



## **Mourne Heritage Trust summary position statement on National Park Primary legislation proposals for NI - May 2012**

- Since 2002 Mourne Heritage Trust has promoted the consideration of establishment of Northern Ireland's first National Park. Position statements were issued in 2005 and again in 2007 to precede and follow the Mourne National Park Working Party Consultations. Since then the Trust has responded to a number of consultations and other mechanisms for giving views on this policy area including the following:
  - 2007 Response to Mourne National Park Working Party Consultation
  - 2008 Briefing paper and presentation for meetings with Minister for the Environment
  - 2011 National Parks White Paper Consultation response
  - 2011 Environment Committee Presentation
  - Bibliography of research and other publications related to National Parks

These documents can be accessed at [www.Mournelive.com/Publications/National Parks](http://www.Mournelive.com/Publications/National Parks)

- While this debate has been on-going MHT has continued to be committed to *Caring for Mourne* by providing AONB management services to achieve the 'triple bottom line' of benefitting the local environment, economy and society.
- In particular the Trust has worked hard to develop its approaches to dealing with issues impacting on the AONB, including deepening its understanding of and relationships with key stakeholder groups – notably landowners, recreational users, local community groups and businesses.
- While proud of its achievements, the Trust remains conscious of the limitations of its status as an independent charity, not just in relation to the relatively small core resource but also short term and insecure nature of funding arrangements. An external review of the Trust in 2009 highlighted the need for more secure, long term funding streams for landscape management (an activity that inherently requires a long term focus) in the Mourne area.
- From its informed vantage point the Trust can see that the Mourne AONB is not only one of Northern Ireland's most beautiful and culturally significant landscapes but also one of, if not the, most under pressure from a range of natural and man-made forces. The latter include side effects of both positive economic and social trends, such as increasing recreational use, and of challenges, including lack of diversity and underdevelopment in opportunities for locally based economic activity.
- The progress towards primary legislation for national parks has been welcomed by the Trust as recognition of the environmental, social and economic importance of Northern Ireland's landscapes. The need to consider how management and sustainable development services can be made commensurate the opportunities and pressures impacting upon our landscapes has, as outlined above, been highlighted by MHT for some time.

- As well as protection and enhancement of special qualities, the national park proposals - if designed and implemented effectively - offer a potential base for development of enhanced visitor and environmental management services and a stimulus to sustainable economic and social development. In our various consultation responses and other statements alluded to above, we have highlighted numerous examples of research that attest to the economic benefits of national parks designation. Importantly these show, among other things, that the economic benefits are not all about tourism but can be derived by a broad range of economic sectors and enterprises. We see a national park designation as a stimulus to economic development as opposed to the limiting factor that it has been characterised as at times.
- As with benefits, it follows that the services provided by a national park body/ bodies in Northern Ireland should not be 'all about tourism' or 'all about environmental protection', but rather address in an integrated way the various issues and pressures arising from the special qualities of high value landscape areas. In Mourne Heritage Trust we have, for example, worked hard recently in developing our services to land owners to address the impact of recreation on their activities. We see this as being a key service of any national park.
- Continued farming is essential to the future health of the Mourne environment, economy and society. Our landscape cannot remain in good condition without farming but, particularly in hill areas like the Mournes, the activity has become somewhat economically marginal. A national park body should work with farmers and landowners to support them to continue with the sustainable farming practices that shaped our landscapes.
- Mourne Heritage Trust has always argued that any model of national parks must take adequate account of the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland while doing justice to the reputation of national parks worldwide for appropriate visitor and environmental management. In Northern Ireland we have a land ownership pattern and dispersed rural population that is quite different to other parts of the UK. Indeed, if established, a Mourne National Park would probably be the most densely populated such area in these islands, albeit comparable to some like the Souths Downs and New Forest in England. With such a significant population to support, an effective mechanism for balanced, sustainable development based on the rich natural resource of the area is, we feel, required.
- The Trust looks forward to continuing to contribute to the consideration of how a national park approach can be made to deliver more effectively for the benefit of the community, landowners and visitors of the Mournes than current arrangements. This statement and the information outlined above are designed to help facilitate an open and informed debate. This is accompanied by our desire to see all stakeholders, in the Mournes and across Northern Ireland, afforded the opportunity to consider the possibility of national parks in an open and informed manner. We hope the information presented on our website can contribute to this.