land and enjoy it. The driver for the way that the land is managed is good business management rather than good will. Of course, that will continue, whether or not we are in the park.

Our concern, as indicated in our submission, is simply that there may be situations in the future whereby certain elements of land management in the park are more restrictive than those outwith it. That is a fair assumption. Our concern is that in the absence of assistance funding the management of the land must continue. That applies to the farms and estates that are already in the park, so we are not saying that it is any different for us. A concern for us, as we are not currently in the park, is that, if those income flows are reduced through different forms of land management that are brought about by the influence of and pressures from the park, there should be alternative income for us to ensure that

the employment of people and the good work that is done can continue.

The Convener: I think that Professor Brown wants to answer the question.

Professor Brown: As long as the good will exists that is fine, but in five, 10 or 15 years who knows what may come about? The whole argument for inclusion is to be part of a partnership that comprises the whole of the Cairngorms and has the authority to operate systems across the whole of the massif.

Mr Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I am not sure whether the witnesses managed to read the submissions from other witnesses. The submission from Highland Council identified that a major benefit of the park gateway being at Dalwhinnie is that it requires a left turn off the A9 as opposed to a right turn. Clearly, that poses a question about what happens when a visitor turns around to go home. However, there is a serious issue about traffic management. What are your thoughts on how to manage visitor flows through Blair Atholl and Pitlochry should you become the gateway?

Lin Muirhead: The problem that you mention could be easily overcome. When the new A9 was being built it was proposed that there should be a small slip road off to the left, which would go through a small paddock and take traffic on to the old A9 and straight into Blair Atholl. That would not cost a lot and would not be difficult. There could be a sign to direct traffic from Old Faskally, which is a bit further south, on to the old A9. There should not be a major problem.

Mr Ruskell: I presume that that turn-off would take you past other relevant tourism-related sites, such as the National Trust for Scotland centre.

Professor Brown: As far as Pitlochry is concerned you do not have to cross the traffic to get into town, no matter in which direction you are going. There is not an issue. I understand the point that is being made about Dalwhinnie, although obviously a gateway entrance would also be a gateway exit, so people coming out of the park would have to cross traffic to get out of Dalwhinnie as they headed south. That does not seem to be a strong argument.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Let us return to the land area that we are talking about. Before I deal with the tourism aspects, I want to ask about the topography, which includes the Comyn's road and the Minigaig pass. Is there any point at which the topography changes between the area that is within the existing boundaries of the national park and the land to the south?

Professor Brown: No. One of the original arguments was about consistency and coherence and having a focus for the national park, but the present boundary simply does not meet those criteria. It is simply an arbitrary line that has been drawn along a watershed. I have never heard of a national park being delineated by a watershed; by definition it must be in the middle. The simple fact is that the topography changes roughly 800yd up the road from here. If one looks out of a window in Blair Atholl, one can see it changing. The same topography stretches north.

We talk loosely about going north from here to the Cairngorms but, actually, one cannot drive north to the Cairngorms. Directly north of here is Aviemore. To get to Dalwhinnie, Newtonmore and Kingussie, one needs to drive several miles west. That is the nature of the Cairngorms—they are there. They are the elephant in the room, if you like. We simply cannot deny that they exist. The road builders would undoubtedly have taken a much more direct route to Aviemore if they had been able to, but they were not. The layout of the roads provides evidence that we are part of the Cairngorms.

Rob Gibson: Of course, in the past people used the two passes that I mentioned to travel through the Cairngorms.

What areas does the deer management group that deals with this part of Scotland cover? Does the land that it deals with extend into the national park?

Andrew Bruce Wootton: No. Our group is the west Grampian deer management group, and our area extends from the west side of Atholl, including Dalnacardoch, and spreads across to Enochdhu. Pitlochry lies to the south of the district, which extends roughly from the Enochdhu road up to the county boundary. At the moment, I do not think that any of the group's land is within the national park. However, our group is part of an integrated committee of deer management groups that cover the national park. Because of our proximity to the park, we have worked with that committee for the past three years to ensure that a park plan for deer management is developed that covers the west Grampian area as well, even though it appears that, at the moment, there is not a huge amount of deer movement between the two main areas—west Grampian, which is outwith the park, and Speyside.

Rob Gibson: Is it the case that deer do not respect deer management group areas and that they roam far and wide beyond our artificial boundaries, over towards Deeside and up towards Glen Feshie?

Andrew Bruce Wootton: Yes. When the deer management groups were put together, the range

of each of the different herds was taken into account, but you are right that there is no hard and fast rule. There are certainly no fences or keep out signs on the county boundary. In addition, deer movements change over time. Who is to say what will happen in the future?

There is no question but that any significant change to deer management planning within the park would have an impact on and a relevance to the west Grampian deer management area. At the moment, that is being allowed for through the integration of the west Grampian group in the workings of the committee of groups that represents the park, which we hope will develop into a group that helps to prepare a deer management plan for the park. At present, largely because of the relatively static nature of the hind herds, the stag migration is more east-west than north-south.

Mr John Swinney (North Tayside) (SNP): I want to ask about Andrew Bruce Wootton's submission and the comments that were made in response to Peter Peacock's questions. The submission says that the land management costs are already absorbed by Atholl Estates. It also states:

"if Park regulations eventually make the provision of field sports unviable or restricted then the over head costs would remain to be paid."

Can you shed any light on steps that the park authority has taken that have in any way questioned the viability of field sports?

14:30

Andrew Bruce Wootton: I suppose that the fear is more to do with deer management than other types of moorland management. In relation to Mr Gibson's question, although deer populations remain relatively formal and routine where there is balance, as with sheep on open hills there will be dramatic movement if there is a dramatic change in relative populations, simply through land becoming empty. One must take an holistic approach to deer management if the park objective—for whatever reason—is to reduce deer numbers to a level that does not support the maintenance of a labour team. That applies to the whole park, and it is not the first time that it has been raised as a concern.

There will also be net costs for businesses or agencies. That is a reality. We are not jumping up and down about it; it is just something that we all have to take into account.

Mr Swinney: But that has not happened to date.

Andrew Bruce Wootton: Not as far as I am aware, but no park deer management plan has yet

been drafted. No action has been taken within the park to address that.

Mr Swinney: I have a final point about the discussion in the submission about local tourism and gateway signage in particular. The committee would benefit from understanding more about the efforts within the community to try to ensure that there is effective signage of the historical connection between Blair Atholl and the Cairngorms. What steps have been taken to provide that signage? What progress has been made? What obstacles have been encountered in trying to secure it?

Professor Brown: I offer a specific example. The community wanted to mark where people enter the Cairngorms, so it put up a sign that said, "Welcome to the Cairngorms". We were blocked by an objection from the Cairngorms national park because we are 30km from it. Although 30km sounds like a long way, it is only about 18 miles. We are not, however, 30km from the Cairngorms—we are 800yd from the Cairngorms and we were stopped.

I said earlier that conflict would continue to arise. We all voted for the Scottish Parliament and we would all vote for it again tomorrow. However, it cannot legislate an elephant into a mouse. The elephant is the Cairngorms—they are there.

Lin Muirhead: We market ourselves as the gateway to the Cairngorms, not to the national park. We make people realise that we exist, that we are a buzzing community and we have a lot to offer people in the way of tourism, restaurants, hotels, shops and activities. If we did not have a sign on the A9, people would go past Blair Atholl. It would be detrimental to the economy for people to pass by when there is everything for them to gain here.

The tourism association has a good website that had about 62,000 hits in January. It has a webmaster who is available 18 hours a day to answer any questions. Anybody from anywhere in the world can access the national park website. If Blair Atholl was involved, somebody would be available to answer all their questions, which is a big bonus nowadays. That service is funded by the Blair Atholl area tourism association.

The Convener: Would you be satisfied with being the gateway to the Cairngorms, rather than to the national park? I am conscious that we have talked about the tourism impact and not so much about the environmental responsibilities that go with being a member of the national park.

Lin Muirhead: No, we definitely want to be in the park; there is no doubt about that. We were just grasping at straws in case we were not, by trying to market Blair Atholl as the gateway. The Cairngorms are a unique selling point for the

village because of what they bring with them, such as television coverage and everything else. We just did not want to miss out on that, so we definitely want to be in the national park.

Atholl Estates covers all the areas that are required by a ranger service for the tourists as well, and there is a very good ranger information centre in the village that would answer people's questions.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): Paragraph 3.2 of the Blair Atholl area tourism association submission talks about the boundaries and seems to suggest extending the boundary further than the bill suggests. Is that a misapprehension?

Lin Muirhead: We just thought that there should be more of a natural boundary going down to Killiecrankie, up Glen Giraig and then following the river. At the moment, I think that the boundary goes through the Killiecrankie battlefield, which is probably not where it should be. We do not really want to get wound up with boundaries, but it also separates the small villages of Struan and Calvine, which is not practical either. It is on a practical basis that we would like the boundaries to change slightly.

Nora Radcliffe: I have a general question for the whole panel. There have been hints that the Executive might consider the boundaries when it comes to the five-year review. Why do you think that it would be better to support the bill than to wait for a chance of changing things during the review?

Geoff Crerar: Five years sounds like quite a long time, but the review is next year, which is not far ahead. We are here and everyone, including the committee, has put a lot of time and energy into reviewing the situation now. It is hard to see how things would change so hugely between now and then as to justify one conclusion being reached now and another being reached in fewer than 15 months' time.

Professor Brown: Another reason for deferring a decision is cost, but it will cost to change the boundary at any time. The sooner we do it, the better. I worked in non-departmental public bodies for more than 10 years and we always found that if we made a slip in good faith, it was better to get it sorted earlier. When you are in a hole, stop digging, as Denis Healey said.

The Convener: Lin Muirhead said that her idea of where the boundary should be is different from what is in the bill. Perhaps it would be better to wait for the review so that the issue could be considered in more depth to see exactly where it should be.

Geoff Crerar: With respect to Lin, minor modifications are not the main issue that we are addressing here. The adjustments are very minor.

Richard Lochhead: On a point of clarification, my understanding is that when we talk about the review being in 18 months' time or whenever it is, we are talking about the launch of the review. I assume that we do not know how long the review will take. It is worth clarifying the timescales that we are talking about. Presumably, the review could take ages.

The Convener: We can clarify that when we take evidence from the Executive.

