



NEW FOREST
NATIONAL PARK

The Right Reverend James Jones
Chair of the Independent Panel on Forestry
c/o The Secretariat
Defra, Area 3B
Nobel House, 17 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3JR

Our ref: SA/JJ

Date: 28 July 2011

Dear Bishop

INDEPENDENT PANEL ON FORESTRY

The New Forest National Park Authority was established in 2005 to champion and safeguard the special qualities of the area. As such it is conscious of its responsibility to ensure the continuity of the New Forest, which is one of the last remaining extensive living medieval landscapes in England and one of the most important semi-natural habitats in northern Europe.

The Authority is aware that changes to forestry policy and management in England could have major implications for the New Forest. Members have therefore given careful and serious consideration to the Independent Panel's Call for Views, and this response sets out their agreed views.

It is hoped that the Panel will take full account of the points below, and the very particular circumstances of the New Forest, in reaching its conclusions on the future of forestry policy and management. The National Park Authority look forward to discussing some of the issues in more depth when the Panel visit the New Forest later this year and would certainly wish to continue to be involved in discussions about the future of the New Forest Crown Lands. Our earlier offer to help coordinate the Panel's visit still stands.

The New Forest – a national asset

Located on the south coast of England, the New Forest is a place of outstanding and unrivalled natural beauty. It was first created around 1079 by William the Conqueror as a royal hunting Forest and since then it has survived for over 900 years to become a highly valued part of our national heritage. The New Forest is a unique mixture of ancient woodland, open heath, lawns, mires, rivers and streams, picturesque villages and unspoilt coastline. It has been formed through the close relationship between the land and its people over many hundreds of years. Much of the area is still managed by traditional agriculture and a strong system of commoning.

Today the New Forest National Park attracts many thousands of visitors each year, who come to enjoy the peace and quiet, natural beauty and wildlife of one of the last remaining unspoilt and open landscapes in England.

Purposes of the New Forest National Park

National Parks have two statutory purposes and a duty that set out the main reasons for their designation and describe the overall focus for their management. The two National Park purposes as set out in the Environment Act 1995 are:

- to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Park; and
- to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public.

National Park Authorities also have a duty, in taking forward the Park purposes, to, “...seek to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities within the National Park.”

Extent of the public estate in the New Forest

Almost 50% of the National Park is Crown Land managed by the Forestry Commission, comprising 26,740 hectares. This is a far higher proportion and total area than in any other National Park in England. The New Forest estate is managed primarily with a conservation remit following recommendations in the Minister’s Mandate.

The entire public estate is within the boundary of the Park and forms the heart of the New Forest. It attracts the majority of visitors and includes the most sensitive and highly protected habitats. The future management of the Crown Lands is critical to the integrity of the National Park and as such should be centred on the objective of maintaining and enhancing the special qualities of the area.

The diversity of habitats

The New Forest is unique amongst England’s forests and woods in including large areas of non-wooded habitats, notably extensive heathland, mire and grassland. Non-woodland land uses cover 54% of the public estate.

The intimate mosaic of different habitats is essential to the ecological value, cultural heritage and public enjoyment of the Forest. It is maintained sustainably largely through the ancient practice of common grazing and the New Forest remains one of the few areas in Europe where common rights are still practised extensively by local people.

It will be essential for the future of the New Forest to allow the varied habitats and landscapes to continue to evolve through natural processes and through open grazing across the Forest. There are clear opportunities to further restore the characteristic landscapes of the Forest through partnership-based landscape scale projects, as envisaged by the recent Natural Environment White Paper. Commoning has been instrumental in creating the landscape of the Crown Lands, and continued

support for the commoning economy should be an essential part of future management.

The New Forest Acts

The New Forest Acts set out the powers and responsibilities of the Verderers of the New Forest, clarify the extent of forestry enclosures, define the Perambulation (the area within which common grazing can occur) and emphasise the importance of amenity and conservation in the management of the Crown estate.

The Acts illustrate the importance of the New Forest in the national context and address some of the key complexities of its management. The integrity of the Acts should remain intact and not be superseded or compromised by any revisions to forestry policy.

Management of the Forest as a single area

The New Forest as a whole has a very strong historical and cultural identity and is perceived by local organisations and local people as a single geographical area. Its importance for nature conservation, cultural heritage, landscape value, public enjoyment, commoning and many other uses adds a high level of complexity to its management. This will require expertise in a wide range of subjects and an understanding of the sensitivity of many of the issues involved.

The interconnection of its semi-natural habitats and landscapes and the extensive areas of open access demand that the Crown estate is managed in an integrated way as a single unit, drawing on the expertise and significant knowledge that already exists in the Forestry Commission locally. This would require an organisation of sufficient size and with a clear remit, able to resolve often competing interests. The National Park Authority would not support the fragmentation of the Forest into discreet or separate areas for management purposes.

Engagement with local communities

There has been a long history of strong and passionate involvement of local people in the affairs of the New Forest. Communities and user groups feel a high level ownership and identity with the area and many different interests and individuals have the expectation of being involved in discussion and decision making at a detailed level.

As examples of current practice, the New Forest Consultative Panel comprises around 80 organisations with a keen interest in forest management and meets regularly with the statutory bodies to discuss topical issues. In addition the Forestry Commission has convened a large number of stakeholder groups to discuss different projects or aspects of forest management.

Any organisation responsible for the Crown Estate will need to have a strong culture of stakeholder consultation and involvement and the ability to bring together and work closely with a range of different local interests.

Clear lines of local accountability and commitment to funding

The Forestry Commission is currently ultimately responsible to the Secretary of State, and therefore there is an element of public accountability for policy or management decisions relating to the Crown estate.

The National Park Authority would wish to see public accountability maintained or improved, and believes that this may be difficult to achieve through private or voluntary sector organisations. In addition effective management of the area will require planning and delivery over a number of years, and therefore a long-term funding commitment. As a recognised national asset of outstanding public importance, the National Park Authority considers that a publicly managed New Forest remains the most appropriate and practical option.

Forestry policy in the surrounding area

There are many public and privately owned woodlands within and around the National Park. Some already complement management of the New Forest Crown Lands by providing a choice of destinations and alternative recreational facilities. Moors Valley Country Park to the west of the Forest is a good example, managed by the Forestry Commission and East Dorset District Council, and attracting many hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

One of the management objectives for the National Park is to alleviate pressure on the more sensitive habitats of the New Forest by providing a network of green infrastructure in surrounding areas. The National Park Authority believes that existing recreational facilities should be maintained, and further opportunities sought to encourage greater public access and enjoyment of nearby forests and woodlands.

Conclusion

In conclusion the National Park Authority strongly believes that the public estate in the New Forest warrants special consideration by the Panel. The national and international significance of the area, the complexity of its history and present management, the extent of open public access, the critical role of commoning and the sheer scale of its natural habitats all make the New Forest unique amongst England's forests. The view of the National Park Authority is that to ensure the future of the New Forest a specific and dedicated public organisation is still required, with full local autonomy and adequate funding, and a clear commitment to furthering the special qualities of the area.

Yours sincerely



Julian Johnson
Chairman, New Forest National Park Authority