

# New Forest Fact File

## TOURISM AND RECREATION HORSE RIDING

Horse riders have always enjoyed free access to the Forest. In 1994 a study commissioned by the New Forest Committee found that there were 3655 horses in the New Forest Heritage area of which 2599 were ridden by recreational riders. A further 337 horses were in use by 26 riding schools. Most people recognise that pressures exist on the Forest environment due to horse riding, but there is a divergence of opinions as to how significant these pressures are in comparison with other user groups. Many horse riders have expressed the opinion that they are unfairly singled out and point to other major contributors of erosion such as cyclists, walkers and Forestry Commission operations.

The effect of horse riding on vegetation of the Open Forest is mainly attributed to "school horses from riding establishments which followed regular but numerous routes"

***Survey of Damage by Horse Riding in the New Forest - Dr. S. A. Hayne, Nature Conservancy Council***

"No-one would dispute that some erosion is taking place but whilst the Report (Draft Consultation 1992) vigorously asserts that the prime cause of erosion is the riding of horses no hard evidence of this is presented."

"The virtual absence of any statistics on the current use of the Forest by ridden horse means that the argument that these are the primary cause of erosion cannot be sustained."

***Response to the Forestry Commission's Consultative Draft Report "Horse Riding in the New Forest". New Forest Equestrian Association, 1993***

### **Joint initiatives of the New Forest Equestrian Association and the Forestry Commission:**

- ◆ New Forest Riding Code           launched June 1994
- ◆ Riding Advice Line                launched June 1994
- ◆ Riding Working Group             Early 1994

The following is an extract from the consultation document "A Framework for Recreation" published in 1997 by the Forestry Commission.

"Damage to the fabric of the Forest is caused by riding, with the heaviest erosion occurring at access points onto the Forest. It has been estimated by English Nature that between 1976 and 1987 erosion, as a result of riding, increased by 10ha per year. More recent limited studies suggest that this figure is still increasing".

As a first step towards reducing these undesirable effects the Forestry Commission has worked with the New Forest Equestrian Association and others. This has resulted in the development of a riding code, the introduction of a telephone advice line and the setting up of a Riding Working Group to address access difficulties faced by riders. Much work has also taken place to restore riding damage and improve access tracks; to benefit both riders and the Forest itself. However increased co-operation from riders is still required to ensure the most sensitive areas in the Forest are avoided.

Specified riding routes may have a part to play in preventing erosion damage, especially in those parts of the Forest where the intensity of riding is greatest. They could also be used to direct pressure away from the most sensitive areas. Such a solution could be well suited to the needs of riding stables and others in locations where recreational riding is most popular. Such routes would also have the potential to be linked into the wider rights of way network. Benefits for both the rider and the Forest could be gained if this approach were to be adopted.

A balance still remains to be found between the scale of riding provision and the conservation of the Forest. It is questionable whether the current level of free access enjoyed by riders is in the best interest of the Forest. We will work with the NFEA, riding stables and other organisations to address this balance and achieve a *Forest First* result. However, It remains the view of the Forestry Commission that riders should contribute towards the repair of past damage and future works which are carried out to their benefit.

“A Framework for Recreation” will:

- ◆ Seek to benefit the Forest by trails of riding routes in certain well used locations.
- ◆ Work with representatives of the riding community to put the *Forest First*, while also achieving benefits for riders.
- ◆ Explore mechanisms by which riders can contribute towards repair and development work.”

In 1998, a donation of £3000, which was matched by the Forestry Commission, was given to the Forestry Commission by a local riding school towards the construction of a gravel path. The path links with other tracks to form a 12 mile circuit and aims to encourage users to keep off other eroded forest tracks to allow heathland regeneration in the area. The track was opened in September 1998 and the Forestry Commission hope that other riding stables will follow suit and contribute to the building or maintenance of riding tracks in order to protect the Forest from further erosion.



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