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Countryside Recreation Network

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Countryside **Recreation**

This issue...'Looking Back Looking Forward'.

Countryside Recreation Network




Countryside Recreation Network (CRN)

CRN is a network which:

- covers the UK and the Republic of Ireland
- gives easy access to information on countryside and related recreation matters
- reaches organisations and individuals in the public, private and voluntary sectors
- networks thousands of interested people

The Network helps the work of agencies and individuals in three areas:

Research:
to encourage co-operation between members in identifying and promoting the need for research related to countryside recreation, to encourage joint ventures in undertaking research, and to disseminate information about members' recreation programmes.

Liaison:
to promote information exchange relating to countryside recreation, and to foster general debate about relevant trends and issues.

Good Practice:
to share information to develop best practice through training and professional development in provision for and management of countryside recreation.

Chair: Geoff Hughes
Vice-chair: John Watkins, Countryside Council for Wales

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Volunteering in the Natural Outdoors

A report for the Countryside Recreation Network

by The Tomorrow Project

Whether it's organising a walking for health initiative, clearing rhododendron in ancient woodlands, undertaking a beach clean up or monitoring wildlife in hay meadows, volunteering in the natural outdoors needs a better image and more people taking part. That's the call from research undertaken for the Countryside Recreation Network, the body which involves all the UK and Ireland major countryside and recreation agencies.

Copies of the report can be purchased for £15.00. Payment can be made by cheque (made payable to 'Sheffield Hallam University') or credit card.

Go to the *Countryside Recreation Network Publications List* on page 29 to order your copy.

Editorial

John Watkins, Countryside Council for Wales

This edition of the journal is broadly under the theme of 'looking back, looking forward', as the network that is CRN hits 40 years old. In this respect, I'm a new kid on the block, and find the wealth of observation and experience from amongst the contributors both fascinating and humbling. This isn't a self-indulgent, "haven't we done well" journal. All of the contributors point to work ahead, perhaps more challenging than what we have already overcome, as the dynamic nature of outdoor recreation continues. My job here, I guess, is to reflect on what strikes me about the content of the articles and the questions they raise.

It is a pleasure to read Kate Rew's wonderful reflection on outdoor swimming, and I can't imagine anyone failing to be struck by the beauty of the photographs. This is the essence of the emotional experience that visiting the outdoors can be. Something we in the 'profession' perhaps forget when we're embroiled in strategies, forums, and committees, as we toil to provide services, facilities, and set limits of acceptable change; when the real goal is to provide opportunities for the public to create their own meaningful experiences, on their terms, in this great outdoors.

Terry Robinson has captured very well the phases of outdoor recreation through managing a "leisure explosion", controlling and containing use, through to encouraging and facilitating participation. Rather like looking at old photographs, what appeared as cutting edge fashion in its time doesn't look quite so cool any more? But, have we really shaken off all of the baggage of these phases? I still see ample references to "damaging recreation" in today's plans and strategies that could read as responses to Michael Dower from 1965. Perhaps the real "damage" we should be concerned about is the apparent decline in participation we are witnessing on our watch.

The experience in Scotland will be something that the rest of us observe with interest. This is certainly the boldest move in outdoor recreation of the last 40 years (and more) in the UK and Republic of Ireland. Scotland now has the challenge of making it work, and the rest of us have to look carefully at whether the justification for our own approaches still stack up in the face of increased frustration from user-groups.

In this context, is what David Moxon and Colin Palmer propose for supporting an expansion in the availability of places for off road cycling really that outrageous? A recent survey for CCW reveals that 49% of the population of Wales already believe that they can cycle on footpaths, and 56% believe they should be able to. For young people the results are even more dramatic, at 70% and 85% respectively. When the same survey reveals only 21% of the population (or 7% of young people) have heard of Public Rights of Way Improvement Plans, one has to consider the possibility that the game has evolved quicker than the rules have been able to keep up? Particularly so if we're interested in addressing the outdoor recreation needs of the so-called "lost generation", who thankfully appear to have an interest in getting out into the great outdoors, but perhaps not on the terms we're used to?

Ross Millar's reflections on Northern Ireland offer a degree of perspective of what it is like to work in a climate of real conflict, and yet pull together effective partnerships and a hugely impressive work programme in a short space of time. For these reasons I would, personally, shortlist the establishment and the achievements of CAAN as one of the highlights in outdoor recreation of the past 40 years.

The need for CRN as a vehicle to share approaches, experiences, and knowledge is as relevant today as it was when the Network was established. As devolution accelerates different approaches, the need to highlight common areas of debate and share lessons through this journal and regular workshops and conferences will become even more important.

There is much to celebrate. And yet, there is still so much to do.

John Watkins leads the Recreation Policy team at the Countryside Council for Wales and he is also Vice Chair of CRN.

Views from the North

John Thomson Scottish Natural Heritage and **John Mackay,** formerly Scottish Natural Heritage

'Scotland – they do things differently there, don't they?' That at least has long been the perception of outdoor recreation north of the border from elsewhere in the UK. Well, we do and we don't. Some aspects of the countryside leisure scene here in Scotland are effectively indistinguishable from those in other parts of the British Isles, if not the globe. Human psychology and behaviour, after all, do not vary so very much across cultures and continents. But others are indeed highly distinctive, reflecting differing physical conditions and social traditions.

What is certainly true is that, in one critical respect, the divergence has grown more marked in recent years. The 2003 Land Reform Act has created in Scotland a right of responsible access, extending to almost all land and water other than private gardens. What is more, this right covers not just pedestrians but cyclists and horse riders, canoeists and sailors. How sharply the new legal situation departs from what went before is still hotly debated amongst those who care about such things. But there can be no doubt that it means that outdoor access, and all the many recreational activities that it supports, now rests upon a radically different basis in Scotland from that prevailing in the other countries of the British Isles.

Those of us who have been involved in helping to bring about and see through this change can perhaps be forgiven for believing that the new statutory position gives Scotland a head start in catering for evolving countryside recreation needs and demands. It has certainly enabled us to concentrate attention on the real, practical issues that require to be addressed, rather than time-consuming mapping exercises, with their tendency to provoke conflict rather than foster cooperation. It has also proved the widely-held fears about increased landowner liability to be substantially groundless – a point worth noting in other jurisdictions.

But the right is certainly no panacea. It hasn't overnight remedied the shortage of waymarked footpaths and bridleways on lower ground, and especially around towns and cities. Although the core path networks called for by the legislation are now beginning to take shape, it will still be some time before we can match the provision already available through established rights of way in many parts of England and Wales. Nor has it triggered a spontaneous flush of funds to re-engineer eroded mountain paths. The resourcing of ongoing maintenance and mediation remains a conundrum to which we have yet to find a dependable solution.

New challenges also crowd in upon us. How will climate change affect the demand and opportunities for outdoor recreation? How can we foster greater participation and yet at the same time curb the greenhouse gas emissions from transport? In these new circumstances do we need to review

and update the role of some of the recreational facilities - country and regional parks, for example – created during the 1970s and '80s? As the public purse-strings tighten, can we find ways of tapping more private funding without privatising the outdoor experience? Can we make sure that in an era of instant electronic entertainment the children of the 21st century acquire in their formative years that taste for the natural world that experience tells us will thereafter last a lifetime?

These and many other issues are ones where countryside recreation practitioners will benefit hugely from exchanging ideas and experience. Wider diversity of approach across the British Isles makes such pooling of knowledge all the more important and potentially fruitful. So too do budgetary constraints: we cannot afford the luxury of reinventing wheels. CRN and its predecessor CRRAG have a proud record in facilitating it – and, moreover, in generating a good deal of fun along the way.

My direct exposure to the work of CRN goes back a mere twenty years or so. The experience of my former colleague in SNH, John Mackay, is far lengthier. What is more, he was for most of that time much more deeply involved than I in the bread-and-butter work of the network – of which he was a stalwart. That is why, when I was invited to contribute to this fortieth anniversary Journal, I immediately thought of him and encouraged him to offer his reflections. Characteristically, he had obliged within days with the following piece, which captures far better than I could the flavour and achievements of those four exciting decades.

John Thomson

John Thompson reflects in this issue on the differences and the commonalities with the rest of the nation in how we provide for open-air recreation in Scotland. These differences define some of the distinctive aspects of enjoying the outdoors in the north, such as the greater extent of wild and challenging open country: but, in practice, the commonalities between us are more important. The two Countryside Acts provided the platform – north and south - for a new approach in the 1960s to serving growing demand for open-air recreation. Both Acts had the stimulus of the Countryside in 1970 Conferences – for Scotland, through Study Group 9 to that event. Part of the new approach was to secure better provision close to where most people live. However, in the north, there was also a strong theme of delivering better support for rural tourism, especially to help rural local authorities, hard-pressed in delivering basic services to thinly-spread populations.

At that time, tourism was much more domestic in character – many Scots still holidayed on the Costa Clyde rather than Mediterranean beaches, and the tourism season was very much shorter than today, and strongly peaked. Hence the problems faced by the local authorities, especially in some parts of the Highlands. We lacked national parks, which have an important role in the busier tourist areas in the south, but the Forestry Commission did emerge as our largest, outdoor recreation manager, for which it should take credit. Being a smaller place institutionally, there was much early cooperative action in Scotland between the relevant public bodies – the former Countryside Commission for Scotland, and the Scottish Tourist Board, as was; also the Scottish Sports Council and FC.

The 1967 Countryside (Scotland) Act came first: it was a belated recognition that some statutory action was needed to give support to open-air recreation in Scotland, given that the countryside provisions in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 did not apply. The 1967 Act was a combination of contemporary thinking on better provision for open-air recreation, as set out in the 1968 Act, bolted onto large chunks of the 1949 Act. Thus, the arrangements for access agreements and for LDRs were brought north in the presumption that these were the powers needed by local authorities to meet new challenges. Some would say that here was a missed opportunity to design new legislation that better fitted the times and a different legal system. However, the outcome was that the new era for countryside recreation was launched with a statutory framework that was very similar across the border, bar the lack in Scotland of the top tier designation of national park.

CR(R)AG helped greatly in illuminating the issues of commonality and difference: it provided opportunity for the public bodies in Scotland to engage in a wider debate about the new arrangements, and to share experience and stimulate research on good practice – the early conferences were especially valuable. Sharing (or stealing) good ideas from elsewhere (or learning to avoid bad ideas) is an

important part of doing things better: likewise, the stimulus of working together, or just keeping up with the others. The extra 'R' for research was significant in the early days, in encouraging people think harder about whom we were serving and how to improve on practice. At that time, research on open-air recreation was an open and relatively unexplored field, although the then Tourism and Recreation Research Unit (TRRU) at Edinburgh University had been early in the field, led by Terry Coppock and Brian Duffield.

