

Annex 1

The History of Proposals for a National Park since World War II

It was the Hobhouse Committee of 1947 which first recommended to Government that the South Downs should be made a National Park. However, it was not until 1956 that the National Parks Commission finally considered the case for the South Downs, deciding that the area should not become a National Park on the grounds that they had lost much of their recreational value¹. While this might have seemed a valid reason at the time, as the ploughing up of downland had undoubtedly led to a loss of chalk grassland, history has proven the Commission wrong. With the South Downs receiving more than 32 million visits a year, the public have effectively voted with their feet and shown that, despite more intensive farming, the South Downs have not lost their recreational value. Also, there are some forms of quiet recreation, such as paragliding and mountain biking, which today are extremely popular on the Downs, something that the Commission could not necessarily have foreseen in the 1950s.

Despite their acknowledged closeness to London and outstanding natural beauty, it was not until nearly 40 years later that the clamour for greater protection for the South Downs pushed the issue high up the political agenda. Consequently, in 1992 the Countryside Commission set up a Sussex Downs Conservation Board (SDCB) as a six year experiment.

Towards the end of this period the Countryside Commission held a very limited consultation on the future of the South Downs. However, an analysis of the results showed that 63% of the public who responded supported a form of National Park for the South Downs². Despite this the Countryside Commission decided against a National Park, referring to the 1950s ruling in its decision, saying: *“These circumstances have not changed, except that even more land is now under the plough.”*³

This decision and the justification for it was made without supporting evidence. As far as the SDC is aware, no research was carried out by the Countryside Commission to demonstrate that its reasoning was sound. Commissioners did not visit the South Downs prior to their meeting to acquaint themselves with the area and the key issues. In its decision making process the Countryside Commission also clearly ignored the fact that since the establishment of the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) in 1987, extensive tracts of downland pasture had been recreated, making it unlikely that more of the area was under the plough than in 1956. In fact research by the SDC has shown that there are substantial tracts of open land, comparable to the amount of downland pasture found in 1840⁴, and that the options being put forward for the future management of the South Downs were fundamentally flawed⁵.

¹ CD 082 – 7th report of the National Parks Commission, HMSO, 1956, page 3

² Annex F – Public Support for a South Downs National Park, para 6.3.1 – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

³ CD 047 – Protecting our Finest Countryside: Advice to Government, Countryside Commission, 1998 (CCP 532), page 31

⁴ Appendix A - Assessment of the Open Country Characteristics of the South Downs by Dave Bangs (October 1998) – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

⁵ Appendix B – Letter from SDC Chairman to Rt Hon Michael Meacher MP with critique of Countryside Commission’s advice to Government (July 1998) – Inquiry Document No: 3275/3/3

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Consequently, the SDC believes that these past decisions are not relevant today. Time and facts have proven them to be wrong.