Lin Muirhead: The granite signs are not in position yet and there is not a huge amount of signage or leaflets around. All those things will cost thousands of pounds. If the boundary were changed now, surely it would save a lot of money in the long run. If all the signs and things were in place in 18 months' time, or two to three years down the line, you might say that Blair Atholl could not be in the national park because it would cost far too much money to change everything. If we are going to be included in the park, now would be the time. What will change in 18 months or two years? Blair Atholl will not change and neither will the environment. It will just mean going through this process again.

Peter Peacock: I have a couple of questions, following on from what Nora Radcliffe asked about boundaries. The first is for Lin Muirhead. In paragraph 3.2 of your submission, on the boundaries at Calvine and Struan, you argue that the original boundaries that SNH drew were better than those that John Swinney suggests and that the boundary should follow Allt Girmaig rather than what you describe as

"an arbitrary line along the hillside."

I recognise that those are points of detail rather than points of principle and that you want the boundary shifted. However, do you accept that an element of judgment must be applied in deciding any boundary and that there is not an absolutely correct boundary in all circumstances?

Lin Muirhead: I appreciate that. It is simply important that Blair Atholl and the surrounding area be included. The final boundary would be a point for negotiation between all the parties and landowners concerned. As long as that part of Perth and Kinross was within the boundary, everybody would be quite happy.

Peter Peacock: I will pursue the same general point about boundaries with Professor Brown. You have given me the impression that there is an absolutely clear, indisputable boundary to the Cairngorms and that that is not the current park boundary. The Blair Atholl area tourism

association's submission refers to the SNH boundary but, as I recall, way back SNH gave ministers three potential boundaries for the Cairngorms: a tightly drawn boundary around the central massif of the mountains; a slightly wider boundary, which, almost by definition, is not the one about which you are talking; and a wider boundary again.

I know from past discussions that there will always be debate about boundaries, wherever they are drawn. John Swinney's bill opens up questions about the current southern boundary. Does the Pitlochry partnership think that, if the opportunity arose, the boundary should be moved slightly further south from where John Swinney suggests that it should go to include Ben Vrackie and the whole of Killiecrankie, for example, or is that clearly not part of the Cairngorms, of less scenic value and in need of less management and protection?

Professor Brown: You must have read our minds, Mr Peacock. We thought seriously about that question, because there is a case to be made for what you suggest. Any boundary at the end of a geographical phenomenon will be a matter of judgment, as you rightly say. We talk about fine tuning the boundary in the strath between Calvine and Struan, but some major boundaries can clearly be wrong. For example, the current division of the Cairngorms is precisely analogous to the Lake District national park dividing the lake district between the old counties of Cumberland and Westmorland with the boundary running through Grasmere. Wordsworth did not know that the lake district could be divided that way; it is one geographical unit that runs across two old counties.

We can debate where the fine tuning should be and I am sure that we would do that positively. However, for the Cairngorms national park boundary to be where it is on the watershed is a tourism, geographical and economic nonsense. I am sorry to say that so bluntly, but it is nonsense.

Ben Vrackie sits on a particular spur. There is an old pass between Pitlochry and Blair Atholl. The Pitlochry partnership's view is that it makes much more sense to respect Blair Atholl's position as a genuine and historic gateway. The five ancient roads start in Blair Atholl and head north; they do not start in Pitlochry. We see our role as supporting our neighbours in Blair Atholl. Pitlochry is a larger town with a different kind of tourism, and it would be of great benefit to the park if the park authority was to recognise the value of having us just a wee bit down the road outside the boundary.

Mr Brocklebank: Can you clarify whether Killiecrankie wishes to be part of the national park? The boundary that goes through the

battlefield has been mentioned, but am I right in thinking that Killiecrankie has said that it would prefer to stay outwith the boundaries of the national park?

Professor Brown: I cannot speak for Killiecrankie directly, but I understand that to be the case. It is an example of the need for what I would call fine tuning. That would not detract from the broad principle that the Cairngorms national park—if it is not going to be just the north Cairngorms national park—should include all of the Cairngorms.

14:45

Eleanor Scott (Highlands and Islands) (Green): I have a quick question that goes back to the first question. I am picking up from everybody a definite feeling that this area would benefit from inclusion in the national park. Has any work been done to quantify that? Have you done any work on the number of visitors that you would expect? Have you compared the number of visitors that the national park is getting with the number of visitors who are coming here? Are you aware of any work that anyone else has done on that?

Andrew Bruce Wootton: After the village was excluded from the park originally, the community rallied and put together a working group to consider developing the village as a gateway to the Cairngorms, with the help of Perth and Kinross Council and Scottish Enterprise Tayside. That initiative culminated in a study that was put out to a consultant; however, the study did not look significantly at the difference that inclusion in the park would make to Blair Atholl because, at that stage, inclusion was not an option. The study did, nevertheless, examine the potential opportunity for developing Blair Atholl as a gateway village. I do not have the figures in my head, but the potential was significant. There is a paper on that, which I am sure could be made available to the committee.

At the moment, the local authority is working with the community to put that paper out to private enterprise interests, to see whether that project can go ahead. Obviously, the opportunity for Blair Atholl to be part of the park would make that initiative much stronger. The community has been doing an awful lot since the legislation to reposition itself and to make the best of the situation. Hundreds of hours of community work have gone into that.

The Convener: Professor Brown, do you have anything to add to that?

Professor Brown: No, thank you.

The Convener: I propose to bring the session to an end. Thank you for your strong evidence, which

has been most useful. There will be a short break while the witnesses change over. On the table at the side of the room, there are copies of the maps showing the present boundary and the boundary that is proposed in John Swinney's bill. Members of the public may want to have a look at those.

14:47

Meeting suspended.

14:49

On resuming—

The Convener: Our second panel of witnesses are now before us, so I ask everyone to take their seats again. We will have time for a proper look at the maps when we break for half an hour later on.

I welcome Councillor Sheena Slimon, a community representative; Doreen MacIntyre, the secretary of the Mount Blair community council; Bill Wright, the founding chair of the Perthshire Alliance for the Real Cairngorms; and Dr Kate Adamson, the convener of the association of Cairngorms community councils. We have read the written submissions, so without further ado I ask members to ask questions.

Eleanor Scott: My first question is directed initially to Doreen MacIntyre, but all panel members may wish to respond. Given the location in which this meeting is taking place, we have focused on the Blair Atholl area and the A9 entrance to the park. Can you say something about the issues for the areas further east?

Doreen MacIntyre (Mount Blair Community Council): Mount Blair community council area includes Strathardle and Glen Shee and, therefore, the A93 corridor up to the Glenshee ski area adjacent to Aberdeenshire.

There are a number of issues. Some work that was done last year on whether the A93 could be a gateway to both the national park and royal Deeside confirmed that the eastern side of the Cairngorms national park does not have a strong brand at present. Deeside is known as Deeside. People visit it for a number of reasons, but it offers much the same outdoors sports as those in the Cairngorms that have been discussed hitherto. However, at the moment Deeside is very much Deeside and not the Cairngorms—certainly, that is the case as far as the A9.

A number of businesses have pointed out that, given that the A93 is a natural gateway, the likes of the Spittal of Glenshee—which is basically a hamlet—could be the gateway to that part of the national park. At the moment, the gateway is very much at the watershed at the ski centre. There is an opportunity for the Glen Shee corridor to be

part of the national park, given that the corridor is the natural route from the south into that part of the national park.

Bill Wright (Perthshire Alliance for the Real Cairngorms): I attended the meeting in Mount Blair at which the proposal to move the boundary southwards was discussed. I was very much encouraged by the strength of opinion in favour of such a move. The meeting was attended by the then chair of the Cairngorms National Park Authority, Andrew Thin, who explained what was involved with the national park. In the discussion that the community had afterwards—this is mentioned in Doreen MacIntyre's written evidence—it was clear that people wanted the area to be included in the national park.

Dr Kate Adamson (Association of Cairngorms Community Councils): Moving the boundary in that way would, as far as the communities are concerned, be the natural completion of the park. It has been noted that there is currently a gap in the connections between communities.

Councillor Sheena Slimon: I was the community representative on the Cairngorms Partnership board some years ago. At that time, all these communities were keen to be part of the national park. I do not believe that that has changed over the years.

Rob Gibson: There is a general concern among communities that there might be disadvantages to being part of the national park because housing costs might rise and finding affordable housing might become more difficult. Is there a measurable difference between the cost of housing in upland Perthshire and Glen Shee and the areas that are currently within the national park? Does anyone know of any examples of that? The concern has been raised by community members.

Dr Adamson: I do not have evidence on house prices at the present time, but we are working hard on the issue. The park authority includes the communities on all its various groups. For example, I am the community member on the Cairngorms housing group. The figures are studied continuously, which can only be of advantage to all the communities, as it means that the information will be available at the earliest possible time. We do not currently have information about a rise in house prices. Everyone assumes that such a rise will take place within the national park, but we do not have evidence to suggest that that is happening yet.

Rob Gibson: Having read the park board's document on this subject, I am interested in hearing the panel's thoughts. Do members of the panel believe that the park authority might have a better chance of being able to tackle the issue of

affordable housing than has been possible for the various councils?

Councillor Slimon: Yes. The national park is certainly considering different and interesting ways of tackling the issue of affordable housing. The board has not yet decided on the proposals, but a variety of opportunities and discussions are being considered.

Dr Adamson: Our organisation held a seminar on affordable housing fairly recently, at which we had a very good response from all areas of the communities. We have every intention of following that up, so that the national park authority has the full information available to it when taking decisions.

Rob Gibson: Would it be an advantage to the area that John Swinney proposes adding to be an active participant in those discussions about affordable housing and so on?

Dr Adamson: That would be one advantage. I say to Blair Atholl and Struan community council that the association of Cairngorms community councils has been impressed with how the Cairngorms National Park Authority has involved the communities in its discussions and in the development of the structure plan—the national park plan that is coming. It is intended that the communities will be involved in the structure plan's implementation. That has not happened before. The authority is a best practice flagship, given the direction in which it is going.

Bill Wright: I am in a fairly privileged position, because I live in highland Perthshire, in the community of Birnam in Dunkeld—by the way, nobody suggests that we should move the boundary that far south. I am also director of the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland and I am very much in touch with the views of national outdoor bodies.

National parks are seen as providing an opportunity to implement best practice in relation to socioeconomic and environmental sustainability. If arrangements were put in place to address affordable housing in the national park, they could operate in Blair Atholl, be seen to operate there and spread from there throughout highland Perthshire.