Some early and novel research was sponsored cooperatively by the agencies in Scotland. The CCS and STB led wide - ranging national visitor surveys – say, the 1970 Scottish Leisure Survey – or resource assessment and planning work, such as the over-ambitious Scottish Tourism and Recreation Planning Studies. The latter was backed by the early GIS system TRRIP – the Tourism and Recreation Resources Information Package, which was an innovative venture, albeit primitive by today's GIS standards. Whether these were good or bad ideas to learn from is for others to say, but they did reflect a period of innovation, and a sense of energy and ambition that often comes from structural changes to our administrative systems.

CRAG/CRN had three chairmen from agencies based in Scotland – Tom Huxley of CCS, Richard Broadhurst of FC, and John Thompson from SNH. Colleagues from other member agencies were always very tolerant of the seemingly large Celtic fringe around the table. We always had a different political context over the border, which – after devolution – is now a bit sharper. And we now have legislation under the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 that places Scottish access law firmly in the Scandinavian model, the closest analogy being the statutory position in Norway.

Today, CRN reflects a wider geographic and institutional framework than in the early days. This is welcome because the public sector family is under more pressure to act in a more focused way than in the past and, at times, this may seem to undermine a cooperative approach between bodies with shared interests in this part of the public agenda. These continuing shared interests include serving a public with common needs, of exchanging experience in best practice, and of providing a platform that can help give weight to an activity that is important for many people, but which still doesn't get sufficient political or policy recognition.
John Mackay

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Photographic References

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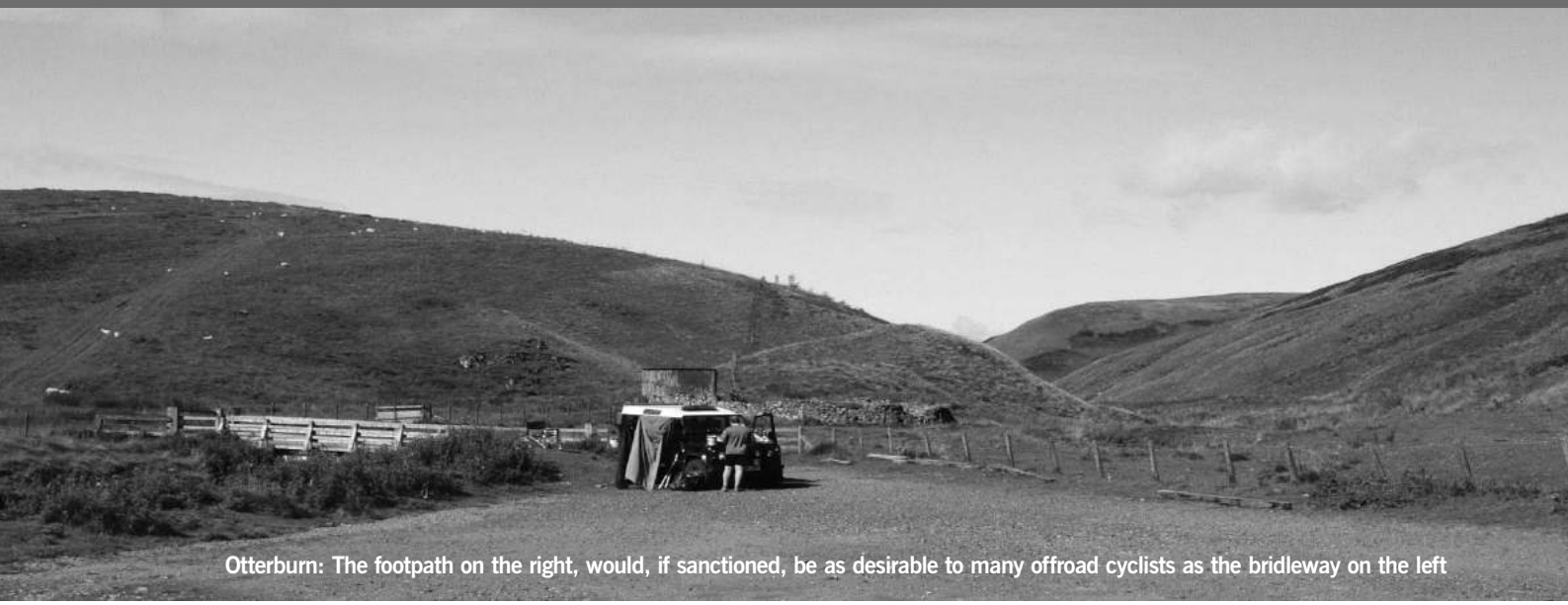
A Way forward for Offroad Cycling

Colin Palmer and **David Moxon,** Cyclists Touring Club



Otterburn: The footpath on the right, would, if sanctioned, be as desirable to many offroad cyclists as the bridleway on the left

The development of the mountainbike has led to a dramatic increase in offroad recreational cycling, much of which is on dedicated Forestry Commission trails.
If government aspirations for encouraging outdoor activities such as cycling are to be realised then mountainbiking opportunities close to home should be developed.
Much of the footpath network is suitable for shared use and there is considerable potential to find ways of unlocking this potential to improve opportunities for cycling.

People have been cycling offroad for decades.

But it is only in the past 20 years that bicycles designed for offroad use have become common, to the point where mountain bikes account for most bicycles sold.
Most cycling on rights of way occurs as a result of the 1968 Countryside Act which introduced rights to cycle on bridleways, and was a pragmatic compromise born of a different age and long predated mountain biking as a mass activity.
There has since been little in the way of serious debate about the potential for developing a rights of way network that caters effectively for the needs of 21st century offroad cyclists, and there is considerable merit in the suggestion that shared use should be the default position - a situation which works well in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe.

The current law would be fine if all rights of way available to horse riders were suited to cycling and all footpaths were not.

But that is very far from being the case.

At present all cyclists and horse riders are concentrated on just 22 per cent of the rights of way network, some of which is also shared with offroad motor vehicles. Even the 22 per cent figure overstates the proportion of bridleways that can in practice be used by cyclists as there is no requirement for highway authorities to maintain them for this use - so while soft ground is good for horses, it is very bad for cyclists.

Walkers by contrast are better catered for than ever (for which the Ramblers' Association deserve much credit) now with extensive areas of Access Land in addition to exclusive rights to 78 per cent of rights of way. Further, the Marine Bill is likely to extend coastal access for walkers, but while entirely welcome, it will further widen the disparity in the treatment of walkers and those wishing to ride in the countryside.
Following the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 it is possible for cyclists to claim Restricted Byways on the basis of 20 years of regular use. However,

the definitive map modification process is a slow and cumbersome procedure, and if a route can readily accommodate cyclists, it seems illogical that they should have to wait 20 years before they can even begin the process of having this fact recognised in law?

As any regular user of rights of way will know, many footpaths are eminently suited to cycling, and, under the Cycle Tracks Act 1984 it is possible to redesignate footpaths as cycle tracks. But this legislation is overdue for revision, as it can result in the path being removed from the definitive map, so is understandably resisted by ramblers as visibility on OS maps is compromised. This was resolved in a recent case in Surrey where half of a path was designated as a cycle track while half remained as a footpath, a pragmatic solution for a suitably wide path.

Damage to paths

Walkers and landowners are sometimes apprehensive about the impact of cyclists on rights of way with a widespread perception that bicycles damage paths. The most rigorous studies, which come from the US, have demonstrated conclusively that cyclists generally cause no more erosion than walkers. If more cyclists, walkers and equestrians use rights of way then increased wear and tear on paths is inevitably the price to be paid for achieving the avowed aim of increasing non motorised leisure in the countryside. Better drainage and vegetation control on byways and bridleways by Highway Authorities would alleviate these difficulties - and certainly on Restricted Byways where cyclists are now the "ordinary traffic" on these paths.

Safety

Whilst proposals for cyclists to share routes with pedestrians sometimes generate objections, the available evidence suggests that these are a minority view. A recent Countryside Agency survey showed that most pedestrians are unconcerned about sharing with cyclists, and reported that actual conflict, while rare, is often exaggerated in later memories.

However, pedestrians, particularly those who are frail or who suffer mobility or sensory impairments, need to be able to use paths without being frightened by cyclists passing unexpectedly close. Heavily used paths therefore need to have sufficient width and sightlines for the level of use they attract, and user separation may be desirable on narrow heavily used "honeypot" paths.

Cyclists themselves need to act sensibly, and better education through a wide understanding of codes of practice for offroad cyclists is essential. Children undertaking cycling proficiency tests should all be instructed on the Sustrans or similar Codes of Practice.

Improving cycling provision

A substantial proportion of the rights of way network is not available to cyclists despite being well suited to cycling. Could the currently available, expensive and bureaucratic, remedies be improved to address this problem?

One option would be to adopt the approach used in many European countries - including Scotland. There, cyclists, as a general rule, can go wherever walkers may go. One argument against extending this approach to England and Wales is that many footpaths are unsuited to cycling, but the same applies equally to bridleways. In 1968 a far higher proportion of bridleways were unsuitable for the bicycles of that time but that was no bar to providing legal rights. So, providing that information on terrain, surface and path furniture is available, there seems no overriding reason why cyclists should not be able to determine suitable routes for their journey. The evidence from Scotland and elsewhere is that extending access in this way rarely increases environmental problems or conflict between users. If cyclists and walkers in England and Wales can readily coexist on heavily used trails such as the Bristol to Bath Path and Camel Trail, then this use should not be a problem elsewhere on the path network.

A prerequisite of any improved provision would be a complete survey of all current paths - possibly using the criteria utilised to assess the suitability of byways and Bridleways for cycling in the 2000 Rights of Way Condition Survey. Rights of Way Improvement Plans can then be used as a vehicle to redress the identified inadequacies of shared use provision. To be successful, this may require new legislation, a revision of regulation or merely robust guidance to encourage Local Authorities and Local Access Forums to agree where improvements will be appropriate - and to facilitate their implementation.

Grading

There will always be paths that are unsuited to even the most ambitious cyclists, and many more that would appeal only to a select few. This has always been the case but it would become more of an issue if a much more liberal approach were adopted which in turn drew a wider range of people into the countryside.

Whatever paths cyclists may use, the ones that they will wish to use will depend in part on the nature of the particular path. Differences in the types of bicycle now in use is greater than ever – anything from road bikes with smooth, skinny tyres designed to be fast on tarmac, to sophisticated full suspension mountain bikes able to cope with rough, challenging terrain. Cyclists themselves range from those who want an easy route to the shops, to those who thrive on technical challenge. There are strong parallels between the kind of information offroad cyclists need and the

information skiers need. Skiers benefit from a simple universal grading system that gives them a broad indication of the level of difficulty of each piste wherever they ski. Comparable grading schemes have been used for cycle trails, sometimes for circular routes, sometimes for individual paths.

