



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
SUSSEX

Bill Bryson steps out for the South Downs

Members of CPRE Sussex (1) were delighted to welcome their newly appointed President, Bill Bryson (2), to the proposed South Downs National Park (3) today (Tuesday). Members of the Chichester District Groups took him on a tour of the land most under threat in the recent revision of the National Park boundary. In the western Weald, the area from Liss in Hampshire stretching as far east as Pulborough has been excluded from the National Park. This beautiful landscape follows the scarp slope of the chalk ridge on the northern face of the Downs.

Bill Bryson said

'I was shocked to see the Planning Inspector's argument to exclude from the National Park a large tract of land known as the western Weald because it's a different type of landscape from the nearby chalk downland. This countryside is some of England's finest and one of the glories of the English landscape is its huge variety.' (4)

Exclusion of the western weald represents over a quarter of the existing protected area. (5) This land is currently protected from excessive and unsustainable development by its status as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Once outside the Park the future of this landscape is uncertain and is likely to be subjected to the persistent corrosion of development.

Bill Bryson continued

'If this beautiful landscape is left out of the National Park, it will run the risk of being picked off by developers and lost forever. (6)

Our iconic Downland landscape forms the backbone of Sussex but its history and evolution reaches much further than simply the chalk ridge. Residents of the village of Ditchling are up in arms at the exclusion of the village and its surrounds from the National Park.

Mike Burr from the Ditchling Society notes their dismay, "those of us who successfully campaigned in 2002 for Ditchling to be included in the National Park cannot understand why circumstances have apparently so changed that the Planning Inspector now recommends that the parish be excluded. The reasons for its inclusion have obviously not altered: Ditchling is an ancient community, a surviving example of a Saxon strip parish whose boundaries were founded upon the complementary mix of geology of the high downs and the weald, reflected in a traditional pattern of agriculture. The parish naturally straddles the downs and the weald, and its wealden landscape complements, and is every bit as beautiful as, the high downs in the south of the parish".

To draw the northern boundary of the park along the foot of the downs is to ignore the history and beauty of Ditchling"

The same considerations apply to many other towns and villages which have been excluded, including the market towns of Arundel (where the proposed boundary would include the Castle but exclude the Cathedral!), Petworth, Lewes, Midhurst, and Steyning - not to mention numerous villages in the area south of the original line from Petersfield to Pulborough, at present almost entirely designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Downs are

an integral part of the landscape, and draw the eye from every viewpoint. These settlements have evolved in an intimate relationship with the Downs Their lively farmers' markets sell many items produced on the Downs and are living proof of the relationship between the weald and chalk of this working landscape.

Bill Bryson noted

'It has also been recommended that the historic market towns of Petersfield in Hampshire, Midhurst and Petworth and part of Arundel in Sussex, be excluded from the National Park. The same is true of unspoilt villages such as Ditchling. Where is the sense of excluding these settlements which have such strong historic and cultural links with the South Downs, and can contribute so strongly to the economic and community life of the new National Park.'

CPRE has made the case for a South Downs National Park since the 1920s (7) and this was recommended in the Hobhouse Report of 1947. (8) The Government's advisers designated a boundary for the National Park in 2002 and this was discussed at a public inquiry which ended in 2005. The great majority of public responses supported the National Park and many asked for more land to be included.

Bill Bryson concluded:

'What we want is for the Secretary of State to confirm the original wider boundary, including the whole of the western Weald, which was so carefully worked out by the Countryside Agency and designated some five years ago. [10] On my trip to the South Downs I have met some of the amazing people who have campaigned for many years for a South Downs National Park. It is so important for the Government to get it right now and set up a National Park of which we can all be proud.'

– END –

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. CPRE, the Campaign to Protect Rural England, is a charity which promotes the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England. We advocate positive solutions for the long-term future of the countryside. Founded in 1926, we have 60,000 supporters and a branch in every county. President: Bill Bryson. Patron: Her Majesty The Queen.

CPRE Sussex has over 2,000 members from all walks of life. To find out more visit our website www.cpresussex.org.uk.

2. Bill Bryson was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1951, the son of two journalists. A backpacking expedition in 1973 brought him to England. After working for *The Times* and *The Independent* in the 1980s, he became a full time author living in North Yorkshire. He and his family returned to the USA for several years, then moved back to England in 2003 to live near Norwich. Bill was awarded an honorary OBE for services to literature in 2006.

3. The South Downs National Park, alongside the New Forest National Park, was promised as 'a gift to the nation' by the Government in 1999. The Countryside Agency made a Designation Order for the South Downs National Park in 2002 and a public inquiry took place between 2003 and 2005. The designation process was put on hold in 2005 owing to a boundary challenge in the New Forest which could have had implications for the boundary of the South Downs National Park. The designation process restarted in July 2007 when a public consultation was launched on the Inspector's recommendations. The Planning Inspector's report was published at the start of the consultation.

4. The South Downs National Park as designated by the Countryside Agency would cover almost all of the East Hampshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (designated in 1962) and the Sussex Downs AONB (designated in 1966). Designation as an AONB requires the same standard of natural beauty as found in National Parks.

5. The 2002 Designation Order for the South Downs National Park proposed the boundary that was discussed at the public inquiry, where 5,800 individual representations were made. Of those that commented on the principle of the National Park, 94% supported the designation and the majority asked for more land to be included. The Planning Inspector who oversaw the 2003-5 public inquiry into the South Downs National Park has submitted his recommendations to the Government and recommends that the area of the Park should be reduced by approximately 23%, from 1,638 sq km to 1,267 sq km, excluding a large area in the East Hampshire Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (designated in 1962) and the Sussex Downs AONB (designated in 1966).

6. The land excluded from the National Park would have a very uncertain future. It would have to go through a process of de-designation as an AONB which would be highly unpopular. Alternatively, the Government could set up a new AONB, which would be another substantial process to protect the landscape without the benefit of encouraging public access or greater funding to handle visitor management. These problems can be avoided if the original wider boundary is now confirmed by the Secretary of State. Natural England has maintained its support for the original wider boundary.

7. CPRE has been campaigning for the South Downs National Park since 1929 when it submitted a list of areas deserving protection to the Government's National Parks Committee. Due to the intense farming of the war years, the South Downs were not regarded as being appropriate for designation as a National Park in the 1950s when the majority of our other National Parks were created.

8. The South Downs was officially recommended for National Park status by Sir Arthur Hobhouse in his 1947 report to the Government. All the other Parks recommended in the report have been established.

9. The Planning Inspector's report and further information can be found on <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/issues/landscap/natparks/sdowns/index.htm>.

10. The consultation on the revised National Park boundary ends on the 24th September 2007. Further information can be found on Natural England's http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Landscape/DL/new_designations/SouthDowns/whole_boundary.asp