Young people who want to remain in highland Perthshire already have a problem in finding affordable homes. That is an issue for communities in highland Perthshire within and without the national park. Including Blair Atholl in the park would strengthen the link with innovative strategies for addressing the housing problem.

Rob Gibson: So, in a word, there is a crisis in affordable housing in this area and in the park.

Councillor Slimon: Many years ago, the Cairngorms Partnership board found that every community had the same problems: a lack of affordable housing; a lack of good jobs for their youngsters; difficulties in keeping youngsters in villages; and—although this does not apply to Blair Atholl as much as to other communities—a lack of public transport.

15:00

Mr Brocklebank: I return to the possible use of the Spittal of Glenshee as the gateway to the park. Courtesy of Atholl Estates, some of us were given the tremendous opportunity this morning to go to the top of the massif outside here, to look down on the valley and on Blair Atholl and to look across the various glens in the other direction. It became clear that the topography was identical, as we have said, and it was possible to see what I think is the natural logic of making Blair Atholl a gateway. Will you give us a sense of whether the Spittal of Glenshee occupies the same position as Blair Atholl? I have been up that way many times, but I am trying to form a sense of where the mountain range begins. Is the Spittal in a similar situation to Blair Atholl?

Doreen MacIntyre: In terms of the height of the adjacent mountains, the Spittal is similar to Blair Atholl. Obviously, there is a large vale here, whereas the Spittal is much more of a glen or an acute type of valley. The height of the mountains, the general topography and, I am sure, the general ecology at the Spittal are very much congruent with what we have here.

At the meeting convened by Mount Blair community council, there was some debate about where the boundary ought to be. There is some merit in the suggestion that Bridge of Cally could be a gateway. However, the land has much more of a lowland feel there. Although it is more upland than Blairgowrie, which is the next major settlement, if the aim is to keep a degree of congruence in the ecology and geography of the park, the Spittal would be the appropriate place to have a gateway.

Mr Brocklebank: My other question really repeats a question we asked the first panel. We are told that 15 to 18 months from now there will be a review of the boundaries. John Swinney has worked hard with the bill, but is there any reason why the issue could not be handled by Parliament in the new session in 15 months' time, when a review will happen anyway? Is there any particular need to try to rush the bill through at this stage?

Doreen MacIntyre: I thought about that when the question was asked earlier. There are two issues here: the principle and the implementation. The principle is that it would be perfect to establish

as soon as possible that Perth and Kinross has a right to be part of the Cairngorms National Park Authority. The detail—the actual boundary—is more complicated and could be debated at some length. The principle of the issue could be a very straightforward decision. If the principle was in place, our community would like the opportunity to explore further the ideal boundaries in our area. I cannot speak for other areas, but perhaps they would agree.

Mr Brocklebank: Do others have a view? Why should we not just wait another year and get it right?

Bill Wright: The national park authority is an institutional structure. That institution is introducing national park plans and making arrangements for things such as signage. The more strategies and policies we have in place for the management of the national park as it exists and the more time passes, the more policies and strategies we would have to unpick if Perth and Kinross were brought into the institutional structure. It is important to get Perth and Kinross into the family now rather than wait until a different story is drawn up.

The Convener: Dalwhinnie was mentioned earlier. What benefits has the park brought to Dalwhinnie? If Blair Atholl becomes a gateway to the park, what would happen to the possibility that Dalwhinnie could develop as a gateway? There are also questions to do with the boundaries around Dalwhinnie. For example, Ben Alder is not in the park just now. Is there a possibility of extending the boundaries to the west—or the south-west? Perhaps Councillor Slimon has some views on that.

Councillor Slimon: Dalwhinnie has not yet seen any great benefits, or disbenefits, from being within the national park. More housing is being built at the moment, which might be of benefit, although it is open-market housing, rather than affordable housing. We are doing housing surveys, and if there is a need for affordable housing, it will certainly go ahead. Dalwhinnie rather hopes that if it is the first village on entering the park, it will benefit in the long run, but I do not think that it is concerned that Blair Atholl would steal its thunder. Blair Atholl has Bruar, which probably causes more angst in my community than anything else.

Dr Adamson: From our communications with Dalwhinnie, people there are not particularly concerned about the inclusion of Blair Atholl in the park. We have not asked specifically about the issue, but they have not implied any concern.

Peter Peacock: I have a question for Bill Wright and the Perthshire Alliance for the Real Cairngorms. That name rather implies that the Cairngorms have an absolutely logical, clear and

indisputable boundary but, when SNH gave advice to ministers on the national park, it said that three boundaries could be chosen. As John Swinney said, ministers did not choose any of those boundaries but, before he starts on about that again, I point out that that is a slightly separate point. The point is that there are different views about the matter.

The founding legislation, the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000, sets out the purposes of a national park, which were alluded to earlier. The 2000 act states that the purpose of a national park is

“to conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area”—

that is, the area that is chosen. Elsewhere, it mentions the coherence of the natural heritage area.

Other aims that the 2000 act sets out are

“to promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area”

and

“to promote understanding and enjoyment ... of the special qualities of the area”.

I drove down to Blair Atholl this morning from Inverness. If I had just flown in from outer space and was told, as I got beyond Dalwhinnie to the current park boundary, that I was now close to a national park, I would find it difficult to work out why the area on the left-hand side of the road had natural heritage qualities that were such that it deserved to be in the national park and yet the mountains and lochs to the right did not have those qualities. For example, the territory around Ben Alder and Loch Ericht is clearly outstanding and is a major natural heritage asset.

In that context, is it completely logical that the area that John Swinney wants to include in the park, for reasons that have been set out clearly and which many people support, is somehow in need of greater attention, greater natural heritage support and greater protection and interpretation than the area that I described, which is on the right as one comes down the A9 from the north, as I did this morning? Given what the statute says about the purposes of a national park, could we not argue that that area is coherent with the adjacent area that is in the park and perfectly equal in value to the area that John Swinney suggests should be included and that it therefore should get the same degree of protection in future?

Bill Wright: There were a lot of points in that. I begin my answer by saying that you were driving in the wrong direction. Most people who enter the Cairngorms national park approach it from the south. There are two elements. First, there is the principle of an area of “coherent identity”, as

written into the National Parks (Scotland) Act 2000. Secondly, topographically, it is clear that when people turn the corner at Killiecrankie and look up to the right and see a big mountain, Beinn A’Ghlo, they know that they are in a big mountain area.

That brings me to the issue of fine tuning. I accept that some points of detail, about 100yd here or there, need to be addressed and that there will never be a right answer. However, it is important to remember that, if the national park authority calls in a planning application to examine it, the extra care and attention that will be devoted to the application may well spark a site visit. Whether those who decide on a planning application go on a site visit will be determined by where the park boundary is.

You mentioned SNH’s recommendations. It is important to make it clear that SNH’s final recommendation, in its position as reporter, contained one single boundary, not three. Yes, there were points of detail in relation to red bits on that boundary because of the need for fine tuning, but it is important to be clear about the fact that SNH, as the Executive’s appointed reporter, drew up a single boundary. The boundary that John Swinney proposes, by and large, follows that boundary.

Peter Peacock: Let me pursue that a wee bit. I respect your answer, but you did not address the particular point about the left-hand side of the A9 as one drives north, approaching the current park boundary and heading for Dalwhinnie. What is different about the area to the left? Does it not cohere as much as the area to the right? Is it less environmentally in need of support, protection, interpretation or management than the area to the right of the road? I genuinely do not see the natural heritage arguments for the inclusion in the park of the area to the right of the A9 at that point. I understand the argument about place names—why someone might interpret that area to be part of the Cairngorms. However, that is not always the purpose of a park; it is about natural heritage, coherence and so on, as I have described it.

Bill Wright: As you drive north up the A9, your eye will be drawn to the area on the right—to the east of the A9. Environmentally, we are not talking just about natural heritage; we are also talking about landscape. Studies that were undertaken in the past by no less than W H Murray—one of the greatest ever champions of the landscape in Scotland—identified the Atholl area as probably the foremost area for landscape in Scotland. However, Murray did not see the moors to the south-west of the A9 as being of such high standing.

That takes us back to the question of fine tuning, and I would be more than happy to argue the toss

about that. By and large, we are talking about the river Garry being the boundary. Some commentators have said that the skyline to the west of the A9 should be where the boundary runs—as it does in the case of Monadhliath—in order to provide the buffer zone that was discussed earlier. However, as you say, a boundary needs to exist somewhere, and the A9 road and rail corridor is roughly suitable.

Mr Ruskell: I want to ask about boundaries of political representation, as they seem to have had some bearing on the decision concerning where to set the boundary of the park. I am not aware of how many councillors currently represent people within the park boundary. How many councillors sitting on Highland Council represent wards that are within the current park boundary?

Councillor Slimon: There are 10 councillors altogether, five of whom represent the Badenoch and Strathspey area; of the others, one represents Moray Council, three represent Aberdeenshire Council and one represents Angus Council.

Mr Ruskell: How many councillors will represent areas within the park after the boundary reorganisation?

Councillor Slimon: I am sorry, but I cannot say for the other side of the hill. In Badenoch and Strathspey, we will be down to four Highland councillors.

15:15

Mr Ruskell: Can Kate Adamson give me any further clarification on that?

Dr Adamson: Not beyond the comment in our submission, which says:

“We do not foresee any complications in the alteration in the composition of the CNP Board. In the future there will be four Highland Councillors in the Badenoch & Strathspey area, and it would be appropriate to have four places”

on the park board.

Mr Ruskell: Let us look at the situation after May. If John Swinney’s bill is not passed and if there is no fifth space on the park authority board for a representative from Perth and Kinross Council, where will the additional councillor come from if not from Badenoch and Strathspey?

Councillor Slimon: The new area will be Badenoch and Strathspey, Nairn and Inverness. At the moment, we have a Nairn councillor sitting on the national park authority board for Badenoch and Strathspey due to the fact that one of our councillors also stood for direct election. He could not wear two hats; therefore, he opted for his directly elected hat.

Mr Ruskell: So one of the board’s current members does not represent people within the park.

Councillor Slimon: That is correct.

Nora Radcliffe: One of the arguments against extending the boundary is that an increased cost would be incurred. You may have seen the figures that the Executive has provided. What do you think it would cost to incorporate an extra bit of land, including Blair Atholl, into the national park? I am talking about the costs of added staffing, more planning applications and so on.