For example, Harvey Maps grade individual paths so that cyclists can plan routes tailored to their ability, while Surrey County Council broke new ground by involving local cyclists in grading all bridleways and byways in the county. These gradings were included in a set of free Cycle Guides with cartography based on street maps aimed equally at road and offroad cyclists.

Grading schemes for cyclists on the increasingly popular Forestry Commission trails are already proving their worth and it is a concept that could be refined and extended. Indeed Surrey's experience demonstrates that bridleways and byways can be readily be graded with a fairly small team of volunteers across a county.

Signage & Waymarking

Roadside path signage has improved greatly over the last decade, but subsequent waymarking remains inconsistent, leading to trespass and conflict with landowners, with even experienced map readers finding themselves misled when navigating across lowland field systems.

Good signage and waymarking is particularly important for the mountain biker, as map reading on the move can be a hazardous operation - and significant distances "off the trail" may result from any errors.

Cyclists returning from the Isle of Wight are regularly complementary about the island's signage - not only is it comprehensive and accurate, but also depicts designation and distance - a model which would be highly welcome on the mainland.

As the government seeks to encourage people to be more active, and to encourage more people to use rights of way, it will be increasingly important to provide confidence in users and landowners through appropriately sited route signage.

Conclusion

The popularity of Forestry Commission cycle trails has conclusively demonstrated that there is a hugely unsatisfied demand for mountain bike routes. But most forests are far from our centres of population, so a radical approach to opening more of the rights of way network for shared use is long overdue - particularly where they are close to where people live.
If government is serious about encouraging active lifestyles such as cycling, then it is likely that primary legislation will be needed to transform the current highly fragmented network of bike legal paths into a web of interlinking routes which are pleasant to use and follow - and not only for cyclists, but also for equestrians, who could be considered as being even more disadvantaged by the current system. While cyclists see this as a preferred solution, it is recognised that, in reality, government has not, to date, been persuaded to increase shared provision. So as a minimum we should at least be finding ways of streamlining the map modification order process with a minimum aim to double the network of byways and bridleways within a decade.

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Photographic References

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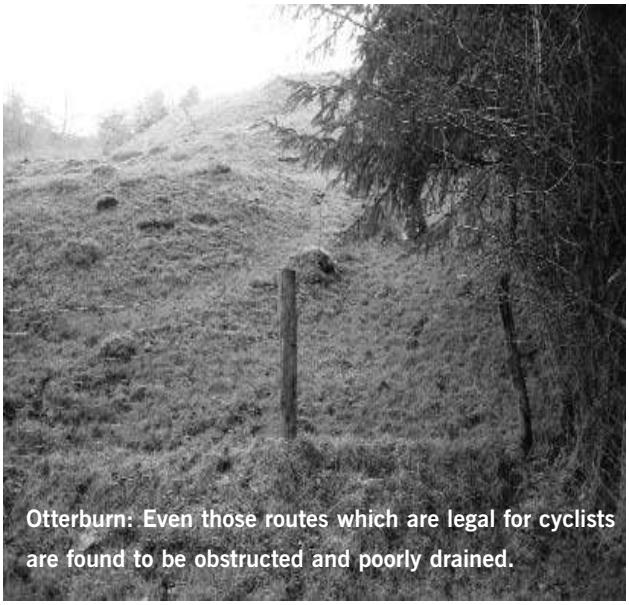
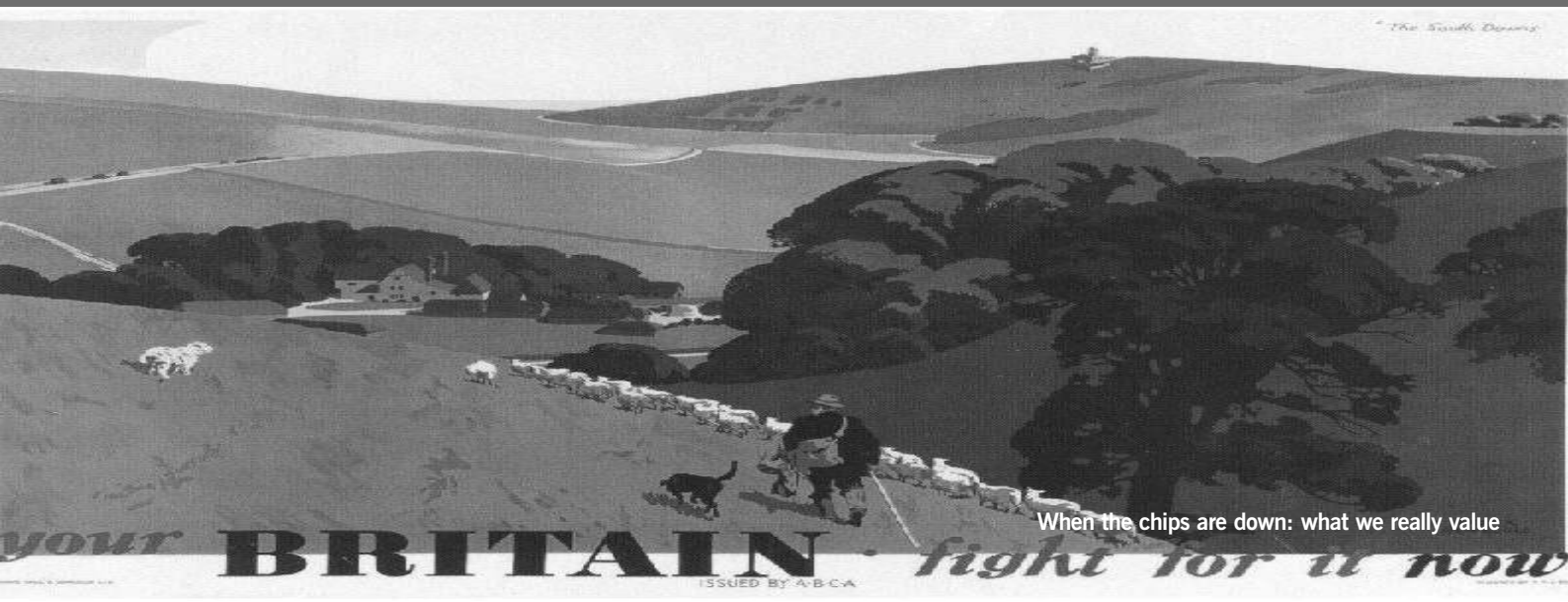


Otterburn: Even those routes which are legal for cyclists are found to be obstructed and poorly drained.

We Know we Belong to the Land: and the Land we Belong to is Grand

Terry Robinson, Natural England



When the chips are down: what we really value

Their eyes used to glaze over when I told my friends that my job was to manage recreation in natural places. I try not to talk about it now. Instead, I tell them about my Mum and her love of country walks and how she passed that on to me through the good company she gave me as a child. And then long days on my bike, on my own, exploring the wild coasts and moors of West Penwith in Cornwall. Tell most people who experience their countryside at this level that it has to be managed and they'll look aghast.

Statutory measures up to 1950 to provide for fresh air and exercise in the countryside envisaged visitors being committed hikers, cyclists and mountaineers: adventurers who would take to the wilderness on its own terms and rough it. Car travel and ice cream did not feature in the formula. There seemed little need to manage the activity.

A threat at an industrial scale

The leisure explosion predicted in the 1960s embodied a very different prospect; tens of millions of people looking for escape from towns and cities: sheer weight of numbers laying waste large swathes of our natural environment; a threat at an industrial scale promising to move recreation in the countryside to a wholly different level; a change analogous to that when mechanised trawler fleets move in on fisheries that were doing fine when worked by a few small boats.

The book, "Britain and the Beast" published in 1937 exemplifies the siege mentality. Chapters by a succession of experts depict the very essence of the country we love swallowed up by the bleak squalor of a giant industrial machine, road-building mayhem and endless ranks of jerry-built soulless housing.

C E M Joad in his book, "The Untutored Townsman's Invasion of the Country" described an imagined coastal "honeypot"; "…from ten to six the place is an inferno…. The cars decant their contents of whining children, nagging mothers and bored fathers." And this was from a champion of countryside access.

There were, indeed places where mass visitation caused damage. Photographs of some of the popular sites in the 1970s are alarming; narrow rural roads clogged with traffic, huge jumbles of parked cars marring hillsides and clifftops, "beauty spots", such as Land's End with extensive portions worn away to bare earth or rock, popular trails with extensive portions eroding away, badly drained and difficult to use and arrays of embattled signage warning people to keep away from land that occupiers wanted to keep private. Commercial outlets selling refreshments and souvenirs to visitors were sometimes poorly planned eyesores and there

were instances where farming, forestry and other rural industries suffered hindrance from visitors.

Control and containment

On the basis of repeated reference to the comparatively small number of cases where damage or disruption occurred, visitors to the natural environment were perceived to be a problem. The fact that such sites were in the minority was given scant regard. Millions of people were visiting the countryside, (ten million on a fine Summer Sunday) and, in most cases the repercussions were nil.

Against this, it is not surprising that countryside recreation centred on control and containment. It was clearly about condescension, too; authority ordaining who might go where, what was available for people to explore, what was to be kept away from the public grasp. Country parks and picnic sites, the two great initiatives of the Countryside Act 1968 were seen as the means of heading off more despoliation of the national parks in facilities close to town. The countryside management projects that started to materialise in the early 1970s provided responsive services to keep visitors out from under the feet of those engaged in "legitimate" rural interests. Countryside interpretation, delivered in visitor centres and outdoors through guided walks and nature trails provided a means of controlling where visitors go and how they behave. This was not a recipe to make people feel welcome.

Off the hook of the "inherent conflict"

But towards the end of the 1980s a subtle change began. Recreation management started to find its feet. Determined and thoughtful attention to the business of managing visitors started to bring sound and lasting solutions so problems, where they did occur either disappeared or could be traced back to failure to apply straightforward and well-tried measures. The attitude that the only solution was to keep people out was looking increasingly tenuous and ill-founded: except in particularly fragile places, restrictions were judged unnecessary and undesirable.

Research was by then showing how essential tourism and day visits were to the economy of many rural areas. National parks and other scenic areas included many communities where the local income from tourism outweighed that from agriculture. Spend per head of different classes of visitor was looking increasingly impressive, as was the contribution to the preservation of the viability of many rural services. This meant that when the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment 1995 Inquiry into the Impact of Leisure on the Environment, took evidence from the (at the time) Sports Council, English Nature and Countryside Commission, the witnesses agreed that they each would have been happy to have spoken to each others' proofs. The Committee found that recreation in the natural environment was not, in itself a problem and a number of memoranda and concordats followed to cement the accord.

