

PARK

The Northwest's nine regional parks are a test bed for new approaches to the environment and the economy.

The Northwest is already home to some of the UK's best loved parks, from country estates like Tatton Park in Cheshire, to miles of glorious fells in the Lake District National Park.

Now, the region is pioneering a new way of using 'parks' as a means of driving regeneration, through the concept of 'regional parks'.

A regional park covers a much larger area than a typical country or urban park. It can be a linear park, like Mersey Waterfront, stretching almost 140 km up the coast. Or it can be a more compact urban park, such as Wigan Greenheart, encompassing many of the area's former coalfields. It can be a part of the countryside surrounding a city, or a network of urban parks, waterways, valleys, nature reserves, heritage attractions and recreational facilities, all linked by notional boundaries.

The definition and purpose of a regional park is fluid and the concept is still evolving. Early regional parks such as the Lee Valley in north London were intended to promote outdoor activities, and this remains the core function of some regional parks today. Scotland's three regional parks, for example, are primarily designated as areas of countryside available for informal recreation. Emscher Park in Germany, however, fulfils a further purpose and is the model that most closely resembles the Northwest's aspirations.

“Regional parks use nature conservation as a lever to facilitate regeneration and economic development.”

Emscher, Germany

By the late 1990s, 150 years of industrialisation and the restructuring of industries had led to severe environmental damage in the Ruhr region. Derelict steel works and abandoned coal-mining operations scarred the landscape. Emscher Landscape Park was developed as a creative way of regenerating this post-industrial landscape.



The park preserves historical buildings, reusing pithead buildings for housing, workplaces and leisure activities. Industrial relics are presented as museum pieces and promoted as centres of cultural activity. Concerts are staged against the backdrop of a steel plant, while people hike among the hills of reclaimed coal pilings.

Emscher park shows how regional parks can be used to encourage investment in urban and environmental regeneration, as well as to provide outdoor recreation opportunities.

The region's life support system

Regional parks have multiple social, economic and environmental benefits. Encouraging people to take part in outdoor activities can help tackle obesity and stress, improving the health and wellbeing of communities. Developing green spaces helps manage the impact of climate change, including absorbing greenhouse gases.

Improving the environment increases the value of nearby housing and land, while greener cities encourage tourism, benefiting local businesses and improving the images of towns and cities. The process of developing regional parks attracts high value industries and workers, boosting the local economy and improving employment opportunities. Regional parks also provide a venue for the performing and visual arts and other cultural activities.

As Jo Harrop, programme manager at Wigan Greenheart, says, “Regional parks can offer a great deal in one package and are potentially an excellent tool for tackling a wide range of regeneration areas.”

LIFE



Words Gareth Chadwick

Regional parks and the Northwest

There are currently nine regional parks in the Northwest, each incorporating its own variety of landscapes, features and, crucially, objectives.

East Lancashire Regional Park was one of the first modern regional park proposals and focuses on urban regeneration.

Mersey Waterfront is the most developed of the parks, covering over 145 km of coastal and estuarine waterfront, which includes major ports, a world heritage site and internationally important wildlife habitats.

Weaver Valley, stretching 45 km through the centre of Cheshire, from Runcorn to Crewe, is nearing the end of an extensive two year development phase, testing the economic and environmental rationale for further investment in key strategic projects.

Croal Irwell in Manchester is branded as ‘an urban playground for the city region,’ while Wigan Greenheart is a 20 km² park at the heart of Wigan’s former coalfields.

Morecambe Bay and Duddon spans the coastal zone from Fleetwood in the south to Haverigg in the north.

West Cumbria is still in its early stages of development. Its progress is closely linked to wider proposals to brand the whole coastline the ‘Energy Coast’, reflecting the move from nuclear energy production to the development of new skills and businesses in nuclear decommissioning and the renewable energy sector.

The Northwest Coastal Trail and Ribble Estuary projects have both undertaken feasibility work. The focus of Ribble Estuary is its internationally important wildfowl sites, while the Northwest Coastal Trail aims to provide a continuous high quality footpath along the Northwest coast, from Chester to Carlisle.

Management

The Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA), the Northwest Regional Assembly (NWRA) and Natural England support the nine parks in the Northwest. The NWDA reconfirmed its commitment to the regional park concept in the 2003 Regional Economic Strategy, and development of regional parks is identified as a potentially significant driver of regeneration and investment.

There is no standard model for the management of regional parks. Their development may be driven primarily by a single organisation, or by a partnership. The Weaver Valley project, for example, is managed wholly by Cheshire Country Council, and Wigan Borough Council leads the development of Wigan Greenheart. The Morecambe Bay and Duddon regional park, however, is spearheaded by the Morecambe Bay Partnership, which includes representatives from Lancaster City Council, Cumbria Tourist Board and British Energy. Similarly, Mersey Waterfront is a partnership between all the local authorities on Merseyside, along with other key stakeholders in the area.

The aim is for regional parks to act as a catalyst for action, enabling different partners to focus together to achieve broader, shared objectives.

As Richard Tracey, senior regeneration executive at the NWDA says, “If you want to cover an area like Mersey Waterfront, you have to deal with different bodies all along that stretch of coastline. The only way to do that effectively is to bring people together as a group sharing a single strategic objective. Regional parks are an ideal way to do that.”