Bill Wright: Frankly, the costs involved are minimal compared with the benefits of engaging Perth and Kinross Council enthusiastically in the development of the national park authority. Bringing in Perth and Kinross would create an additional measure of support that does not exist at present. I am a long-standing campaigner on landscape in Scotland. When promoting the campaign to include part of Perthshire in the national park, I was encouraged by the fact that Perth and Kinross Council invested a lot of time and effort in dealing with the issue, as it is keen to be involved. Including part of Perthshire in the national park would bring in additional resources and expertise that are currently not part of the family. There will be additional costs, but we are talking about a relatively small number of staff overall. Compared with the several hundreds of thousands of pounds that the national park authority is investing in signage, it is pretty small beer.

Dr Adamson: I support what Bill Wright has said. There is no doubt that there would be a cost to extending the park boundaries, but it can only be of benefit for Perth and Kinross Council to be involved as soon as possible, before the structure plan and the park plan have gone too far. It would be a great advantage to have the council involved sooner, rather than later.

Councillor Slimon: I agree. If extra costs are incurred, the Scottish Executive should come up with the money to cover those. If we want to have a national park, we cannot go halfway with it—it should be the best that it can be. One reason why Blair Atholl was included in the partnership board area was that it provides walking and cycling access to the Cairngorms. The aim was to protect and enhance the environment, which means taking in the glens that lead into the national park. Blair Atholl should be included in the park. That will cost more money, but it is worth it. Joe Public wants it; it is up to the Scottish Executive to ensure that Joe Public gets the best.

Doreen MacIntyre: I have nothing to add to what has been said.

The Convener: Members have no further questions, so we will end this session now. There will be a half-hour break. Coffee is available next door, and there are maps on the table at the side

of the room. I thank the panel for its evidence, which we have found most stimulating. We will reflect on it in due course.

15:20

Meeting suspended.

15:49

On resuming—

The Convener: Before I welcome our next panel of witnesses, I should say that Richard Lochhead has had to leave us because he has constituency engagements to attend.

I welcome Beryl Leatherland, who is vice-president of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland and chair of its access and conservation committee; Dave Morris, who is director of the Ramblers Association Scotland; Nigel Hawkins, who is director of the John Muir Trust; and Dr Iain Robertson, who is director of the Cairngorms Campaign. As with the earlier panellists, we have had a chance to see the witnesses' written submissions, so I invite members to indicate whether they wish to ask any questions.

Rob Gibson: Earlier, I was talking about the coherence of the area. We are talking about the Cairngorms being a larger area than what is inside the existing boundaries of the Cairngorms national park. Does the Atholl area link directly into the massif? Would it be natural to include the southern glens?

Beryl Leatherland (Mountaineering Council of Scotland): The Atholl area contributes to the coherent whole of the Cairngorm massif. If we consider the paths and routes that historically come from this area, Blair Atholl is the hub. If someone is standing on one of the mountains in the main massif, whether it is Cairngorm, Ben Macdui, Cairn Toul or Braeriach, on a good day they can see the Atholl hills and how they all contribute to the overall landscape character and integrity of the area. We have to remember that this area is not just of national importance; it is internationally renowned. People come from all over the world to see the Cairngorms, the northern corries and the glens, and the Atholl hills contribute to that.

Dave Morris (Ramblers Association Scotland): It is extremely important to encompass the southern areas because they contain some of the most remote land in the United Kingdom. Over more than 40 years, every authoritative report that has been written about the area has included the land down to the Blair Atholl area. In particular, the 1967 Cairngorms area report that was produced by the Scottish development department contains maps showing that the area of land at the head of

the rivers Feshie and Tilt was the most remote land in the UK. So today we are faced with an absurd boundary. The idea that the boundary should cut through the middle of one of the finest parts of UK heritage has to be corrected as soon as possible.

Dr Iain Robertson (Cairngorms Campaign): I underline what has been said. The area that we are speaking about is a coherent part of the Cairngorms in geographical and similar terms. However, we also have to preserve remoteness and the area that we are speaking about is equally remote. We have to preserve land that has the minimum of intrusion. That is a very important part of the debate.

Nigel Hawkins (John Muir Trust): There is an important point that has not come out fully. We should consider this issue in the context of national parks internationally. My organisation takes its name from John Muir, who was the father of national parks. In other countries, national parks have a definite integrity; they are not politically decided but define themselves by the areas that they cover. For example, the areas of national parks in North America, including those in which John Muir was involved, are clearly defined. I argue that the Cairngorms, too, are clearly defined. I listened to Mr Peacock talking earlier about going up and down the A9 and what is on the left and on the right, but the fact is that the Cairngorms are on one side and not on the other.

When visitors come to Scotland to see what is our first and biggest national park, they are struck by the fact that there is a big hole in it; a significant part is missing. When we take people up on to these hills—I believe that some of the committee members were on the hills this morning—they can see the unity of it all and the integrity with which it all sits together. When we take people who know other national parks on to our hills and say, "That bit is in the Cairngorms national park, but that other bit over there is not," they ask why not, because they think that it should be included. They look at maps and wonder why some parts are missing when the area is clearly defined and everyone recognises it as being the Cairngorms. I urge the committee to think of the park in those international terms.

National parks are very important to us here in Scotland. John Muir was a famous Scot who was the pathfinder for conservation and the father of national parks. We need to honour what he stood for by ensuring that our national parks stand up to international scrutiny.

Rob Gibson: There has been some discussion about buffer zones, but it seems to me from what has been said that the areas that reach down towards Blair Atholl are an integral part of the whole rather than a buffer zone.

Dave Morris: That is correct. In addition, in the discussions that have taken place on world heritage site designation for the Cairngorms, it has become clear that the river systems that drain the southern slopes of the Cairngorms down towards the Blair Atholl area are some of the most unmodified river systems in Scotland. Many of our other river systems have been modified by hydroelectric schemes and so on. The river systems are an important and integral part of the value of the area.

The Convener: Are there any other areas—perhaps in the north, the east or the west—that were not included within the national park's boundaries that the panel believes should have been included?

Dave Morris: Yes. A mistake was made when the Dulnain native pinewood near Carrbridge was excluded from the park. Rather strangely, Scottish Natural Heritage recommended that the area should not be included, but it was included in the Scottish Executive's draft order. However, that seems to have been forgotten about when the final boundary was drawn. That is one of the more minor modifications that needs to be made.

We need a new designation order and we would like the Scottish Executive to commit to introducing one right away. The primary objective should be to bring the boundary down towards Blair Atholl but, as Mr Peacock mentioned, there is a case for asking whether the park should also include the Drumochter hills, which are immediately to the left of the A9 as you go north. In addition, the park should include the Dulnain native pinewood and there may be a need for one or two other minor modifications as well.

Eleanor Scott: You have partly answered the question that I wanted to ask. You accept that the existing boundary is wrong. Has the bill got it right?

Dave Morris: I think that the bill has got it 80 per cent right. There is such strong unanimous opinion on the issue among all sectors of society that we hope that this will be the day when the politicians say, "Okay, we have got to change tack and sort this issue out."

We need to remember the context. When the process began four years ago, there was a question mark over whether the proposed area would be too big. At that time, the Scottish Executive had a case when it suggested that the area would be too difficult to manage. Four years later, the park has proved itself to be very effective and its board and staff have done an extremely good job. There is now a great deal more confidence in the ability of the park to deliver what is required under the legislation, so the doubts that existed at the beginning have evaporated. The fact

that the committee has heard virtually no opposition from local communities or national interest groups today shows that the park has done a good job. We should correct the problem as soon as possible and move on together.

16:00

Nigel Hawkins: Boundaries are always tricky things to draw in detail. However, as I pointed out earlier, the Cairngorms are perceived as a massif. Mr Swinney's bill would address that issue of principle. There is currently a big hole in the Cairngorms national park. The bill would fill that hole by ensuring that the area that is covered by the national park covers all the Cairngorms. That is a critical point.

In some ways, boundaries are porous. In partnership with the John Muir Trust, the Cairngorms National Park Authority is involved in the John Muir award, which is the first educational initiative that has been adopted by the park authority. The award, which is an exciting and innovative personal challenge that encourages people to take an interest in the environment, places a great emphasis on including people from socially excluded backgrounds. A manager in the national park works on the award, but it is also available to people outwith the park's boundaries. As far as that award is concerned, the park's boundaries are porous. We need to consider the bigger picture. Communities all round the park—including communities here in Perthshire—have taken part in that award. That aspect needs to be considered.

My main point, however, is the principle about how people see the Cairngorms. The park is not the north Cairngorms national park but the Cairngorms national park. We need to consider the issue in international terms. The Cairngorms are an extremely fine, wonderful area of wild beautiful landscape that is very important in international terms. The way in which we present the area is very important for the future of Scotland.

Beryl Leatherland: I must emphasise and endorse what Nigel Hawkins said. The mountains are iconic and are particularly unique in terms of their fauna, flora and landscape, as we have all said in our submissions.

A lot has already been said about where we think that the southern boundary should be. It is important that we get that right. I think that the southern boundary has to be to the south of the high ground. If you travel north along the trunk road from this village, you will see a change in the landscape when you pass Bruar—it becomes more wild and moorland-like as you rise to the high ground at Drumochter. Those of you who

drove down here today from the north will have noticed the change in the climate and the weather, which is totally different in the two places. The southern boundary has to be this side of the pass. If the southern boundary is in the vicinity of Dalwhinnie, it would be well within the park and visitors would have missed the opportunity to gain an interpretative experience in a gateway settlement. The same happens on the other side of the Cairngorms, down at the Spittal of Glenshee. When you drive through the Spittal, you ascend the ski road and the climate and landscape change—your perception of the landscape becomes totally different.

After tough days up on the Cairngorms, when I have been battered by blizzards and the ice has been dreadful and I want to get home and have a warm bath and something nice to eat and drink, there is always a feeling of calm when I come down the bit of road to the north of us. There is a bit of scrubby woodland that always makes me think, "Ah, I'm getting home now. It's going to be warm and easy." I appreciate that I have left the wild and remote landscape behind and am getting back to human settlement. That is where the transition is—just up the road from here.

Dr Robertson: You asked whether Mr Swinney's bill had addressed the problem. I would disagree with Dave Morris and say that it is more than 90 per cent right. It needs a bit of adjusting around the edges, perhaps, but essentially it is right.

Peter Peacock: I want to pursue the boundary issue further. To Nigel Hawkins, I say that, when I drove into the Yosemite park from the east a few years ago, I thought to myself, "Why on earth wasn't the boundary several miles further back." Equally, last summer, coming down over Dava moor towards Duthil—which might be the area that Dave Morris was talking about—passing through the beautiful moorland around Lochindorb and seeing the remnants of the Caledonian pine forest, I suddenly hit the boundary of the national park and thought, "Why on earth is the boundary here?"