What is now discernable is that these years marked a turning point that allowed recreation management to get off the hook of the "inherent conflict". Management needs to secure the aims of recreation and conservation together: both need to flourish: people and the environment need each other. There was no starker evidence of this than the devastation to the local economies of many rural areas when visitors stayed away during the wholesale "closure" of the countryside during the Foot and Mouth epidemic in England and Wales in 2001.

The Rural White Paper had reinforced this in 2000 by treating as one topic conservation of the countryside and its availability to all. Many regretted the Government's decision to publish an Urban White Paper alongside the rural one, fearing it might perpetuate the view of two separate worlds. In fact, the two documents related well and emphasised the view that the interests of town and country are inseparable. As well as proclaiming a set of policies under the banner of, "Countryside for All", the Rural White Paper set the stage for the Diversity Review, an inquiry into the reason why some groups in Society remain stubbornly under-represented as users of the natural environment for leisure.

The White Papers also advanced the understanding of the natural environment as a continuum; the Rural White Paper devotes a substantial section to the countryside around towns and the Urban White Paper emphasises the importance of a high quality environment in towns and cities. Work that followed in this decade, firstly under the Urban Task Force and then the Sustainable Communities Plan and Urban Green Spaces Task Force of 2002 extended this into a richer understanding of quality parks and open spaces in and around where people live.

Green infrastructure

Policies now espouse green infrastructure as an essential component of the standards we require for towns and cities, just as important as healthcare and education, roads, water and drains. Green infrastructure has a job to do: absorbing and controlling surface and flood water, heat amelioration and arresting climate change. The social benefits of green infrastructure in country as well as in town are writ even larger, contributing to the solution of many of today's problems. Poor health, insufficient exercise, weight gain and loss of social cohesion become greater and more costly the longer they remain untackled. Natural greenspace provides a stimulating educational arena; it provides space to play and grow and lead healthier lives; it is where many find spiritual refreshment and release from the stress of urban life.

This is not a new idea. Access to green space and fresh air was seen by the Victorian housing reformers, (including Octavia Hill, who went on to found the National Trust) as crucial to human wellbeing. The Pearson's Fresh Air Fund, (still in action as the Pearson's Holiday Fund), founded in 1892 was one of many charitable initiatives directed at young people deprived of access to fresh air and exercise.

A wave of social action in the 1930s, including the founding of the Youth Hostels Association and the Ramblers' Association was from the same pedigree. It led to the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949.

Julian Huxley, eminent zoologist, member of the 1936 Standing Committee on National Parks and Chairman of the then government's Wildlife Conservation Special Committee, which set the framework for our system of nature reserves, was also a champion of the proposed national health service. His article, "Health for All" in "A Plan for Britain", published by Picture Post in January 1941 argued for recreation in the open air and national parks. Closing the second reading debate on the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Bill in 1949, the Minister, Lewis Silkin made the same point: "the enjoyment of our leisure in the open air and the ability to leave our towns and walk on the moors and in the dales without fear of interruption are….just as much a part of positive health and wellbeing as are the building of hospitals or insurance against sickness."

Encouraging and facilitating use

Over the last fifty years, recreation management has emphasised protection of the environment and the management of human use to minimise any damaging impact.The knowledge accumulated from research and practice over this period means managers can act with confidence in this regard. Recreation management now needs to be as much the business of encouraging and facilitating use as it is of managing the environment itself.

The bulk of the population sees the future of the natural environment as irrelevant to them. Holding the population at arm's length from nature will help perpetuate the feeling. If the environment is not to continue to be marginalised in national and international affairs, it needs more friends. More people more active and more deeply involved in experiencing the natural environment for themselves is a powerful means of creating them.

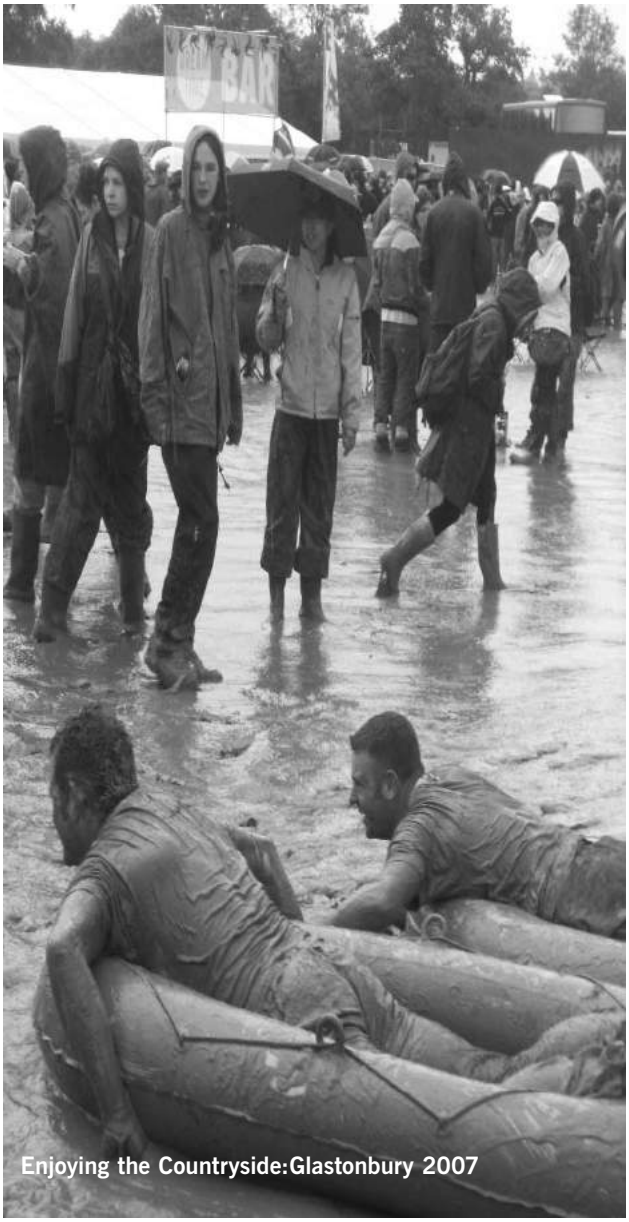
Some people are lucky enough to have mentors like my Mum to kindle their interest. In an urbanised society, far removed from direct experience of nature, few people find it on their own. Recreation management needs to lead them to the magic experience that can happen just by being there. Providing ready access to those already aware of the majesty and life-enriching wonderment of wild nature is an important part of the task.

But there is an even more important job. Recreation managers need to become as adept at looking after people as they are at looking after the environment. They need to address the needs of the whole population; all types of user and every level of interest, especially those unaware of the natural world.

Attracting and encouraging greater and richer involvement needs to start with many potential users at a very elementary level, for example, through led activities that may seem mundane to seasoned open-air users. Recreation managers need to engineer experiences that lead on to an increasingly exciting and satisfying immersion in the natural world.

So will more people become aware of the contribution the natural world makes to their life, recognising its health and restorative properties and treasuring it for the precious asset it is, both to them and to future generations.

The policy is in place for this in England. Natural England was created two years ago with the strong despatch to embrace together both the care of the natural environment and its value to Society. It is from this new body that we may expect the leadership to turn policy into practice.



Enjoying the Countryside:Glastonbury 2007

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Picture 1: When the chips are down:what we really value, British Civilian War Effort Poster 1942, picture credited to Frank Newbould

Picture2: Not a New Idea:Fresh Air for Health, Southern Railway Poster 1937 picture credited to H Alker Tripp

Picture 3: Every Variety of Pleasure, London Transport Poster 1910

Picture 4: Enjoying the Countryside: Glastonbury 2007, picture credited to Ben Robinson

Swim Without Restrictions?

Kate Rew, The Outdoor Swimming Society

In the early 1900s Britain was a keen river swimming nation, with people all over the country free to enjoy the outdoors by dipping in rivers, lakes, lochs and tarns. The Outdoor Swimming Society hopes it won't be long before that day returns.

Just 50 years ago Iris Murdoch, a keen river swimmer, had characters in all her novels swimming outdoors at some point in her books. In 'Under The Net' they get in to the Thames on a slack tide at night. 'The sky opened out above me like an unfurled banner, cascading with stars,' said the narrator. 'As I looked up and down stream I could see on one side the dark pools under Blackfriars Bridge, and on the other the pillars of Southwark Bridge glistening with the moon. The whole expanse of water was running with light. It was like swimming in quicksilver.'

This was written in 1954, a period in history when hundreds of families would picnic at places like Rickmansworth Lake in Hertfordshire, using the wooden bathing huts provided, and this countryside pursuit wound it's way deep into cities via rivers - on a sandy beach by Tower Bridge on hot summer days families would gather, with children getting stuck into sandcastles and swimming.

Swimming outdoors has many things to recommend it – it's free, it's good for you, and most of all, it makes you feel good: there are few problems in life that outlast a wild swim. It puts people in touch with themselves and with nature; there is nothing like coming nose to nose with a dragonfly or a spider drifting downstream on a liferaft of grass to open ones eyes to the countryside. Just by virtue of sinking a few metres below normal eye level, to that of a duck, our well-trodden countryside seems new and wild again.

'The day was beautiful and it seemed to him that a long swim might enlarge and celebrate its beauty,' wrote John Cheever in The Swimmer. This sentiment is at the heart of most wild swimmers, whether they be the 16 year old boys and picnicking families that populate the water at Claverton Wier near Bath, or the stockbrokers, eccentrics and civil servants who still take their early morning constitutionals at the Serpentine Lake in Hyde Park, London.

Swimming outdoors used to be actively promoted: doctors from Victorian times recommended bathing for those of feeble disposition – it was said to improve circulation, be a good nervous tonic. And clubs such as Brighton Sea Swimming Club (founded 1860, and still swimming daily from Arch 205E in Brighton) put on displays of 'amazing feats of natation' such as aquatic tea parties and drinking champagne in the water, in order to encourage other members of the population to jump in and join them.

Today the Outdoor Swimming Society, which I set up in 2005 to popularize outdoor swimming through charity swims, fun events and an online community, is beginning to

look at legal and practical ways in which we can recreate this kind of freedom to enjoy the outdoors in a watery way again.

In the 1930s there were outdoor swimming clubs in practically every town, and river swimming races were held all over the country, by clubs called things like the New Town Water Rats, The Tadpoles and The Sheep's Green Swimmers. In the Cam swimmers raced upstream for 3 miles to Grantchester, in Wales local swimming gymkhana featured races, diving for plates, and widths of the river underwater. All over the UK people swam, in rivers, lakes, tarns, lochs and sea, and as part of this celebration and engagement with the outdoors there were spring boards by ponds, with wartime high diving competitions at places like Henleaze Swimming Club come sleet or snow. We would like this to happen again but there are a series of obstacles - some legal and practical.

