

New Forest Fact File

TOURISM AND RECREATION CONFLICTS IN THE NEW FOREST

Conflicts in History

There has always been conflict between various forest 'user groups' since William I first established 'Nova Foresta' in 1079. William I used the area for hunting and protected the 'beasts of the chase' under strict Forest Laws. This conflicted with the local people's pastoral commoning lifestyle, a situation which was partly resolved by the evolution of certain rights over the Forest - including commoning rights.

The hunting of deer became of less importance over the centuries and by the 17th and 18th centuries timber production was the primary economic use of the New Forest. The New Forest Acts allowed more and more areas of the New Forest to be enclosed for timber production threatening commoners' grazing rights and requiring the control of wildlife. Fences were erected around the Inclosures to keep out commoners' stock to protect the young saplings from browsing. The New Forest Act of 1877 went some way to resolve the conflict between forestry and commoning by limiting the area available to silviculture. Two thirds of the Forest was set aside to remain as unenclosed Open Forest where commoners could exercise their traditional rights.

Deer populations were left unmanaged until the 19th Century when they reached levels which threatened timber crops and competed with commoners' animals for food. This was resolved with the passing of the Deer Removal Act of 1851 under which all deer were to be removed from the Forest. Although total removal was not achieved, numbers were dramatically reduced. Today Forestry Commission Keepers are responsible for managing deer numbers to prevent such conflicts occurring again.

A rise in tourism and recreation during the 1950's and 1960's brought new and severely damaging pressures to the Forest. Improved highways, greater affluence and leisure time resulted in huge numbers of people descending with cars, caravans and tents onto the fragile fabric of the Forest. The character and interests of the Forest were being steadily diminished and degraded to the point where the future of the forest hung in the balance. Its very survival was at stake in the face of a new conflict.

In 1970, a report on the Conservation of the New Forest was published and proposed a strategy for the management of modern pressures and demands through dispersal and channeling. Recommendations included the creation of 'car-free zones', day visitor sites, car parks and informal camping areas. Following a period of public consultation, the strategies and recommendations were approved by the Minister of Agriculture in 1971. These conservation measures were very successful and have helped maintain the integrity of the Forest for future generations. Today, the pressure on the Forest from recreation is huge with approximately 7 million day visitors a year from people outside the New Forest Area, as well as approximately 17 million visits from local people within the Forest Heritage area boundary.

Present Day Conflicts

The New Forest is an important area for recreation, conservation, traditional commoning practices and forestry. Managing the Forest with consideration to all these factors inevitably leads to conflicts that must be addressed.

Recreation and Conservation

Recreation is of great economic importance to the New Forest, however, the great increase in recreational activities in recent years has brought with it problems and conflicts with other demands on the Forest. Increased recreational use of the Forest has resulted in an increase in erosion and problems with wildlife disturbance. Especially sensitive are heathland areas and nesting sites of rare ground nesting birds. The following management policies are extracted from "A Framework for Recreation" published in 1997 by the Forestry Commission and provide examples of management practices currently in place to resolve recreational conflict.

- Walkers** Use of the Forest by walkers has resulted in increased erosion near to car parks. In order to control erosion but still allow provision for walkers, seasonal or complete closure of some car parks where erosion is occurring and enlargement of other car parks near more robust areas (e.g. Inclosures) may be carried out.
- Dog walkers** Dogs disturb wildlife during breeding seasons. Access to these sites may be restricted at certain times of the year to reduce impact on wildlife by dogs, with a recent Forestry Commission survey showing these measures would have the support of over 65% of local dog walkers. By carrying out surveys and educating the public as to the impacts of their activities much of the potential conflict could be avoided.
- Camping** Campsites concentrate high numbers of people into one area, so it is essential that the areas can cope with the pressures placed on them. With an increase in knowledge about the effects of recreational facilities on the Forest it is acknowledged that some campsites are in inappropriate locations. It is, however, necessary to provide such recreational facilities for visitors and sites which would be more able to cope with high recreational use and therefore less likely to conflict with conservation of the Forest should be sought out.
- Cycling** A cycle network was established in 1998 which used only gravel tracks and aimed to steer people away from delicate habitats such as heathlands. This measure should help reduce erosion from cycling and minimise conflict with other forest users.
- Horse-riding** A survey carried out by English Nature identified that erosion caused by horse riding had increased by a rate of 10 ha/yr between 1976 and 1987. Subsequent reports indicate its figure is still increasing. After consultation between the Forestry Commission and the New Forest Equestrian Association a Riding Code and Riding Working Group were set up, and two graveled tracks were established at major access points into the Forest. Unfortunately, a balance between horse riding provision and conservation of the Forest has still not been found and more co-operation from riders is needed if this conflict is to be resolved.