The evidence from the Mountaineering Council of Scotland talks about

"The many summits loosely referred to as the Cairngorms",

which rather implies that those summits are not quite the Cairngorms but make up a loose definition of the Cairngorms. It also mentions the Cairngorms and "their surrounding hills". Dave Morris has said that he would be quite happy for a wider review to consider inclusion of the Drumochter hills in the Cairngorms national park—for reasons of protection and so on—even though some people would argue that they do not form part of the Cairngorms. Is the truth of the matter not that there is no perfect boundary and that it is

simply not possible to find the right boundary for the park concept? Perhaps it would be much more appropriate to have porous boundaries, which would enable us to have policies that flowed through from the park, to help with the creation of a buffer zone or the protection of a particular area. I would be interested in hearing your comments on that notion.

When you spoke about the area to the north of the park, you said that you reckoned that an error had been made. What do you think about including Dava moor in the park? I recognise that there is an argument for moving the park boundary slightly further north. In addition, there is an argument for considering not just the area that John Swinney is talking about, but the area to the south-west of the current boundary. However, given that John Swinney's bill restricts what we as a parliamentary committee can consider to the southern boundary, would it not be better to wait 18 months until we get the comprehensive review of the entire park boundary so that we can examine the issue comprehensively?

Dave Morris: The problem is that the present boundary is so bad. I accept that it is difficult to be absolutely definitive about where a boundary should be—there will always be anomalies. However, everyone was shocked by the boundary that the Government decided on four years ago, which is grotesquely out of place. That is why we need to move forward in the way that I have suggested.

If Dava moor were included in the park, it could be argued that we could go on adding areas until we arrived at the Moray firth, but rather than a national park boundary to protect it, Dava moor needs a change in Government policy on wind farm development. The financial incentive for giant wind farm developments should be stripped away; that is what would protect Dava moor. There are other instruments that can be used to protect the countryside.

As regards the quinquennial review, as other witnesses have said the main problem is that, as every month goes by, the situation gets worse. The national park authority is involved in the production of the national park plan and investment decisions are being taken. There was the absurd business of the road sign, whereby the roads authority refused to allow the word "Cairngorms" to be used. Everyone is wasting large sums of money. Officials from Perth and Kinross Council, voluntary bodies and all the people in this room are having to spend a great deal of time trying to get the problem sorted out. We are saying that instead of waiting for the quinquennial review—a process that will last two or three years—to start, the politicians should act now. If we wait for the review, we might solve our

problem in 10 years' time. Ministers should instruct officials in the Scottish Executive to start work on a new boundary within the next few weeks. There is no doubt at all that that is what is necessary. *[Interruption.]*

The Convener: I am sorry, but I must ask the audience not to applaud—or to hiss or boo—during the committee's meeting.

Peter Peacock: As well as hearing what other witnesses think, I would like to know what Dave Morris thinks about the porous boundary concept, which is that when it gets too difficult to adopt a hard boundary, a broader approach should be taken.

Dave Morris: The difficulty with that is that it is extremely difficult to relate policies to a porous boundary. As you will know well, with planning policy it matters a great deal whether one is to the left or to the right of a boundary. Agricultural or forestry funding requires the drawing of boundaries.

One of the arguments that we advanced—and which I think SNH accepted—is that with the changes in common agricultural policy funding, in particular, being in the national park would offer great advantages because, over the years, agricultural funding would gradually move towards supporting those farmers who were in it. They would get more ticks in more boxes. At the end of the day, farmers cannot make a case on the basis of a porous boundary; either they fall within the park or they do not. A firm decision has to be made on a particular line.

Nigel Hawkins: My point about porous boundaries was not that the boundaries should not be well defined but that a lot of the activity that relates to the national park can spread out from it. That is important. When national parks were being discussed many years ago, the John Muir Trust suggested that the whole of the Highlands and Islands should be a national park because of the boundary issue. Having said that, we can use well-defined areas—that is, areas that define themselves. The Cairngorms define themselves as a definite area and there is no doubt that there is a big hole in the national park at the moment.

It has been suggested that the issue could be addressed in the five-yearly review. I may be wrong, but I thought that that was to be a governance review, which would examine the working of the national park authority rather than key issues such as the boundary. If the park has the wrong boundary now, it should not be left to a review that may or may not pick up on the subject. Action should be taken now to ensure the unity and integrity of the Cairngorms national park.

Dr Robertson: Mr Peacock asked whether we could ever come to a decision on the boundary.

The boundary and extent of the park may have come above the political horizon only recently but, in fact, they have been discussed for many years—Bill Murray has been mentioned. The matter has been discussed for as long as I can remember, and the consensus that has come out of those long years of discussion is that the southern boundary should be the one that SNH came out in favour of, which is more or less what Mr Swinney proposes in his bill. That is not a recent decision; many people have thought long and hard about it, and that was the consensus to which they came.

Beryl Leatherland: I can only agree with what my fellow panel members have said—as Dave Morris said, for once the Mountaineering Council of Scotland is in agreement with the Ramblers Association. Although the review is presumably only 18 months away, we do not know how long it will take. It might take a very long time and the boundaries might not be its main focus anyway. Therefore, we must address the matter now, while Mr Swinney's bill is live.

As far as the idea of a diffuse boundary is concerned, it has been agreed that there will be a national park and there must be a boundary for all the obvious administrative reasons. However, we appreciate that that has a knock-on effect on communities, landscapes and agricultural areas that are outside the boundary.

Peter Peacock: I have one other question, which switches tack slightly and picks up on what Dave Morris said about world heritage site status. He argued that John Swinney's proposal is required to support the argument for that status. Perhaps the other witnesses agree with him—I do not know—but SNH, which will give evidence shortly, indicates in its submission that that is not the case. I ask Dave Morris to address that.

Dave Morris: I disagree strongly with SNH's written evidence. I have been involved in discussions about the world heritage convention since 1980. I used to work in Aviemore for the Nature Conservancy Council and am aware of all the criteria that emanate from the convention.

When the committee reads SNH's written evidence, it needs to realise that an important change occurred during the 1990s, when the UK Government changed the basis of the submission for world heritage site status for the Cairngorms from its value as a natural site to purely geological criteria. I was involved in the matter because I represented Scottish Environment LINK on the UK committee of ICUN—the World Conservation Union, which dealt with the submission. We were extremely annoyed that a consultation took place on the sites in England and Wales but the Scottish Office carried out no consultation in Scotland.

I would like the Parliament and the Scottish Executive to revisit that matter and examine what the situation should be with regard to the Cairngorms. Our argument is that, to satisfy the criteria for world heritage site status, the area should be big. I have walked across the Cairngorms with a world heritage site assessor and in 2003 I talked about the situation at the world parks congress in Durban, in South Africa. We are convinced that a good case can be made for the whole area to be put forward for world heritage status as a natural and cultural site. We have to remember that a managed grouse moor is a unique landscape in world terms. A strong case can be made for its inclusion in a world heritage status bid alongside the geological features, the native pinewoods and so on.

16:15

Beryl Leatherland: I think that the previous panel mentioned that the Cairngorms national park plan has been consulted on and, presumably, will be finalised shortly. It seems sensible, therefore, to include the extension now rather than later so that local plans can be amended to take account of that. To do that now would be far less costly financially, in terms of labour and consultation time.

Many of us feel very strongly about the fact that we have never had an explanation of why the original SNH recommendations were not accepted fully. SNH underwent the proper procedure, consulted and reviewed and had expert scientists and employees working on the recommendations, so it seems strange that its advice was not taken. It would be nice to have some explanation of all that.

Perhaps one should not comment on another body's submission when one is a witness, but SNH's submission should have included some history of previous consultations and the foundations of deliberations. I found it quite unsatisfying.

The Convener: Mark Ruskell has a question.

Mr Ruskell: No, it is okay—Peter Peacock stole my question.

Mr Brocklebank: I want to play devil's advocate for a minute. We have heard how the Cairngorms are an iconic group of hills. We have heard that as we travel north and look right, we see that iconic group and if we look left, the topography is perhaps not of the same standard. However, as we look at the map at the moment, a huge section of the current national park is on the left-hand side—to the west—of the road. Although we are talking about the southern boundary today, the question that almost begs to be asked is where the relevant western boundary should be.

Obviously, we are not going to pull that boundary back to the A9, but is the existing western boundary correct or should it go further west and include the topography in that area? That would take in a larger chunk of landscape and might satisfy some of the aspirations about which we heard from Peter Peacock and others.

Beryl Leatherland: The area on the right-hand side of the A9 as we drive north has the particular qualities of remoteness that have been mentioned. If we have to cross the road to experience the other side, we lose some of those qualities. We also have to think about accessing those hills from further west. For example, one can access Ben Alder better from the western side than from the east, although many people visit that mountain and its satellite mountains from this side of the country.

Mr Brocklebank: All that land to the west is already in the park, so should that be the natural western boundary?

Beryl Leatherland: In that area, Ben Udlamain and all its satellites are fine hills. When one drives up the A9, the eye is drawn more to the western side of the road than the eastern, but that is just because of the particular topography at that point.

Nigel Hawkins: Can I come in on that? It is an interesting question. I feel that scale is an important part of this and that it is better to err on the side of the park being too big rather than too small. We could have discussions about this bit or that bit, but I am arguing—as are most of the panel—that the southern part should definitely be part of the park. Even if there are parts whose inclusion in the park could be debated, the point is that scale matters in national parks and we could almost say that the bigger they are, the better it is for them.

I made the point that the John Muir Trust thinks that the whole of the Highlands and Islands should be a national park because of the issue of where the boundaries are drawn. However, if there is to be a national park on a smaller scale, the Cairngorms can definitely be defined. As I say, they define themselves. The logic is to have the national park boundary following the area that defines itself.

Dr Robertson: We must argue consistently. I have no particular objection to the park boundary being moved further west but, if it is moved further west, the park will have to be called the Cairngorms and Laggan national park. We must concentrate on what the Cairngorms amount to.

Dave Morris: We should not get into arguments about the fine detail. If the Executive said tomorrow that it would draw up a designation order exactly along the lines of John Swinney's bill, I would be happy about that. Equally, if the

Executive decided to bend the boundary a bit away from the River Garry and up along the watershed over the Drumochter hills, I would be happy. We should not start arguing about little bits here and there. The fundamental point is to get the boundary down as far as Blair Atholl.