In popularity, there are joyful signs that a resurgence might be underway. All over the country passionate swimmers are reestablishing old rituals and inventing new ones. For example, in Topsham in Devon the local ferryman, Mike, has restarted the 'Topsham to Turf' swim, a 2.5km swim from the town to a local pub, the Turf, down the Exe Estuary, which used to be popular in the 1930s. In the first year Mike swam alone, but this year there were around 40 swimmers and it's been embraced with such enthusiasm by the town the event is attended by the Mayor and the town crier.

At the corporate rather than one-man band end of the scale Windermere, a long-standing venue for the length of Windermere swim (10.5miles) and a cross the lake swim by Troutbeck swimming club, saw the people behind mass participation events such as The Great North Run, put on a 'Great North Swim' this year. It attracted an outstanding 2200 swimmers completing 1 mile, including the GB Olympic open water medalists, David Davies, Kerri Anne Payne and Cassie Patton.

And while there are only a few river swimming clubs of the old type remaining, a new tradition is setting up. All over the country triathletes are jumping into open water (often the most uninspiring open water, but fresh water under a big blue sky nonetheless) to complete triathlons, of which there are now over 650 in Britain. Many of those competing join open water swim clubs that are springing up between April and October, with hundreds gathering to slither into their wetsuits at prescribed times in waterparks and boating lakes which previously only allowed sports like sailing and windsurfing. These clubs could be the blueprints for the river swimming clubs of the future.

The OSS is volunteer run, and is currently seeking to increase the number of volunteers at the helm so we can both respond to all the enquiries we receive and increase what we do. It will continue to develop at a slow and organic pace, as all those running it have demanding full time jobs so it's unrealistic to think we can put on even half of the bright ideas we currently have. We have, however, a solid fan base of 3200 members which grows weekly, and as enthusiasts, we have time – a lifetime, perhaps.

Our objectives for 2009 are to:

- Increase our online OSS swim map: this is a map of all the great places that OSS members have swum, which people refer to when they want to go for a dip.
- Continue sending members regular newsletters and updating news stories on www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com.Newsletters are a combination of news, chat and swim tips.
- Run more charity swims, which serve as a good first time swim for those who want to get into the water, but don't know quite how. The OSS swims are smaller, friendly, non-competitive events: if swimmers want to get their heads down and power on they can, but there is

just as much room for social swimmers. In 2009 we are turning our focus to charities that support the watery environments we wish to swim in.
In 2006 and 2007 we held charity swims Breastrokes with USA PRO in the Serpentine and Windermere which raised £150,000 for Cancer Research.

- Expand our membership to 5000 over Christmas.

- Clarify the legal situation about outdoor swimming. At the moment the OSS is in a legal no-mans land much of the time which is inhibiting our growth, but one member has just arranged for the law firm in which he is a partner - Berwin Leighton Paisner LLP – to take us on as their pro bono client to help resolve these issues. The issues for us are that we wish to promote outdoor swimming, and are happy to see our members on the Outdoor Swimming Society Facebook page arranging to meet each other for a swim. We'd like to do free peer swims, where our members who are used to swimming outdoors take those who aren't for a dip. We want to continue to live by the motto that each swimmer is responsible for themselves, and must do their own risk assessment before getting in. We would like to build a forum where people can share their tips about swimming outdoors safely and reading water, without pretending that we have the definitive lowdown on it (we are enthusiasts, and do not wish to invent an accreditation scheme which would make us experts). We would like to start running open water swim clinics where water sense is part of the day. But doing all this we are aware that we may be legally liable. We have no wish to start charging for membership, doing risk assessments, creating frame works, accreditation schemes and life guarding our own weekend jaunts: we want swimming to remain as free and spontaneous as going for a cycle or walk. Hopefully during 2009 we will get more clarity on these issues.

- Create a legal blueprint document that swimmers can give to sympathetic farmers and landowners and say 'can we swim here a few times a week? We'll pay £x a swim, and with this document you will not be liable'. The document will, like all good countryside arrangements, be based on responsibilities on behalf of the swimmer – but we are optimistic that there are many landowners out there who would be happy to see this kind of arrangement.

We are realistic about our ability to meet and talk to all the interested parties that could assist and inform us on our journey, but always keen to embrace people who can help the OSS on it's journey. So whether you want to strip and dip once a year, or set up an outdoor swim club in your area, do visit www.outdoorswimmingsociety.com and jump in and join us.

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Photographic References:

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"Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile"

Ross Millar

Bearnagh

Looking back but looking forward in Northern Ireland

Having given the structure of this piece some thought, I have decided to write firstly about my own 16 year experiences of 'dipping in and out' of CRN and then to consider the changes that have taken place in Countryside Recreation in Northern Ireland over the past 40 years, concluding with some thoughts about the fairly immediate future.

At a personal level, I firstly want to put on record how much I have always valued CRN, the people I have met, and the lessons I have learned from and with others. It pleases me greatly to see how well Ireland, both North and South, is now reflected in CRN's membership.

When I joined CRN in 1992, Derek Casey, later Chair of the then English Sports Council was the Network Chair. A new 'Environment Service', within Government's Department of Environment for Northern Ireland had been established with three 'directorates' covering the 'Natural' Heritage, the 'Built' Heritage and Environmental Protection, a huge remit for which it was grossly understaffed and underfunded. Within Natural Heritage, the bogs and the birds had a growing raison d'être through both existing legislation and forthcoming EU Directives. Recreation on the other hand wasn't a priority merely being covered by the clause in the legislation (1) stating that the Department may "take such steps as it considers expedient to encourage the provision and improvement, for persons resorting to the countryside, of facilities for the enjoyment of the countryside and open-air recreation in the countryside".

The Department's original position on this role was that it was catering admirably through the provision of its 7 Country Parks and Countryside Centres and indeed it is true that these were and still are attractive and unique places to visit but they are largely controlled environments.

What had been largely overlooked was the wider recreational use of the countryside, the growing range of countryside based activities and clear evidence that more and more people wanted to enjoy these places and pursuits, and that this required both development and promotion.

Enter me, drafted in to a new post to supposedly set this right and given a remit for establishing management structures, creating networks and, with that, given a Countryside Centre of my very own in the Mourne Mountains. Heaven had arrived early, I thought.

Having just completed a 'mid-life' M.Sc. specialising in 'protected landscapes', I was given the task of promoting and managing the 3 main re-designated, post 1985, AONBs (Mournes, Antrim Coast and Glens, and the Causeway Coast) and for facilitating 26, then largely disinterested, District Councils to develop and maintain access routes as 'suggested' they do in the legislation (2) (again it contains lots of 'mays'). At that stage there was myself, one assistant and two Ranger staff in the Mournes although we did have access to considerable capital funds including EU programme funds.

To network with others who had 'been there and bought the tee shirt' was essential. However, my first thought on attending CRN meetings, which were then almost always in London, was just how many people in so many organisations were 'involved' and how much had or appeared to be happening in England, Scotland and Wales.

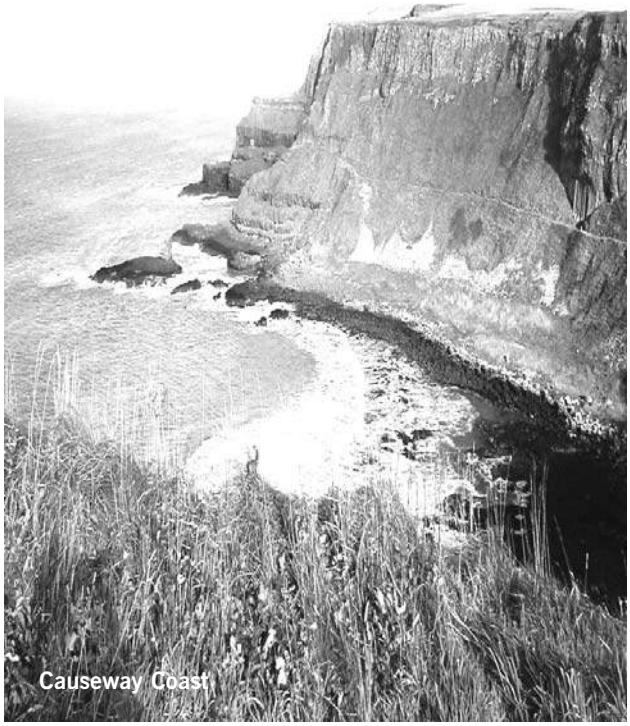
Where could we even hope to begin? The 'agencies' people I encountered were all so apparently knowledgeable and erudite, I was in awe. However, they were also very 'specific' and research focused and I quickly concluded that, as with most things in 'Norn Irelan', we should just do our own thing. Ironically we have always had a great advantage in being small and working very much with other individuals with equally broad remits notably in the field of tourism and sport. At that stage I attended to just listen and learn since we had nothing much to bring to the table.

From my perspective, there was then (mid-90s) a sea change in CRN. Some of this was down to the move away from centralist Westminster thinking (and consequently power when the local Assemblies were actually established) but a lot was also down to, as usual, people. So, for me, enter Richard Broadhurst. Richard did not forget CRRAG\CRN's research roots but he saw the value of real networking, working with people and 'going to' places. We thus moved, and I hope I am not being unfair, from what I felt was a 'sharing Committee', to what I regard as a proper Network. We also created one great way to see what other people were doing on the ground and to learn from those on the ground and share our experiences. To me, this is fundamental as to what CRN is still about and we have a stronger, more relevant body as a result.

I did eventually coax my colleagues over to Northern Ireland for a somewhat 'infamous' 3 day meeting at the brand, spanking new 'Rural College'. Those who came not only found out how differently things were done in Northern Ireland but returned to the 'mainland' acting as emissaries for future trips, in fact we now have trouble keeping people away but that is not a complaint. Many of our own relevant agencies have increasingly seen the value of CRN and have joined up in more than name. Having also created our own Network, specific to Northern Ireland, the Countryside Access and Activities Network (3), it also became a member in its own right. A deal was done in a pub to bring in the Heritage Council of Ireland and this opened the way for other bodies from the Republic to follow, so we now have a true geographic network of Britain and Ireland based on our common geography and the commonality of our cultures and of course we are talking 5 nations now.

For various reasons I have not been so 'active' in CRN these last 5 years but I see a Network that has forged bonds and created the links to allow certainly us in Northern Ireland to put what we do in perspective and to continually learn from others. What pleases me most is that I now believe that others are also learning from us and some of the innovative things that have happened and will continue to happen all over Ireland.

Northern Ireland has come through a lot in forty years. The 'troubles' perverted not only how we as a nation were seen but how we were governed and what the priorities of Government were. When people are being killed and towns blown apart, it was difficult to think of recreation in the way that other countries did. People wanted safe, controlled environments, so Leisure Centres flourished to the extent that we had more per head of population than anywhere else in Europe.



