CHAPTER I

NATIONAL PARKS IN ENGLAND & WALES

1. TYPES OF SCENERY SUITABLE FOR THE NATIONAL PARKS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, WITH LOCAL EXAMPLES

(Evidence given on behalf of the C.P.R.E. at a Meeting of the National Park Committee, appointed by the Prime Minister, Dec. 3rd, 1929)

The purpose of national parks, stated in the terms of reference, is twofold, preservation of natural character and recreation for the people, and it appears to be intended that every park should satisfy both conditions.

The scenery of England and Wales exhibits several well-marked types owing to the variety of geological structure. Therefore no scheme of national parks can adequately preserve the natural character of those parts of the country which are still in a wild or open state unless there be at least one for each principal type of scenery. These types are coast scenery, mountain scenery, moor and down, river gorges, woodland and fenland (in the original sense), six in all. The whole area of enclosed agricultural land is unsuitable for national parks. Here the public must scatter for holidays, not concentrate in a kind of country where standing crops cramp free movement. In the selection of particular areas two principles should be kept in mind. (1) The areas should be preeminent in beauty and, if possible, have advantages of
climate. (2) They should be distributed as equitably as possible in relation to the chief industrial districts, which may be taken as centred in London, Cardiff, Birmingham, Manchester with Leeds, and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. A district of wild scenery which is immediately adjacent to a great town is more suitable for the expenditure of municipal than national funds. The areas cited in the report as suitable are such as would be mainly visited for a sojourn during the holiday season, not on day trips from the great towns. The selection has been made on two assumptions, first that the preservation of rare species of fauna and flora cannot be made a prime consideration in the national parks of England and Wales. Secondly, that the proposed improvement in recreational facilities refers to characteristic physical recreations of the countryside, as rambling, climbing and boating, and to the intellectual recreation of nature study; and that it is not intended that national parks should extend or compete with the existing provisions for athletic games or indoor amusements.

The scenery of South Britain has great variety of natural character; no single area can be found which would be representative of the whole, and the minimum provision for preservation of natural character in national parks is therefore the selection of a supreme example of each principal type of landscape in those parts of the country which are not standing crops or in fenced fields.

Excluding, therefore, the undulating lowlands with their fenced fields, let us examine those types of scenery in wilder state which are of recreative value from the
beauty of their outlook, the refreshing qualities of air and climate and the active pastimes of the countryside. First is our coastline of 2300 miles, sought in the holiday seasons by numbers comparable to those who go to inland resorts. Of those who seek the seaside there is no inconsiderable part who desire the recreation of the shore itself and long to view the elemental ocean from a natural foreshore or unenclosed cliff. The opportunity has become much more difficult of recent years, largely owing to the facility which the private motor provides for the use of seaside residences for week-ends or holiday seasons.

Hence the immediate and urgent need for preserving in perpetuity the natural character of some portions of the coast and securing them for the recreation of people from all parts of the kingdom who retain the love of wild nature.

A systematic study of the coast soon reduces the choice of suitable areas for seaside parks to such narrow limits that the subsequent work of actual delimitation will be much simplified. It is in the west that the foundations of South Britain appear above the sea, the igneous rocks and hard ancient strata jutting in lofty headlands that withstand the waves, which pile up beaches in the sheltered coves between, and it is only at the southern extremity of the west coast that the shore lies open to the majestic swell of the Atlantic, which is one of the finest spectacles of our scenery. Here, too, in the terminal peninsulas of Cornwall and Pembroke, the proximity of the Atlantic brings an equable climate which permits the enjoyment of outdoor life on the very cliff in winter as well as summer, so
that here the people may seek recreation throughout the year, an impossibility upon the fine stretches of the Yorkshire coast so attractive in summer time. A national park must at least provide a complete landscape, and the minimum for the Land’s End park would be the cliff for 10 miles on either side of the headland; the maximum would be all between the suburbs of Penzance and St Ives. The area to be reserved need not, however, be large, only a mile or so inland, with the proper planning scheme for the adjacent interior.

The coast park of Pembrokeshire would be formed by the headlands of St Bride’s Bay, terminating at St David’s Head on the north and St Ann’s Head on the south, the outlook from each diversified by off-lying islands, the haunt of sea-fowl. The intervening strip of coast with long accessible beach would be subject to a planning scheme which the proximity of a national park would render needful.

That the proposed coast parks in Cornwall and Pembrok are not adjacent to any large town is a suitable fact of situation for a park supported by national and not local funds. That they are in an extreme corner of the country is a disadvantage. Both peninsulas, however, already have a service of express trains capable of handling tourist traffic on a considerable scale.