The Convener: There are no further questions, so I thank our witnesses for their evidence. As always, it has been extremely useful. We will reflect on it in due course. There will be a short suspension while the witnesses change over.

16:22

Meeting suspended.

16:23

On resuming—

The Convener: Our final panel comprises representatives of some of the public agencies that have a stake in the issue. I welcome Peter Rawcliffe, who is the national strategy manager at Scottish Natural Heritage; Roland Bean, who is the head of sustainable planning at Perth and Kinross Council; John Rennilson, who is the director of planning and development at Highland Council; and Jane Hope, who is the chief executive of the Cairngorms National Park Authority. We have received written submissions from the panel members, which committee members have had the chance to read. I invite members to ask questions.

Eleanor Scott: I would like to tease out a bit of the history that has been referred to. My question is primarily for SNH, but is perhaps also for Highland Council. What is your understanding of the reasons why the existing park boundary was arrived at?

Peter Rawcliffe (Scottish Natural Heritage): Our understanding, like everyone's, is based on what was said on the public record, what the ministers announced when the draft designation order was laid and what ministers subsequently said in evidence to the committee. The reasons were to do with size and there being discomfort at that time about the creation of a large park. Although it was to cover a smaller area than was suggested by SNH, it was the largest proposed park in the UK. There were also concerns about the operation of planning powers within the park. It is debatable whether those are still strong arguments.

The Convener: Does anybody else know where the bodies are buried?

John Rennilson (Highland Council): When the park was being established, Highland Council did not comment about boundaries outwith our area

and we will not do so today. I simply make the point that, in Highland Council's opinion, the decision whether to change the boundary should be made as part of a reasoned debate that covers all possible areas. I have submitted to the committee a plan that shows a number of areas—not just the area that we are in today—over which there is a difference of opinion between Scottish ministers—and, eventually, Parliament, in the designation order—and SNH. Our view is that the discussion on boundaries should take place as part of the quinquennial review and may include areas that are outside even the proposal that was made by SNH two or three years ago.

Eleanor Scott: Your map makes it clear that the largest area by far—the only really huge area that is involved—is the bit that we are talking about, which John Swinney's bill concerns. I do not want to push you too hard on the matter. If you say that Highland Council did not make a submission, that is fair enough. However, Highland Council has something to lose, because its representation on the board might be affected. Has Highland Council ever not wanted another council to be involved?

John Rennilson: No. We were consistent from 2000 to 2003 in making no comment on boundaries outside our area. Our area includes more than 70 per cent of the population of the park as it is—in the park as it is envisaged in Mr Swinney's bill, we would have 66-plus per cent of the population. Given that, our view on representation has been and is that it is not unreasonable that Highland Council should have the right to nominate at least half of the 10 board members who are local authority nominees. However, that is not part of our reason for being here today. Our reasoning is that the issue should be part of a considered review.

Mr Ruskell: I am trying to get my head round the costs of the different options. One option is to make no change—after John Swinney's bill and after the quinquennial review, we would go on as we are. The second option is to pass John Swinney's bill and to make changes now. The third option is to wait until the five-year review has been undertaken and to make changes then. What costs are associated with the two options for change? Would it be cheaper to wait for the five-year review and more expensive to make changes now, or would it be the other way round?

Roland Bean (Perth and Kinross Council): I am not sure whether there would be much in it. As previous witnesses have argued, there is probably merit in making changes now to prevent abortive costs. For example, it would be better not to move the large boundary signs, which are costing several hundred thousand pounds. It would be better to act sooner rather than later in order to reduce such costs. It has also been argued that,

given where the authority is in developing its national park plan and its local plan, it would not be so good to make changes later, when policies and projects have been implemented.

Mr Ruskell: Do you have any idea of the magnitude of the costs? Are we talking about £50,000 or £100,000? What is the difference between leaving the boundaries and changing them now?

Roland Bean: Perhaps Jane Hope could answer better on project costs. As for the effect of leaving or changing the boundaries now, in respect of costs of items such as boundary signs, my concern is that no commitment has been given to consider boundaries in the quinquennial review. Mr Finnie's letter quotes what the First Minister said in 2004, which was:

"I hope that that issue will be considered".

That is all he said. I re-emphasise that no commitment has been given to consider boundaries as part of the quinquennial review.

16:30

Mr Ruskell: I am interested in hearing other views on current costs.

Jane Hope (Cairngorms National Park Authority): I will give some figures. In my submission, I drew a distinction between recurring costs and one-off costs. As Roland Bean said, recurring costs would be incurred anyway. I reckon that they would be about £100,000 a year, which would come from extra travel costs, extra running costs, some additional staff needs and the costs that would arise—rightly—from the expectation that the programmes and projects that the park authority and its partners would run would cover a bigger area. Such costs would be incurred whenever a change was made.

We are left with the one-off costs that would result from a change. Such costs would arise from the national park plan, which Roland Bean mentioned. The plan, covering the park as it exists, has just been submitted to the minister; it has not been approved yet, but I like to think that it might be soon. We would need to return to that plan to ensure that it covered the bigger area. Similarly, we hope to put the local plan, which will cover the whole park area, on deposit by June. We are in the middle of a core paths planning process at the moment. Those works would need to be halted. Even if we were to stop now, we would not save all the costs because we would still have to go back to the national park plan and hold another consultation. The cost will be incurred anyway. We are quite far down the road with many such things.

Mr Ruskell: If a change were made after the five-year review, what would it cost to shift the signage that has been erected to Blair Atholl or wherever?

Jane Hope: The only signs that would be affected are the big granite markers on the relevant roads. Clearly, all the other granite markers around the rest of the park would not be affected. Our estimate is that there would be about £75,000 at issue in respect of those signs. If the major sign on the A9 had to be moved, that would be a substantial fraction of the total, but we are not talking about hundreds of thousands.

Nora Radcliffe: If we accept, hypothetically, that the boundary will change either now as a result of John Swinney's bill or later as a result of the quinquennial review, would it be preferable to revisit at this point all that you are doing now or to revisit when you are further ahead? If the boundary were to change, would it be better to start making all the changes and recasting matters now than it would be to do so much further down the line?

Jane Hope: That is a difficult point to argue. We are doing many things for the first time and we are learning all the time. After three and a half years, we have completed the first national park plan, which feels like quite an achievement. I hasten to add that not just the park authority but all our partners have been involved in that. The achievement has resulted from bringing all the partners together in the plan, which is a plan for delivery over the next five years around a vision for the next 25 years. Having got to this stage, it would be a bit dispiriting for some people if we had to go back and do it all again before we had learned the lessons from having had the plan in place for a little while. I cannot put a sum of money on that.

Nora Radcliffe: I am not talking about the money, but about the practicalities.

Jane Hope: It would be helpful if we could see how well the first national park plan and the local plan will pan out in practice. The national park plan is completely new.

Nora Radcliffe: You seem to be saying that if we do not move the boundary now, it would not be sensible to do so for at least another five years.

Jane Hope: Yes—for a few years at least.

John Rennilson: I endorse what Jane Hope said. The park has come on a remarkable amount in just over three years. The local authority and many other stakeholders have been brought together during production of the present round of plans—the park plan and the local plan. It is important that they be taken to fruition to provide a sound basis for the park going forward for the next

five years and beyond. To disrupt that process at this stage would not help anyone.

Mr Swinney: I want to pursue that point, which arose from Nora Radcliffe's question. I take it from Jane Hope's answer that if it is not right to move the boundary now, it might be some years before it is right to do so. "A few years" was not the answer that I thought was coming, given all the caveats that Jane Hope gave about the amount of disruption and turmoil and her point that we would have to go back to the beginning, although I find it rather hard to understand why that would be the case. "A few years" seems to be an underestimate given your perspective on when will be the right time to review the matter. Will you comment further on that?

Jane Hope: I am sorry if I seemed to be a bit inconsistent. I was not trying to say that it would be such a huge job that it would require us to go back to the beginning. I am talking about a psychological issue: having set up the park and got the first national park plan in place, we would not be able to implement it. It could not be approved because we would have to go through the statutory consultation process again, which would be a bit dispiriting.

Mr Swinney: You are not saying that you would have to go back to the beginning of the process.

Jane Hope: We would not have to go back to the beginning. We have the basis in place, but we are nevertheless required to go through a statutory process, which takes time and money. We could not simply say, "We've added a bit more to the park, so we will just talk to people in Perth and Kinross Council area and tweak the plan a bit." Quite a bit more process would have to be gone through.

Mr Swinney: I want to explore that issue, because it gets to the nub of the difficulty that I have with understanding the cost estimates for the bill that the national park authority has provided. The draft national park plan that has been submitted to ministers strikes me—unsurprisingly—as being a document that creates, in effect, a policy framework for the whole national park area, which is exactly the right approach. I therefore cannot understand why it is not possible to discuss that overall framework—which I assume has been discussed and signed up to by a multiplicity of partners—in relation to the area of Perth and Kinross that would come into the park. Obviously, those discussions would be principally with the local authority, although other players would be involved. Why would you need to shred the framework of the national park plan, which is a set of generic general policies, and go back to the beginning to start the process again?

Jane Hope: I do not think that I said that the national park plan would have to be shredded.

Mr Swinney: It sounded pretty close to that.

The Convener: Roland Bean may want to comment.

Mr Swinney: I would like an answer from Jane Hope. I am genuinely trying to understand the scale of the task. I have read the draft national park plan, which strikes me as being just a generic set of policies for the whole park. I am not surprised by that—it is exactly as it should be—but I do not understand Jane Hope's comments on the scale of the task that would be involved in perhaps not shredding but unpicking the contents of what is a generic and general plan.

Jane Hope: The plan is, in essence, a partnership document, so it is not for the park authority simply to redraft it. There would be a new set of partners with whom to interact and all the partners who have to date been engaged in putting the plan together would need to be content that the framework was still right, given that it would cover a bigger area. We would not have to go completely back to the beginning. We could use the framework that we have but, equally, we would have to go through quite a bit of process to ensure that all the partners—I emphasise that the plan is a partnership document—were content with it. It has taken us three years to get to the present situation. It would not take another three years to create a national park plan to cover the bigger area, but it would take a substantial time. My point is that the process involves partnership working.

The Convener: I will let Roland Bean comment. I am not sure whether Mark Ruskell has finished his line of questioning—we seem to have strayed from it. I ask him whether he is content for other members to come in.