Causeway Coast

We also not only had the Country Parks I referred to earlier, but (at that stage) innovative and inspired Forest Parks and a really good (and still flourishing) range of National Trust properties. These were places people felt safe, so although we had legislation for asserting Public Rights of Way and for creating Public Paths, the vast majority of our 26 local authorities established in 1972, did little about access and were under no pressure to do anything to create informal path networks. We also had and still have a very strong agricultural lobby and the issues around security, both personal and for property, and liability were always raised. Some local authorities to their credit created their own Country Parks but again these were managed environments.

Through ourselves (DoE) developing a subsidised network of Countryside Officers within our local authorities, over the years we have been able to make some progress on wider access to the countryside. This has been done largely on the basis of what we refer to as 'permissive paths' created under local government legislation which allows Councils to enter into agreements with land owners. I have no doubt that the vast majority of these paths would have qualified for assertion as Rights of Way (RoW) but the local authorities didn't have the stomach for the hassle involved as each attempt at asserting a RoW invariably involved a 'row', as the name suggests, and the final word in NI lies with the Courts with some very bizarre judgements on the few cases that did reach that length. The result of this is that even the vast majority of paths around our world famous Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast are technically only 'permissive' just awaiting an irked or cantankerous landowner to erect those friendly 'go away' notices.

In the 90s and early 2000s, Northern Ireland was awash with money notably from a range of EU programmes. Invariably this was for capital works, so we had a rash of Heritage Centres, Visitor Centres and the like, many of which had no chance of economic sustainability but were seen as creating hope and infrastructure for otherwise desperate communities. Some have closed, some are now restaurants or pubs. There was however some innovative use of EU funds not least in the Mourne Mountains through dealing with footpath erosion and creating small car parks.

In a very synoptic fashion, the issues that faced Countryside Recreation in Northern Ireland in the 90s were: poor access legislation; small and mostly disinterested local authorities; the perception that we were catered for by Country Parks etc; no lobby for change; Direct Rule from Westminster effectively leaving civil servants running the Government Departments; a very strong Department of Agriculture who, somewhat perversely, picked up the role of the Rural Development body and is and ever will be 'the farmer's friend'; a Tourist Board but few tourists, and a Sports Council focused on performance and team sports with all of these existing within a political vacuum.

To tackle this diverse and somewhat perverse situation, with the help and support of a Direct Rule Minister, in 1998 Northern Ireland's first Countryside Recreation Strategy was published. Amongst other things this led to the creation of the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN), the employment of a growing team of dedicated development and marketing staff and the capacity to develop or coordinate the development of infrastructure for the increasing diverse and increasingly popular range of countryside based activities. More about CAAN can be found on its website www.countrysiderecreation.com

Emanating from this capacity building over the last 10 years, when 'the Troubles' finally packed up their kit bag, we suddenly find we are well placed in terms of skills, knowledge and experience to develop a range of first class and often innovative countryside recreation facilities. To give but one example, the Lough Erne Canoe Trail, the first of its kind in the British Isles, won the British Urban Regeneration Award for "Innovation" and we are now going on to develop 3 more. Our marketing publications, see www.walkni.com as an example, I would suggest are now even being copied stylistically by others. We also have a dedicated Countryside Recreation Officer within Sport NI and a growing awareness of activity tourism as a vital product.

So what of the future?

We now have a fledgling local Assembly and although still bedding in, we are using the direct access to Ministers that this brings to show the value of Countryside Recreation not just for tourism but more importantly for the health and 'wellbeing' of our own population. However, as a former Civil Servant, I am only too aware that it will take some time to break down a compartmentalised and risk-averse mindset that Direct Rule in particular allowed to flourish within the public service. Matters are certainly not helped by the increasing use of audit and value for money criteria ironically brought about by the profligate expenditure of the 90s. It is to satisfy such demands that we ourselves need both the research of others and research that is specific to Northern Ireland and the funds to do it. Research funding is not easy because although everyone wants it, no one is keen to pay for it. Primarily, we need a few 'champions' within Government, Ministers in particular who can see the value in every sense of Countryside Recreation, the potential of our forests and our public land, and break current protectionist thinking.

The other major opportunity for us lies in the proposed reorganisation of local government which will create 11 new Councils (instead of the former 26) and to be implemented by 2011. These Councils will have increased powers and will have greater recreation functions and have a mandate for that nebulous concept of 'wellbeing' exercised through community planning. Given the structures that we created, notably CAAN and local Heritage Trusts, partly to deal with the existing multiplicity of authorities, it is imperative that we do not throw the baby out with the bathwater and that we

build on the success of these bodies.

Having packed up our 'troubles', I do believe we have good reason to smile but keeping the lyrical theme, 'There may be troubles ahead' but while there's mountains and water and beaches and air.....let's face the music and dance!

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(2) Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983

(3) CAAN is the Northern Ireland Countryside Access and Activities Network see:www.countrysiderecreation.com

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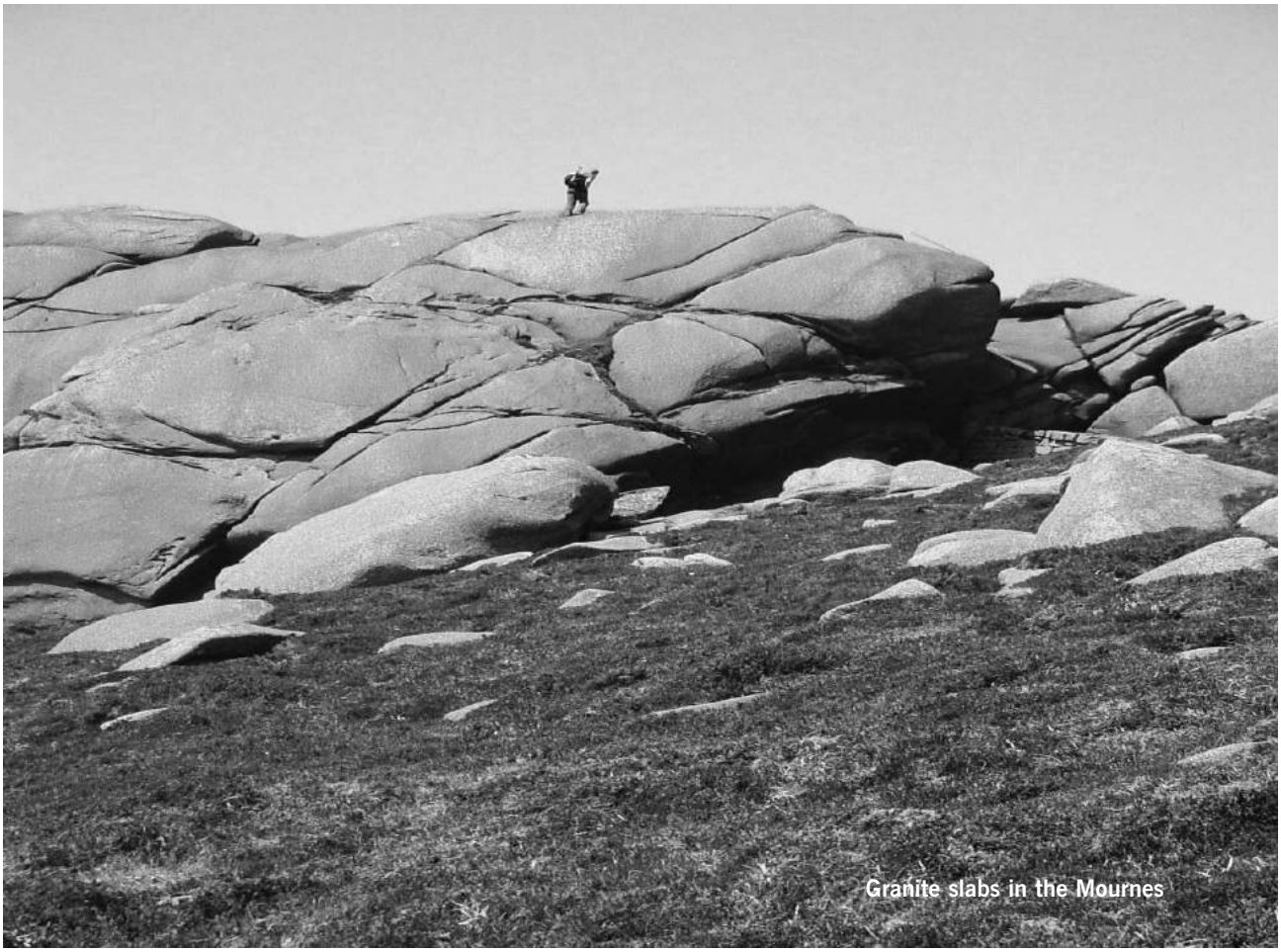

Granite slabs in the Mournes

Country Parks: Celebrating 40 years of Evolution of a Greenspace Family Member

David Solly, Natural England

Rother Valley Country Park

Forty years ago the term 'Country Park' was first recognised with the publication of the 1968 Countryside Act. Today around 430 sites in England call themselves Country Parks. Used by millions of people for a wide range of activities from regular walks through to once only events, they continue to adapt to fit the needs of society and offer huge opportunities and benefits for people of all ages and abilities in a challenging and rapidly changing world where political agendas and people's expectations are continuously evolving.

Today they are a key part of the family of places that offer access to the natural environment in England. 113 have achieved the national benchmark standard for quality of greenspace (the Green Flag Award). With recognition growing of the benefits of the natural environment to people's health and well being, and the likely impacts of climate change, the time is right to revisit country parks, their development and how their evolution may continue in the future.

Early Origins

The idea of country parks as we know them today first emerged in the 1920s - but with an original purpose very different to that they serve today. In the 1920s improvements in working conditions led to people finding they had more time for themselves – as a result the idea of using that time for leisure activities began to grow. This was mirrored within policy proposals of the time. In 1929 two types of National Park were identified by the Addison Committee; areas of outstanding interest to the nation as a whole and areas conveniently situated to provide large scale access for those living in industrial centres.

In the end only areas of outstanding interest were recognised in the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, as the National Parks we know today. It was 1966 before a Government White Paper proposed the establishment of country parks and picnic sites.

The 1950s saw a further explosion in this as increasing leisure time was complemented by the widespread growth of car ownership, the end of fuel rationing and the resulting freedom of travel. Picnics in the countryside became one of the fashionable ways to spend leisure time.

Commentators during these periods were expressing widespread concern on how the growth of leisure and desire for new recreation opportunities may lead to an invasion of the countryside by people, with serious consequences

anticipated for the countryside's special qualities.