Conflicts also arise between forestry and recreation where forest operations restrict recreational access to sites, especially in popular areas or cycle routes. To reduce this conflict diversion signs offering alternative cycle routes are erected and additional rangers are employed during the busy summer months to advise visitors as to the dangers of entering an area which is being worked, and offer alternative locations.

Commoning

Commoning is often in conflict with conservation interests in the New Forest. An example of this is the conflict which has arisen over mire restoration work being carried out under the *Life* project. Mires or lowland valley bogs were drained in the past to create more grazing for commoners' animals and to remove the danger they posed to the animals. Mires have since been listed as an extremely rare habitat, described as a RAMSAR wetland, an Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and forms part of the New Forest Special Area of Conservation. A programme of mire restoration, funded by the *Life* project, was started in 1997 but has received a lot of opposition from commoners who fear it will lead to the loss of valuable grazing land and death or injury of ponies who can become stuck in the bogs. Consultation between the interested parties is hoped to resolve these conflicts.

Forestry

The terms timber production and conservation may appear to be incompatible and a source of conflict. This is not however, necessarily true. A document '*The UK Forestry Standard: The Government's Approach to Sustainable Forestry*' published in January 1998, sets out requirements for sustainable forestry management. With respect to nature conservation the requirements are that:

Biodiversity in and around woods and forests is conserved, or enhanced:

- ◆ **species and habitats subject to EU Directives and UK Biodiversity Action Plans are conserved or enhanced;**
- ◆ **important but previously disturbed semi-natural habitats are restored, where practical.**

In order to conform to these requirements in the New Forest;

- ◆ Chemicals, which in other forests are widely used to control pests and disease, are employed sparingly in the New Forest.
- ◆ Timber extraction operations near stream sides and on many of the woodland rides is influenced by the recognised importance and need to maintain and enhance the flora and fauna of these localities.
- ◆ The broad-leaved plantations are not worked between April and August so that nesting birds are undisturbed; similar restrictions apply to the conifer areas where the nesting sites of birds of prey are sited.
- ◆ A programme of ride reinstatement is being carried out.
- ◆ The percentage of broad-leaf species being planted is increasing.

The planning, management and marketing problems, which these constraints produce, are considerable. However, the majority of conflicts are overcome through regular discussions with English Nature and the New Forest Consultative Panel, and a timber producing industry is able to continue in the Forest.

The Future

With busy forestry and tourism industries being an integral part of the area's economic existence, and conservation and the traditional commoning history of the Forest being of unique importance, the Forest can clearly be seen to be an area of ongoing tension and potential conflict.

Industrial and residential developments in the Forest's urban fringes have created new visual and environmental pressures. Oil, gas and water pipelines, electricity pylons, new roads, road improvements and so on, all continue to place acute demands on the Forest.

The Government's proposal, in October 1999, to designate the New Forest as a National Park brought mixed reactions within the local community. The Countryside Agency has statutory responsibility for designating National Parks, and the Crown Lands would form a significant part of the proposed National Park. "This is a major step towards creating the first National Park in nearly half a century, conferring special status and highest levels of conservation and management in one of the country's finest landscapes" *The Countryside Agency: New Forest National Park: the next stages (2002)*. The

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Forestry Commission believes that the objectives set out in the Minister's Mandate 1999 are consistent with the objectives for the proposed Park Authority (New Forest Management Plan 2001-2006). The consultation process is still ongoing and will involve as many people as possible in this process.

The future of the New Forest will continue to be led by the management programmes of the present authorities: the Forestry Commission, The Verderers, English Nature, New Forest District Council, Hampshire County Council (through consultative procedures with the New Forest Committee). Conflicts will be managed through consultation with those affected.

For more information about the National Park Designation visit:

www.countryside.gov.uk/proposednationalparks



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