Mr Ruskell: Yes—although I may want to say more later.

Roland Bean: Jane Hope said that all plans

"would need to be halted",

but I do not believe that that is the case. I support John Swinney's view that the national park plan is basically a statement of objectives and policies. Those policies—whether they are on recreation, land or deer management—will in large measure be applicable equally to the southern and northern Cairngorms. I accept that there would be some delay because procedures would have to be followed again; for example, there would be further consultation and resubmission of the plan to ministers. However, the principles and main policies in the national park plan could be rolled out to cover much of the area.

Peter Peacock: I am slightly confused. I accept what Jane Hope said about there being no need to shred the plan and I accept that it would be possible to incorporate everything that is in the current plan into a new plan, as Roland Bean said. In that sense, no more work would be required. However, people would be required to go back to the beginning of the statutory process. Is that correct?

Jane Hope: Yes.

Peter Peacock: You would have to go back to the first stage of the statutory process, but you could then roll into that process much of the work that has been done.

Jane Hope: That is exactly right, so the statutory process might be much quicker. However, we are where we are and a plan is currently before the minister. We would have to withdraw that plan and go through the process again, incurring all the costs to do with printing and consultation and so on.

John Rennilson: We should not lose sight of the fact that the local plan, under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, takes over from three structure plans and four local plans. The Badenoch and Strathspey local plan, for example, is quite old, so having a single set of planning policies for the national park in its current area is a big step forward. Plans are being prepared under the 1997 act, but if we had to start from the beginning again, plans would have to take account of the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006, which Parliament passed in November. Quite a lot of unpicking would be required and the new, local development plan approach, which is in the 2006 act, would be adopted.

The Convener: The question is whether that would be a good thing.

John Rennilson: Statutory stages must be followed, even under the new legislation, which provides for a simplified approach—

The Convener: Some clarification is required.

Eleanor Scott: Can John Rennilson explain which stages are statutory?

John Rennilson: There must be pre-consultation, a draft plan must be deposited, there is potentially a public inquiry and post-inquiry modification—

Eleanor Scott: For the Cairngorms plan?

John Rennilson: I am talking about the local plan, not the national park plan. The park local plan comes under the 1997 act and follows the procedures that are set down in that act.

Eleanor Scott: I am sorry, but that was not clear to me. What are the statutory stages in the

adoption of the Cairngorms national park plan? Jane Hope said that we would have to go through them again, so I want to be clear about what they are.

Jane Hope: We are required to consult all interested parties and to report on the consultation before we submit a plan to ministers for approval.

Eleanor Scott: If the park's boundaries were extended, could new stakeholders be consulted by being presented with the plan that had already been agreed, in order to ascertain whether they were okay with it?

16:45

Jane Hope: Of course. I think that that was what John Swinney meant when he said that there is surely a framework there. I accept that, but equally, if we are to have meaningful consultation, we should not just take something and be seen to enforce it on the recipients. There are some quite interesting policies in the national park plan regarding issues such as housing. I am sure that there will be a lot of views from the partners in the increased park area. Although I would like to think that what is in the national park plan is sensible, if we are to have a genuine consultation we must expect people to have views and expect to have to modify what is in the plan.

Eleanor Scott: What is the duration of that plan?

Jane Hope: The statute says that it must be reviewed every five years.

Eleanor Scott: So people will be signing up to something for five years and then—

Jane Hope: There is a 25-year vision and a five-year action plan. Every five years, the action plan will be reviewed.

The Convener: Mark Ruskell, do you still want to ask a follow-up question to your original question?

Mr Ruskell: Yes. I am trying to get my head around what the real cost might be between now and the five-year review. I am interested in what you are saying about the additional costs of the park's covering a larger area. I wonder whether Roland Bean can tell us about his experience of working in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park, in which the council is a minor player. Are there economies of scale in working over a larger area with multiple authorities, or are there real costs to involving multiple partners?

Roland Bean: There are synergies in working in partnership. There are benefits to it in that sense.

Mr Ruskell: Can you give me some examples?

Roland Bean: The sharing of expertise and different understandings. I do not think that extending the park into this part of Perthshire would cause significant extra costs. As my written submission says, there are on average 16 planning applications a year in the Blair Atholl area across to Glen Shee, of which on average only one a year is not delegated to officers. Applying that principle, there might be one important application a year—one extra application that the national park authority might wish to call in. I suggest that that is minimal.

The financial memorandum to the bill speaks about the impacts on ranger services. As we have heard from Andrew Bruce Wootton, the ranger service in Atholl is delivered by grant from SNH through Atholl Estates. One assumes that that would continue. A marginal amount of additional co-ordination may be needed with the other ranger services in the national park, but I see that as being very minor.

Those planning and access issues are likely to be the most costly. It seems to me that the costs of any other issues, such as some of the land management initiatives that we have discussed, would be even more marginal.

Mr Ruskell: Is the council gearing up to revisit the statutory planning processes that we have just heard about, and working with the board on community consultation and other things?

Roland Bean: Perth and Kinross Council is unanimous in its support for including this area in the national park. I give a commitment on behalf of the council that it would wish to work with the national park authority in the preparation of the national park plan and in the review and transfer of planning functions.

In the short term, the highland area local plan and the eastern area local plan would become the statutory planning documents for Blair Atholl and Glen Shee respectively. However, as John Rennilson said, within the next two years, councils will have to start reviewing all their local plans to create local development plans under the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006. An enlarged national park authority would then deal with the new local development plan for the national park. From that point of view, I think that the timescale is quite good.

The Convener: Rob Gibson has been very patient.

Rob Gibson: I have indeed.

The evidence from John Rennilson is interesting: he does not talk about anything other than Highland Council. He says in his submission:

"The Council is further concerned that there is a lack of connectivity between the land (and landscape quality) it is

proposed should be added to the Park and the Cairngorm massif, which is the focus of the Park."

Is that not a comment about the area that is being proposed?

John Rennilson: Eleanor Scott asked me whether Highland Council knew why the Scottish ministers did not pursue SNH's proposal to include the Perth and Kinross, or Blair Atholl, area in the park. I said that we had not expressed any opinion and that I had no inside knowledge of why ministers dropped the proposal. You are right to say that, in our evidence, we have certain question marks. We take the view that there are other areas that also need to be considered as part of an overall, rational review of boundaries. The plan that I have submitted this afternoon shows areas that were previously thought worthy by SNH of inclusion and that, as well as this area, should come back into the mix.

Rob Gibson: Of course, if ministers had designated Blair Atholl in the park, you would not be making your argument now.

John Rennilson: Indeed not.

Rob Gibson: We discussed the massif earlier. The area that we might call the south Cairngorms is viewed by most people as being as much a part of the massif as the northern Cairngorms. Do you agree?

John Rennilson: There are differing opinions, but the majority opinion seems to be that it is worthy of consideration for inclusion.

Rob Gibson: Is Highland Council's argument, which is encapsulated in its submission, less to do with landscape than with economic activity?

John Rennilson: We have expressed an opinion in our evidence in relation to economic activity in Dalwhinnie.

Rob Gibson: I suppose we could say that that is part of Badenoch. Might the massif include Dalwhinnie anyway?

John Rennilson: The park includes Dalwhinnie.

Rob Gibson: It does, but the massif you are talking about is the bit around Glenmore and a little to the south of it. That is all.

John Rennilson: Mr Peacock referred to one of SNH's early consultation documents when he questioned previous witnesses. SNH's original view was that three areas—option A, option B and option C, which get progressively larger—should be considered for inclusion in the park. Option A, which I think was supported by everyone, was the core area.

Rob Gibson: But we are talking about the enlargement of the park to allow more sustainable and cohesive management. In your view, the park

should retain only the smaller part of the Cairngorm massif.

John Rennilson: We are comfortable with the current boundaries at present and feel that the issue should await a proper, park-wide consideration of boundaries.

Peter Peacock: As I asked Dave Morris about world heritage site status, it is only fair to ask Peter Rawcliffe for his response to the points that were made about that.

Peter Rawcliffe: We made it clear in our evidence that there are pretty good arguments for including this part of highland Perthshire in the park, but we do not think that world heritage site status is one of those at present. We sometimes disagree with Dave Morris and the Ramblers Association and this is probably one of those occasions. Dave's evidence was about what he wants to happen, not what is actually happening. The UK tentative list includes the Cairngorms for glacial and earth heritage interests. It is a small part of a massif, so it is a smaller part even than option A, which we are talking about today. On that basis, the buffer argument—the world heritage argument—is not a good one. We disagree with the Ramblers Association on that.

Peter Peacock: To be absolutely clear, you are saying that irrespective of the other arguments we have heard for the inclusion of the area suggested by John Swinney, it is not critical to the designation of the current application for world heritage site status.

Peter Rawcliffe: That is certainly our opinion.

Nora Radcliffe: I get the point that the tentative nomination would be made on the ground of geology rather than natural history. Would it be a UK decision or an international decision?

Peter Rawcliffe: At the moment, it is on the tentative list because of what the UK Government has agreed, as advised by the Scottish Office, as was.

Nora Radcliffe: It has come to that conclusion, but does that have anything to do with the people who decide which sites get world heritage status? Has the UK Government just decided to go for one category and is the other category still open to it?

Peter Rawcliffe: It can put forward any sites it wants, on whatever basis.

Nora Radcliffe: Is the wider category still open? Has the decision been made to go for category A because category B is no longer available, or are both categories available?

Peter Rawcliffe: I believe that, at the time, there was a steer that the natural sites from northern Europe were not being encouraged, although that is not to say that we could not put them forward.

Nora Radcliffe: That was part of a wider picture than the UK?

Peter Rawcliffe: Yes.

Nora Radcliffe: Thank you. I just wanted to clarify that.

Peter Peacock: My question is for John Rennilson principally, but others can comment if they wish.

My understanding is that although at stage 2—assuming the bill gets to that stage—we would be able to lodge amendments of detail to the boundary between the two points John Swinney has set out, the wider question of boundaries is not open, given the way his bill is drafted. I stand to be corrected if that is not the case.

If Parliament approved John Swinney's bill, which would make a major alteration to what is already the largest national park in the UK—it would remove the major anomaly to which some people have referred, which they believe in passionately—do you think it would be more likely that, thereafter, ministers would move to review the rest of the boundary in the quinquennial review, or would there be less of an imperative to do that? Is that what John Rennilson's council is worried about?