'Three great waves have broken across the face of Britain since 1800. First the sudden growth of dark industrial towns. Second, the thrusting movement along far flung railways. Third, the sprawl of car based suburbs. Now we see under the guise of a modest word, the surge of the fourth wave which could be more powerful than all the others. The modest word is leisure.' (Michael Dower, 1965)

As a result, the early thinking on country parks was that they were envisaged as places that could take the pressure off the wider countryside.

Country parks were one of the key proposals of the 1968 Countryside. The Act empowered country parks' recognition by government, which was enacted through the Countryside Commission. Yet it did not empower their designation – a subtle point that was destined to become crucial over time.

Subsequent to the passing of the Act, the Countryside Commission confirmed the criteria that sites should meet to be considered a country park:

- readily accessible for motor vehicles and pedestrians.
- provided with an adequate range of facilities, including. as a minimum, parking facilities, lavatories, either with in or adjacent to the park, and a supervisory service;
- operated and managed by statutory bodies or private agencies, or combination of.

In setting out these criteria, there were a number of caveats, which included:

- The prescription in b) of these minimum facilities differ entiates a country park from countryside on which there are rights of access and from a picnic site, although a country park should include both.
- The duties of a supervisory service were seen as differing according to the special functions of the park, but should include at least litter collection, information services and the enforcement of byelaws or other regulations relating to the park
- The sites did not have to be owned by the managing agencies and could be a combination of parts working to a plan agreed by the managing bodies of each part
- It is not essential for the park, or any part of it, to be open to the public all the time.

Evolution of function

With the 1968 Act in place, the first country parks were established. Local Authorities readily welcomed the concept and committed to their management, taking full advantage of support in the form of recognition and significant funding from the Countryside Commission. The Commission also gave public profile to the brand by establishing the country park logo.

By the 1970s it was becoming recognised that the existing sites were not always performing their intended function of providing opportunities for residents in towns and cities. Early country parks tended to be established estates on the edge of areas of high quality countryside, but often away from centres of population. As a result, targeting of support was realigned towards establishing sites closer to where people lived.

The 1980s saw Government priorities evolve from supporting places to seeking outcomes – which in terms of recreation and access policy meant a greater focus on reducing barriers to accessing the countryside. For country parks, it meant effort and support was focussed on strengthening their role as gateways from which the public could make use of good connections to networks such as public rights of way to explore the wider countryside.

By 1995 there were 220 country parks and 260 picnic sites throughout England, which between them were attracting some 30-40 million visits per year.

Challenging times

The process of evolution has often proved challenging, with maintaining sufficient resources for management remaining challenging today. In early years Countryside Commission was able to support the establishment of sites, on the basis that ongoing management would be taken on by the site managers, the majority of whom were local authorities. In the 1980s national policy priorities shifted from establishing sites towards encouraging people from groups who were less likely to visit the countryside– as a result, funding was focussed on mechanisms that were considered most effective at encouraging new and more visitors. Country parks have not always been seen as being strong on delivering this – at this period, they had an image of providing services targeted at visitors that already visited the site.

By 1992 the shift towards resources for site management being provided by site managers (many of which were local authorities) was complete, with Countryside Commission direct funding for site management having largely ceased. At the same time local authority funding was increasingly under pressure, both from cutbacks and prioritisation on core services and statutory requirements. In some bodies, the changes in national policy and funding was interpreted as indicating that sites such as parks and country parks were no longer considered important components of recreation provision. The net result was a reduction of political support for site management and a scaling back of allocated resources.

With many country parks managed by Local Authorities, the scaling back of support impacted significantly on the quantity and quality of their delivery - examples emerged of facilities and staffing being scaled back because of a lack of

resources for management, and there were even a number of sites that were closed. Similar pressures were also being felt by the managers of more formal urban parks, where the impacts were even more severe.

Renaissance

In 1999 the Countryside Agency (the successor to the Countryside Commission) gave the following evidence to a Government Select Committee: "Country parks are now at risk of neglect and decline just like urban parks were in the 1960s and 1970s. Action is needed now to ensure that they have a better future", whist at the same time endorsing their continued relevance and stating the Agency's desire to lead a renaissance of country parks. In doing this the Agency made it clear that its role was not to be on the ground further developing country parks, a role which lay with the authorities and private bodies that managed them.

The Select Committee's recommendation that a financial commitment should be made to make the Agency's leadership of the renaissance effective. Despite this, the Agency was unsuccessful in securing funds from the treasury and the National Lottery's New Opportunities Fund –the result was to focus the Agency's involvement on capture of evidence, the collation and sharing of good practice and the subsequent championing of the value and importance of country parks.

Research was commissioned by the Countryside Agency in 2003 on the current state of country parks to underpin the renaissance. This considered approximately 170 sites across England. Emerging messages included that there were still many good and well managed sites and much good practice – yet there were a significant number of country parks in decline, and that where this was the case, the sites concerned were getting steadily worse rather than improving. The Agency also supported the establishment of the Country Parks Network, as a forum for managers and those interested in country parks to share good practice, experience and knowledge. The Networks steering group is made up of practioners from national bodies (such as Environment Agency, Forestry Commission and English Heritage), Local Authorities and relevant sector non-governmental bodies (such as the Local Government Association and the Countryside Management Association). Alongside the coordination of the network, this group has provided a link between delivery and policy on issues related to country parks and in particular has taken forward the updating of the original criteria for country parks to ensure they properly reflect the role of these sites in the sector today.

Country Parks Today

Today 430 sites that call themselves country parks are known to exist in England alone, with new sites still being considered as part of regeneration projects.

TABLE 1: Number of sites calling themselves Country Parks (aligned to Regional Boundaries)

Region	No of Country Parks
North East	29
North West	62
Yorkshire and Humber	32
East Midlands	50
West Midlands	45
East of England	68
London	21
South East	83
South West	40
Total	**430**

Country parks remain a strong mechanism for delivering multiple benefits and cross sector delivery close to where people live. Many are truly multi-functional green spaces, for example, they often comprise one or more habitats yet provide education, access opportunities where people can make use of within a healthy lifestyle. Many are a blend of natural, historic and contemporary landscape components which presents an attractive setting for investment.

They are recognised by the planners both within the greenspace strategies that all local authorities are required to develop (under the Governments Planning Policy Guidance statement No. 17) and as a component of green infrastructure, for which recognised Growth Areas and Growth Points are required to develop a strategy for.

Ensuring the availability of sufficient quantity of high quality natural greenspace close to where people live features strongly in Natural England's strategic priorities, and country parks are now considered a key part of the family of places that offer opportunities for contact with the natural environment.

Raising Standards

Although their role in the sector has matured, many challenges remain. Earlier I highlighted how the 1968 Countryside Act left the decision to apply the name country park to a site to the bodies managing these sites. The net result has been that there are examples where the name has been used for sites that do not meet the established criteria, which has diluted the value of the brand to visitors, as the core facilities and services that they were entitled to expect a site to have are not always present.

With evidence suggesting that the lack of or poor quality of facilities and services is amongst the barriers to people visiting sites, this inconsistency in the brand becomes all the more important.

Natural England has recognised the potential of standards as a mechanism to clearly define the quality and quantity of natural greenspace that is desirable and encourage delivery of greenspace to these benchmarks. Achieving standards

can be helpful in building support amongst local politicians and decision makers by clearly and publicly demonstrating delivery is being effectively achieved to a high standard.

To re-establish the country park brand and rebuild public confidence Natural England is exploring with the Country Parks Network the options for an accreditation scheme. This is intended to highlight to practitioners and the public the sites that are genuinely offering what a country park is expected to. It is envisaged any scheme would be based on the updated version of the original criteria that the Country Parks Network Steering Group has established. Further details of the scheme as they emerge will be shared by Natural England and the Country Parks Network (www.countryparks.org.uk)

Looking towards the future

Country parks remain popular amongst visitors and are an important component of the accessible natural greenspace close to where people live.
There remain many challenges for country parks and their managers. Included amongst these is securing resources and political support for site management – in turn, this is in part about becoming better at articulating the benefits for people and the natural environment that country parks offer.

Although they deliver benefits across a wide range of agendas country parks do not always receive the recognition for this that they deserve. All too often they have been seen as simply part of parks and greenspace provision, arguably a fringe benefit, ripe for cutback when resources are tight. Now they are beginning to gain justified recognition as an essential part of green infrastructure and ecosystem service provision as well as key providers of health, wellbeing and social benefits, of education and learning opportunities and as areas of natural greenspace that both enhance the attractiveness of an area, and create an attractive setting for economic investment. Yes, there are examples of sites where there is work to do to improve the quality of the facilities and customer service they offer visitors.

Yet there are now many examples for practitioners to learn from, of creative partnerships between parks, local businesses and communities that deliver the facilities and services people want to a high standard, and secure the country park's role within its local communities. In recent years significant numbers of country parks have been successful in achieving the Green Flag Award, the benchmark standard for quality greenspace – in 2008 this figure has risen to 113.

With their place on the greenspace agenda increasingly recognised amongst policymakers and the increasing recognition of the importance of a healthy lifestyle and the part well managed natural green spaces can play in this, country parks still have much to offer today.

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Photographic References:

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Entrance sign at Worcester Woods Contry Park

Agency Profile

Each issue of *Countryside Recreation* will profile a relevant agency/organisation.

Sport England

Heather Kennedy, Senior Development Manager- Environment

Sport England- Yorkshire Region

Sport England is a non departmental public body and National Lottery distributor. We are the government agency responsible for developing a world-class community sports system in England. We report into the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

Sport England is one of three national agencies involved in the development of sport in England. The Youth Sport Trust is responsible for school sport; Sport England is responsible for community sport; while UK Sport is responsible for elite sport and world-class events. All three agencies work closely together to make sure sports development is connected.

Sport England Strategy 2008 – 2011 Grow, Sustain and Excel

With the Olympics and Paralympics due to come to London and the UK in 2012, Sport England was asked to review its strategy for community sport in England. Following extensive consultation it was deemed that Sport England should focus on the creation of a world leading community sports system to get more people playing and enjoying sport and to help those with talent get to the very top.

This radical new strategy was published in June 2008. It aims to address the fundamental challenges facing sport, and particularly community sport in England. As such, it features a significant shift in focus and direction for Sport England as an organisation.

The new approach is designed to capitalise on the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presented by the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, and to use its power to inspire more people to take part in and succeed in sport.

The strategy commits Sport England to deliver on a series of demanding targets by 2012/13:

- One million more people doing more sport
- A 25% reduction in the number of 16 year olds who drop out of five key sports – to be agreed from plans submitted by the national governing bodies of sport
- Improved talent development systems in at least 25 sports
- A measurable increase in people's satisfaction with their experience of sport – the first time the organisation has set such a qualitative measure.
- A major contribution to the delivery of the five hour sports offer for children and young people.