I pass now to the consideration of the types of inland scenery which would be represented in a system of national parks, with the local examples which appear pre-eminent. We must begin in the west, for the history of British scenery began there, and we must follow it east-
wards or, more exactly, south-eastwards according to the stages by which “Britain rose from out the azure main”. As is the order of geological history, so is the character of the scenery. First in the north-west the rugged mountain peaks of the Lake District and the range of Snowdon, where volcanic protrusions of resistant rock are so carved as to leave upstanding peaks, which are the finest forms of natural scenery. Here are natural pastures which have long been a rambler’s paradise, and crags, mainly of igneous formation, which provide the sport of rock climbing both in summer and winter. The residential parts of the Lake District could not be conveniently administered as a national park, but the upper levels (within a circle of about 12 miles’ radius centred on Dunmail Raise, including some of the smaller lakes whose shores have not become essentially residential) are suited for the purpose. The Snowdon district of Carnarvonshire (with a small part overlapping the Merioneth border), having a length of 28 and an extreme breadth of 14 miles, could be almost all embraced in a national park, for the valleys with their lovely streams have not become residential to the same degree as the shores of the English lakes.

I pass from the scenery of mountain peaks to that of open moorlands with their sense of space. In the Devonian Peninsula we find in Dartmoor an upthrust of igneous rock, which forms a wild highland peaked by granite tors with stretches of open moor, unencumbered by the restriction of sporting rights, already established as a place of resort and recreation, standing greatly in need of measures of regulation, but which could be constituted as a
national park with relatively small expense in the way of compensation. Nowhere in England is there a natural region of fine scenery which has a better defined natural boundary combined with a size sufficient for our purpose.

Passing from the eruptive rocks to those of the carboniferous period, we come to the great upland of the Pennine Chain and the Northumbrian moors, of carboniferous limestone, capped in places with millstone grit, having a length from north to south equal to that of Wales. This is the chief area of moorland in England. These moors are always splendid in their sense of space, and at the time of the summer holiday unequalled for colour and for fragrance of the bracing air. Freedom of access would be of the utmost value to the people of the great towns of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Tyneside, but grouse shooting constitutes a difficulty. Right of access would not make access safe during the summer holiday, and if rambling during the nesting season interfered with the birds and, later on, diminished the bag, there would be a serious economic loss both in letting value and indirectly in other ways.

It is the mountain limestone, hard as granite but soluble as chalk, which provides the pre-eminent examples of incised scenery, that kind of landscape in which it is the hollow, not the height, which dominates the eye. Here are gorges of architectural grandeur softened by vegetation clinging to the crags. In the dales of the Pennines and Northumbria are numerous examples, all naturally beautiful, some spoilt by ill-planned roads and bad buildings,
some that require safeguarding under a town-planning scheme, and one, Dovedale, which among them all has probably a unique claim to be scheduled in the national park scheme, owing to the circumstance that its exquisite and untouched natural beauties are already the object of popular pilgrimage from the great industrial centres of both North and Midlands, and yet it is situated too far from any one of the great towns to bring it within the category of suburban areas where public parks should be maintained by municipal rather than by national funds. Dovedale is but a small part of the valley of the Dove, its length being about 3 or 6 miles according to different uses of the term, but it is the larger connotation which is appropriate to a national park scheme. The breadth to be included, in order to ensure an unspoilt view, is less, so that the area essential for preservation is much smaller than that suggested in the case of the Lake District, Snowdonia and Dartmoor. It is better, however, to leave it so than to endeavour to widen the area to conformity with the other districts, for the landscape of the surrounding uplands, although pleasing, is not pre-eminent, nor so attractive to the pilgrims of scenery as the heathery moorlands which are near by on the north.

The mountain limestone outcrops in the south-west of England also, and it is in that part of the River Wye which borders on the Forest of Dean that we find the most important of our river gorges. Government ownership of much woodland, mainly on the Gloucestershire side, greatly facilitates the preservation of the gorges of the Wye, and a sufficient area on the right, Monmouth bank,
is included in the district proposed by Lord Bledisloe for the Forest of Dean national park.

I now leave the primary and harder rocks and come to the secondary, softer strata, which are for the most part in fenced fields, and in summer time in standing crops. Cupped between the Pennines and the hills of Wales is an agricultural Arcadia of which Worcester is a typical county. South and east is the band of lowland lias and the long upland of soft oolitic limestone continuous from the Dorset coast to the Humber, all under cultivation. In these parts there cluster the villages of old-world architecture in which English scenery is unrivalled. The desire for their preservation has led to the suggestion of a national park in the Cotswolds, where these characters are pre-eminent. It is, however, impossible to combine the requirements of preservation and of recreation upon a national scale in a limited agricultural area. It is true that townspeople can hardly do better than seek Arcadian England for scenic recreation, but they must spread and not concentrate, for where crops stand throughout the summer there can be no free rambling. The problems of preservation and enjoyment of scenery in these parts has more to do with the protection of the country resident than with any addition to the facilities of townspeople, which are already ample, so that as regards agricultural England the help of the Government is to be sought not in formation of national parks but in the direction clearly indicated in last year’s resolution of the British Association and of the National Conference for Preservation of the Countryside, “urging His Majesty’s Government to stimulate the em-