John Rennilson: Yes. Highland Council is concerned about the fact that SNH considered other areas in Highland, Moray, Aberdeenshire and Angus worthy of inclusion when it reported to the Scottish ministers. Highland Council believes that if there were a major change now—Jane Hope expressed her concern about some of the procedures that we would have to go through—further changes in 18 months to two years' time would be less likely.

Peter Peacock: The council's view is that Parliament would be correct not to consider John Swinney's bill to its full conclusion, but should wait and seek assurances from the minister that the Executive will definitely consider boundaries as part of the quinquennial review. That would satisfy your council that the whole boundary was being considered comprehensively.

John Rennilson: Yes. If the minister gave the instruction that the quinquennial review should include consideration of all the boundaries, we would be entirely comfortable with that.

Mr Swinney: What representations has Highland Council made to ministers about other boundary issues?

John Rennilson: We have made none at this stage, because we understood that we had to wait for the five-year period to elapse.

Mr Swinney: I think that this question is relevant to Jane Hope and Pete Rawcliffe. We have heard

all sorts of reasons why the boundary should not be changed. I want to understand the topographical reasons why the highland east Perthshire area should not be in the national park. Will you tell me what they are?

Peter Rawcliffe: I do not think that we can give you any reason, because our stated position is that it should be in the national park.

Mr Swinney: In the view of SNH, there are no topographical reasons why highland east Perthshire should not be in the national park?

17:00

Peter Rawcliffe: That was our advice in our 2001 report, our advice to the Rural Development Committee in 2002, and it is our position at present.

Jane Hope: To reiterate, the park authority has not taken a view on whether the area should be in the park. We will work with whatever boundary Parliament decides on. Please do not misinterpret my earlier remarks. I was asked about the consequences of the bill. I set out the consequences for the park authority. We do not have a view on the issue John Swinney has just asked about.

Mr Swinney: From the professional work that your staff have undertaken, do any points arise on the adjacent areas in the Highland Council, Aberdeenshire Council or Angus Council areas that suggest that the area in highland east Perthshire is inconsistent with the topographical characteristics of the area that is already in the national park?

Jane Hope: No; we have no thoughts to offer on that.

Mr Swinney: Highland Council's written submission has a section about the gateway to the national park at Dalwhinnie. It contains the following statement from the draft national park plan:

"Dalwhinnie has the potential to be a significant 'gateway' centre which could generate business opportunities".

To date, what work has Highland Council undertaken to establish Dalwhinnie as a gateway centre for the Cairngorms?

John Rennilson: We have been in pre-planning application discussions with one individual who wants to create a development in Dalwhinnie that would attract tourists and provide information about the park area.

Mr Swinney: But, so far, after four years of the national park being in existence, there is no such facility on the ground that is supported or encouraged by Highland Council or that in any way has the imprimatur of Highland Council?

John Rennilson: Nothing additional has arisen since the park was designated.

Mr Brocklebank: I have two brief questions for Jane Hope on evidence that she gave in response to John Swinney. She challenged John Swinney's comment that she had said that the bill would mean shredding the whole draft plan, but she agreed that it would have to be unpicked to an extent. If we allow the present situation to continue for another 15 months or so, until the quinquennial review, is it not logical to assume that there will be even more to unpick and that that will be even more difficult and therefore more expensive?

Jane Hope: That question is almost impossible to answer. I am trying to think how it would feel in both situations. The point that I made earlier was that we are going through the process for the first time. We are already considering what the best mechanisms are for delivering the park plan. We should bear it in mind that the plan is a partnership document and is not just about the park authority. We should not just assume that it would be more difficult to amend the plan—I am not sure that I like the word "unpick"—at that time, as we will all be much more confident and much surer of our step in a couple of years' time. I do not assume that it would be that much more difficult to amend the plan at that time.

Mr Brocklebank: It might be that much more expensive. I presume that, by that stage, you will have started to roll out your signage and literature, which will delineate the park. Surely taking any extra area into account would involve additional cost?

Jane Hope: We would have to do that anyway, even if the changes were made tomorrow. We have quite a bit of literature that would need to be reprinted. We would look for the best time to do it, to minimise the cost, but changes would happen anyway, whether now, in 15 months' time or whenever.

Mr Brocklebank: Okay.

I understand that granite pillars are to be erected at all the road entrances to the national park. You suggested that it would cost several thousand pounds to reposition the pillars. Are pillars in place at Dalwhinnie?

Jane Hope: No.

Mr Brocklebank: Where are the pillars situated on the road between Blair Atholl and Aviemore?

Jane Hope: There are no pillars there at the moment. The granite entry-point markers are going in as we speak—some are already in place at other entry points to the park, but the one on the A9 at Drumochter is not yet in place.

Mr Brocklebank: If, in two years' time, it is decided that Blair Atholl will be the entrance to the park, surely it will cost far more to uproot the thing that you have put in at Drumochter and bring it down the A9 than it would be to delay putting it in?

Jane Hope: Yes, there would be a cost.

Mr Brocklebank: I think you said it would cost many thousands of pounds.

Jane Hope: Yes. If all the entry-point markers were in place and some had to be moved, I estimate that the cost would be around £75,000. Other markers would have to be moved, as well as the one on the A9.

Mr Brocklebank: I follow you.

Eleanor Scott: What would it cost to move just one of the markers? We are probably talking about just one marker.

Jane Hope: There would be the cost of moving a marker from Drumochter and the cost of putting entry-point markers on other roads that entered the park. One or two small boulders would be needed on other roads as a result of the change.

Eleanor Scott: What, roughly, is the cost of moving one granite pillar?

Jane Hope: It would be not far short of £70,000.

Eleanor Scott: To move one pillar?

Jane Hope: Yes, because there would also be interpretative material. The intention is to put in a lay-by, too, so the cost would depend on how far we had got with that.

Eleanor Scott: I have a quick question on the boundary. The map shows the areas that SNH originally recommended for inclusion in the park, but which were not included. They include the big bit that is the subject of the bill, three substantial but much smaller bits and some titchy little bits—I think I counted four of those. Can Peter Rawcliffe confirm that, since the park boundaries were established, SNH has not campaigned for the inclusion of those areas, because it does not do things like that?

Peter Rawcliffe: Yes; we do not campaign.

Eleanor Scott: We are in Blair Atholl today not because SNH wants its recommendations to be implemented but because the communities in this area want to be included in the park and there has been a local campaign on the matter. Is anyone aware of community campaigns for the inclusion of other bits that I pointed out on the map?

John Rennilson: The Dava area, which is not one of those areas—they are marked in blue—is interested in joining the national park.

Eleanor Scott: That is a separate issue, is it not?

John Rennilson: Yes.

Mr Swinney: I understand that the granite sign is not in place at Drumochter—

Jane Hope: That is correct.

Mr Swinney: How could a cost of £70,000 be incurred, given that the marker is not yet in place?

Jane Hope: I am sorry, but I think we are talking at cross purposes. The £70,000 would be the cost of moving something that was already in place. You are quite right: if the marker is not in place, there can be no cost of moving it.

Mr Swinney: Mr Finnie sent the committee a letter in November, in which he said:

"The Cairngorms National Park Authority estimates that the one-off costs of the Bill would be in the region of £150,000 and recurring costs could amount to approximately £100,000 per annum".

Do the one-off costs of £150,000 include £70,000 for moving a sign that is not actually in place?

Jane Hope: Yes, although I point out that the sign is expected to be in place by June.

Mr Swinney: I am sure that my colleagues will be pleased to hear that, some weeks ago in Glen Clova, I cycled past one of the signs that have been put in place. I would say, at a rough guess, that it was the size I am indicating just now—

Jane Hope: There are three types of sign.

Mr Swinney: My point is that with some of the other access points—certainly those on the Glen Shee road—it is simply a case of moving a sign that is not all that large. I do not think that it would cost that much. If we waited until the bill completed its passage, not moving the sign at Drumochter would put a massive hole in the £150,000 one-off cost that the park authority has estimated. Is that not correct?

Jane Hope: That one-off cost is based on the assumption that all the signs would be in place. Does that answer your question?

Mr Swinney: But not all the signs are in place. Indeed, the most expensive one is not yet in place.

Jane Hope: Not at the moment, no.

Nora Radcliffe: It might be appropriate to finish with a general question. Would including the area to the south in the national park change the balance of any of your policies and plans for the existing national park? Would it turn the existing park into something very different?

Jane Hope: That would depend on the views of the other partners. As I said earlier, we would have to revise the national park plan, and I do not want to speak in advance of what might emerge from that process. If the consultation is genuine,

we will have to be receptive to anything that comes forward.

Nora Radcliffe: Would this proposal change any of the parameters of your activity? For example, would it affect the balance of the different types of provision in the park?

Jane Hope: The general span of the park authority's activity would not change at all. However, as I pointed out before, the authority's role is to bring together all the partners in the interests of the national park. As a result, our job would remain the same, but it would be spread over a larger area. Given our operations, it could be argued that, because the park would cover a larger area, the centre of gravity would change a bit. For example, because our board meets all over the park, the proposal would mean that we would have to travel more. Moreover, there would be more partners to talk to. I am not saying that that is a problem; I am simply pointing out what we would have to do. That said, as far as the spread of the policies in the park plan is concerned, I do not think that there would be any fundamental differences.

The Convener: People have expressed some scepticism about the possibility of the Executive looking at the park boundaries as part of the quinquennial review. Do you have any definite information about whether that will happen?

I note that the witnesses are shaking their heads.

Jane Hope: It is a matter for the Executive. We have not discussed it.

The Convener: We will have to ask the minister.

That concludes a very enjoyable and interesting meeting. I thank all the witnesses for their evidence. We have had some very robust submissions. I also thank everyone who has made it possible for us to be here, particularly our hosts at the Atholl Arms Hotel. Everyone, including the people who lobbied us during the coffee break, has contributed something to a very lively meeting.

Mr Swinney: Before you close the meeting, convener, I, as the local MSP, want to say how much we appreciate the fact that the committee has come to Blair Atholl to take evidence from the different parties. We are certainly grateful that the Parliament is able to extend its reach into local communities in this way. [*Applause.*]

The Convener: I am glad that the audience applauded that—and did not boo or hiss.

Next week, we will conclude our evidence taking on the bill in Edinburgh, with Ross Finnie, the Minister for Environment and Rural Development, and John Swinney. The committee will then prepare and—in early March, I hope—publish its report on the bill, which will be presented to Parliament and be publicly available on our web page.

Meeting closed at 17:16.

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