The new strategy is based on the delivery of three key outcome areas, which will combine to achieve the targets already highlighted:

Outcome 1 – **Grow** - about 15% of Sport England's investment will focus on increasing regular sports participation by 1 million more adults. In addition, we will contribute to the five hour sports offer for children and young people

Outcome 2 - **Sustain** - about 60% of our investment will focus on sustaining current participants in sport by making sure people have a quality experience and by action to cut the number of 16 – 18 year olds dropping out of sport

Outcome 3 - **Excel** - about 25% of investment will focus on systems and pathways to accelerate talent development

Who do we work with?

Sport England does not deliver sport itself. We are not the people who wear the tracksuits - we support the people who do. We are working closely with a range of partners to deliver the strategy, including:

- National governing bodies of sport (eg British Triathlon, British Cycling, British Canoe Union, Royal Yachting Association or the British Equestrian Federation)
- National funded partners (eg English Federation for Disability Sport, Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation)
- Central government
- Local government
- County sport partnerships
- Higher and further education
- The commercial sector

What investments do we make?

Since 1994 we have invested more than £550m of government funding and £2.2 billion National Lottery funding into sport and physical activity.

National investment is channelled through national partners, such as Women's Sport Foundation or one of our recognised National Governing Bodies of Sport and some major projects, for example, the Redgrave Pinsent Rowing Lake in Caversham, Wembley Stadium or the 2012 Aquatics Centre.

As a result of our new strategy we are reviewing the future of our Regional investment programme known as the Community Investment Fund and have conducted a public consultation. The outcome of this consultation will be published on the Sport England website.

Sport in the wider landscape.

The new strategy focuses Sport England's role exclusively on sport. Sport can and does play a major role in achieving wider social and economic benefits – notably on the health front. However, the driving force behind the strategy and investment is to address the needs of sport participants across the country. This provides a clear distinction with the physical activity agenda being driven by a number of departments, including the Department of Health and Department of Transport, as well as our colleagues within the Countryside Recreation Network.

Further Information:

More information about Sport England, including copies of Grow Sustain Excel: The Sport England Strategy 2008–20011 can be found at: www.sportengland.org

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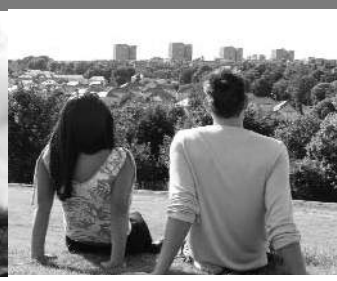
Photographic References:

All photographs credited to Sport England

News



COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION NETWORK

Countryside Recreation to go electronic?

Are printed journals just "so yesterday", and electronic the way to go? CRN is keen to adopt the most preferred and cost effective way of communicating the good practice that is shared via the journal. We will shortly be consulting the journal readers on various options we could adopt, such as introducing e-newsletters, articles on the website, and maintaining the current format. We'll do this via a quick and simple online survey, where we'll also be interested to hear of any good communication examples adopted by others.

Your views will count, so remember to let us hear them

COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION NETWORK

New jobs service for *Countryside Recreation* Readers

The Countryside Recreation Network is pleased to offer a new job vacancies listing on its website. The aim of this service to provide a current list of job vacancies relevant to countryside recreation and access professionals in the public, private and voluntary sectors. Please see below for details of how to advertise any relevant vacancies in this section:
Rate: £200.00 per vacancy (Max. 1 A4 page).
Payment: Once advertising arrangements have been confirmed, we will send you an invoice in the post. Once you receive the invoice, payment can be made by cheque, BACS or online via credit card.
Timescales: Job adverts can be displayed for a maximum of six weeks. Please allow at least two days notice for jobs to be uploaded on to our website.
Volunteer Jobs: These can be advertised free of charge.

If you are interested in advertising through the CRN website, please contact the CRN manager by email: crn@shu.ac.uk or by telephone on 0114 2254494.

COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS AND ACTIVITIES NETWORK NORTHERN IRELAND (CAAN)

Canoe NI goes from strength to strength.

Northern Ireland's canoe trails are complete – for now! It is argued by many that the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) have left the best canoe trail to last, with Strangford Lough Canoe Trail being the fifth following on from trails developed on Lough Erne, River Blackwater, Lower Bann and Lough Neagh.

The Strangford Lough Canoe Trail provides 80 square nautical miles of paddling paradise. One of the United Kingdom's most scenic areas, it is a canoeist's dream come true. From its many picturesque islands to its abundance of wildlife including curious seals, it is somewhere that can be enjoyed by canoeists of all abilities.

The official launch on 2nd July on Salt Island was certainly one with a difference with dignitaries and guests being transferred to the island by boat and then onwards by canoe accompanied by qualified instructors from Clearsky Adventure Centre, providing the exciting opportunity to sample the Strangford Lough Canoe Trail first hand.

Guests were also welcomed inside Northern Ireland's first

ever bothy which was also opened as part of the launch. The bothy owned by The National Trust has been restored from the original cottage dwelling and now offers basic shelter (for up to 12 people) with running water, wood burning stove, and toilets. There are also two official camping areas on the island – one within the bothy grounds and one on the opposite side of the island.

The quality product has been backed up by a comprehensive marketing campaign. The backbone of which is the new Canoe Northern Ireland brochure and improved www.canoeni.com. The Canoe Northern Ireland brochure follows on from the successful Adventure Northern Ireland brochure and award nominated Walk Northern Ireland brochure, it provides first hand accounts of the trail and most importantly a comprehensive list of canoeing providers so you can get out there and enjoy the trails.

CanoeNI.com has been significantly developed to include a new packages, accommodation, news, events, offers and e-newsletter registration making it – your definitive guide to canoeing in Northern Ireland.

With phase one now complete CAAN are currently planning the development of a series of coastal canoe trails along Northern Ireland's spectacular coastline; imagine being able to take in the sights such as the world renowned Giant's Causeway and the awe inspiring Rathlin Island from your sea kayak. This along with a proposed canoe signage strategy highlighting all the best sites for canoeing throughout Northern Ireland will definitely make it a must go destination.

If you do not believe us, Lucinda Manouch from Canoe & Kayak Magazine (Britain's best selling canoe magazine) commented in a recent article "With the launch of yet another inspirational canoe trail, Northern Ireland has recently become one of the most exciting 'must go' destinations in Europe."

BRITISH WATERWAYS

Boating Demand In Scotland

British Waterways has recently completed a study, undertaken by TNS, which aimed to find out more about current and potential levels of demand for boating in Scotland.
The study involved three main stages – a survey of boat owners with long term moorings on the Scottish canal network, a survey of boaters who had recently used Scotland's canals to transit from the North Sea to the West Coast and a survey of boat owners in 9 European countries who may be interested in visiting Scotland in future. A mix of survey methods were used with over 700 of British Waterway's existing customers surveyed by post while the survey of over 1,500 potential users was undertaken online.The survey of potential users used the TNS Activities Panel to identify recent boating participants and boat owners.

If you would like to find out more about this survey or the TNS Activities Panel contact:
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Email: duncan.stewart@tns-global.com

ENVIRONMENT AGENCY WALES

Strategic planning splashes the cash in Wales

On 5th June 2007 Environment Agency Wales launched 'Wales' Strategic Plan for Water Related Recreation', this was the culmination of one and a half years work on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government, in partnership with CCW,FCW,VW,BW,WGLA, SCW and the project consultants The University of Brighton, G&L Hughes Ltd and Exegesis SDM. The project looked at the current uses of Wales' rivers, lakes, reservoirs, estuaries and coast. In particular seeing what activities such as wild swimming, canoeing, gorge walking, sailing and angling had in the way of access, facilities and where there were opportunities, actions & initiates could provide greater public access.
www.brighton.ac.uk/waterrecreation

On 21st July 2007 at the Royal Welsh Show in Builth Wells Jane Davidson (Minister for Environment Sustainability & Housing) announced the launch of the SPLASH challenge fund for Wales. This is a new fund of around £400k a year for the next 3 years, and can offer up to 100% funding for projects to increase public access to Wales' waters. The fund is being administered by EA Wales on behalf of the Welsh Assembly, and grants from £5,000 to £100,000 are available. For more details on the scheme contact:

Rhiannon Hardman
Tel:+ 44 (0) 2920 466241
Email: splash@environment0agency.gov.uk
Website: http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/regions/wales/1168208/2086430/?version=1&lang=_e

Growing Up Outdoors Conference

Wednesday 3 December 2008

The Oval, Kennington, London.

The CRN presents a landmark conference to explore the benefits and the challenges in encouraging children and young people to experience and enjoy the outdoors.

Delegate Rate: £175

(£150 CRN member agencies)

To book your place, email crn@shu.ac.uk

Supporting Outdoor Recreation- The Changing Funding Environment

Wednesday 14 January 2009

The Centre in the Park, Sheffield.

Outdoor recreation practitioners need to understand what opportunities are out there and become more attuned to the priorities of funders and more stringent in appraising and evaluating projects.

Delegate Rate: £150 (£125 CRN member agencies)

To book your place, email crn@shu.ac.uk

A Countryside for Health and Wellbeing: The Physical and Mental Health Benefits of Green Exercise (2005)

How does nature make us feel? Much of course depends on what else is important in our lives. Is it a good or a bad day? Irrespective of where we come from, it seems that the presence of living things makes us feel good.

To buy this report for only £20, use the order form on the page opposite

Countryside Recreation Network Publications List

	Price (incl.postage)	Tick
REPORTS		
Volunteering in the Natural Outdoors (2008)	£15	☐
A Countryside for Health and Wellbeing: The Physical and Mental Health Benefits of Green Exercise (2005)	£20	☐
Social Exclusion in Countryside Leisure in the United Kingdom - the role of the countryside in addressing social exclusion (2001)	£10	☐
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS		
Removing Barriers; Creating Opportunities: Social Inclusion in the Countryside (2001)	£15	☐
Managing the Challenge of Access (2000)	£15	☐
Is the Honeypot Overflowing? (1998)	£15	☐
Making Access for All a Reality (1997)	£15	☐
Today s Thinking for Tomorrow s Countryside (1995)	£15	☐
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Accessible Outdoor Environments for All: Shared Understanding (2007)	£15	☐
The impact of Outdoor Recreation on Changing Social Behaviours (2007)	£15	☐
The Changing Funding Environment for Outdoor Recreation (2007)	£15	☐
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Why? How? Who? Community Engagement in Countryside and Urban Greenspace Management (2007)	£15	☐
Knowing Your Customer. The Joys of Statistics and Visitor Monitoring (2006)	£15	☐
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Country Parks II (2003)(Country Parks I & II can be purchased together for £20)	£12	☐
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Just Walking the Dog (1999)	£8	☐

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