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Left: Morecambe Bay
by Ian Lawson

Right: Hillbre Island,
part of the Mersey
Waterfront regional park

To find out a little more about the concept of regional parks, Source magazine spoke to some leading proponents and asked just what it is about regional parks that makes them such a potent force for change, and what some of the key challenges are in realising that potential.

Peter Batey

Lever Professor of Town and Regional Planning, University of Liverpool



“The key ingredients for the success of a regional park are a combination of the potential for economic development and

environmental development. The Mersey Waterfront regional park, for example, has great variety: although it’s a heavily urbanised area, there are lots of open landscape areas which have got some great importance in terms of nature conservation and they are very accessible to the urban population – it’s right on the doorstep. Having those two things juxtaposed is extremely important.

For a regional park to be successful, you’ve also got to be in for the long term. You can’t develop a regional park in three years, despite the fact that a lot of people will want to see results in three years. You’ve got to see it as a 10, 15 or 20-year project, so you do need some degree of certainty that funding is going to be forthcoming. Increasingly, regional parks will have to look to a wider range of sources of finance, including alliances with the private sector.”



Regional parks in the Northwest

- 1 West Cumbria
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- 8 Irwell City Park
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Frank Bothmann
Team Manager,
Emscher Landscape Park

“Emscher Park was developed in the early 1990s as part of a regional strategy to support structural change in the Ruhr from an industrial to a modern economy. The focus was on restructuring the landscape to promote a positive identity for the region. Within the park, which covers an area of 350km², slagheaps were transformed into scenic sites with excellent views of the surrounding area to attract tourists. Landscaped gardens were designed within former steelworks. The high quality of the landscapes attracted companies and at least 200 million euros have been invested in the park.

The success of Emscher Park can be attributed largely to the involvement of all the communities and organisations on which it touched. Everyone really got behind the idea and helped to ensure it was a success. Although the approach has been copied elsewhere in Germany, there is nothing on the scale of Emscher. The key future challenge lies in maintaining the high quality of the landscapes. Plans are also in place for the reconstruction of an area of the Emscher River to allow for the development of more houses and leisure facilities.”



Jo Harrop [ABOVE]
Programme Manager,
Wigan Greenheart regional park

“If a regional park achieves enough ‘buy-in’ from local stakeholders, it can help to promote good design and sensible investment, and influence what takes place within the boundaries of the regional park. This strategic engagement is what helps to make regional parks successful. It’s not just what they deliver directly, but the potential they have for a much wider impact on areas in question.

Greenheart offers an opportunity to present Wigan borough in a different light to visitors. Few people – even within the borough itself – are aware of the fantastic countryside and wildlife that lies in what were once industrial wastelands. Individually, the sites act to serve local communities and a few enthusiasts. However, sold as a package, they present an attractive day out – in Greenheart you can visit nature reserves, canals, woodlands and country parks and enjoy sailing, golf, cycling and walking... Together, it is a much more powerful offer.”

Walter Menzies
Chief Executive,
Mersey Basin Campaign

“Regional parks are not about nature conservation for the sake of it, they are about using conservation as a lever to facilitate regeneration and economic development.

In the Northwest, we have a dense population and many of the problems of post-industrial landscapes. And it’s been understood for a long time that one way of helping the economy is by improving the environment. There’s a direct correlation between the two.

Of course, there have been many regeneration initiatives in this region over the last thirty years. What’s different about the regional parks is that they’re quite large areas. The word ‘regional’ implies people coming to the park from outside. Mersey Waterfront, for example, is recognised across the world, and everyone in Merseyside is very keen to build up its tourism economy. If people are coming into an area, enjoying themselves, having a good experience, and spending money, that’s helping regeneration and creating jobs for local people.”

Sarah Heyes

Manager of Regional Parks Xchange, the organisation that coordinates regional parks in the Northwest.

“A lot of the benefits that derive from a regional park come from the very fact that it covers a wider area than just one authority. If you’re a visitor to Morecambe Bay, it doesn’t really matter to you whether you’re in Lancaster City Council district or South Lakeland. You’re looking at Morecambe Bay as a whole. So it is beneficial if the area can be branded or promoted as a whole. Many projects would just not be possible without the co-ordination, focus and partnership that a regional park can bring.

For example, in Morecambe Bay there is the possibility of a footbridge running alongside the viaduct that goes over the Leven Estuary, which needs the co-operation of the local counties, local authorities and many different stakeholders. The project wouldn’t be possible if a local authority was working on its own.”

Richard Tracey

Senior Regeneration Executive,
Northwest Regional Development Agency



“I’d like to try to find a different name for regional parks, because although many parks are wonderful places, they conjure up a particular image in people’s minds. Regional parks are about more than just the park; they’re about bringing wider physical regeneration out of a linked programme that we’ve chosen to call ‘regional parks’. We are in challenging times for getting funding for any initiative, so there is a real issue with making sure people understand that regional parks aren’t just about green infrastructure and the natural environment, but about how we place compelling economic projects within that context.

We have to keep finding ways to justify the economic value of those programmes if we are to continue to invest in them, and that won’t be easy. But with strategic partners in a ‘regional park’, there’s a better case to be made as to why we should keep investing in them, and why others should keep investing in them, than there would be if they were individual projects being led by separate authorities.”

Gareth Chadwick is a Manchester-based freelance journalist with a special interest in environmental and ethical issues.