

NEW FOREST NOTES - AUGUST 2001

Danger in New Forest Camp Sites

In May of last year, twenty children attending a scout camp in Aberdeenshire were struck down with an unpleasant and sometimes dangerous infection – *E.coli* O157. Last month, the government's Food Standards Agency "Task Force" on the disease reiterated its earlier advice on the recreational use of animal pasture – particularly for camping. That advice is unusually forthright and puts in question the continued use of every unenclosed camp site in the New Forest. In other words, only the enclosed parts of SetThorns and Holmsley seem to escape its net.

The problem is this. The disease is carried by cattle and sheep (among others) and excreted by them. Contact with dung through hands, boots, clothing etc is almost inevitable in the circumstances of a grazed camp site. When the material is from infected animals and is transmitted to the mouth during play, picnics etc, serious illness can result – as witness the disaster of the Scottish scout camp. That was an extreme case, but even in the Forest camp sites the threat is probably real enough. The danger is increased by wet conditions and such sites as Ashurst, Balmer Lawn and Aldridge Hill are particularly low-lying and damp. Other relevant factors seem to include the density and freshness of the dung. In an overall New Forest context, the camp sites are likely to be among the most heavily dunged areas because they are mostly built on or adjacent to "lawns". These are the parts of the Forest which grow the best grass and thus attract many of the three thousand odd cattle which graze the Forest in a normal year. The extent of *E.coli* O157 in Forest cattle is not known, as they do not themselves become ill and they show no symptoms. However, the Task Force reported that almost a quarter of Scottish herds are infected.

The recommendations of the government scientists are applicable nationally and not targeted specifically at the New Forest, but I find it difficult to see how camping can continue here in anything like its present form. Firstly, they say that, ideally, areas used for grazing animals should not be used for camping, picnicking or play, especially where this involves children. All of these activities are concentrated in Forest camp sites. In other words, "ideally" the Forest's open camp sites should not be used. They go on to qualify their recommendations by saying that (where grazing land is used), the risks can be greatly reduced by keeping animals off for three weeks prior to use. That is impossible in the Forest. Then, animals must be kept out during use, but that is again impossible. In addition, any remaining visible droppings must be cleared up. That is wholly impracticable and the task would be unpopular with camp staff. Other precautions are largely in the campers' hands and include such matters as washing and supervision of children. Altogether, it is yet one more example of the folly of trying to mix farming with intensively used recreation sites in the New Forest. The Verderers have expressed their disquiet to the Forestry Commission, but it is for the latter to take action.

The Commission, in the words of its Recreation Manager, is not convinced that “such draconian action (as closure) is necessary”. He considers that further research is desirable and, perhaps, the provision of information within the sites. For the Commission, of course, there is a great deal of money at stake, but for the campers and for the Forest there is rather more than that.

CROW Act to control horse riders ?

The continued muddled thinking over the Countryside and Rights of Way Act as it applies to the New Forest is unlikely to do anyone much good – whether they believe that off-lead dog running is a priority use of the New Forest, completely harmless to wildlife, or that such a use can be damaging. The first myth which needs to be cleared up is that “the CROW Act does not apply to the New Forest”. That is wrong. The Act applies to most “open country” and common land. That includes the Forest’s heathland and the Act applies to the Crown, just as it does to the numerous other owners of heathland within the perambulation. Moreover, it also includes land which is dedicated by an owner who wishes to create a public right of access. The Forestry Commission must inevitably dedicate the remainder (non-heathland) areas of the Forest as these are so inextricably mixed up with the heathland. It would, in any case, be unthinkable for the government to exempt from the right to roam its own public playground property, while forcing private landowners to accept the burden. Thus the CROW Act with its nesting season and livestock restrictions on dog running will apply to the Forest – until the restrictions are set aside by deliberate action of the relevant authorities.

Next, there have been some extraordinary scare stories that the CROW Act’s access provisions will restrict all sorts of recreational use in the Forest. They will not. The position of horse riders, cyclists, organized party visits and so on will remain completely unchanged because they will continue to operate by permission – not through the new right of roaming. Take, for example, the case of horse riders. They fall into two categories. Firstly there are those who ride in connection with the exercise of a common right – drifting, colt-hunting or simply inspecting stock. They are there by right now and will remain so after the introduction of the right to roam. So long as they behave in a civilized manner, they cannot be interfered with. Secondly, there is everyone else who uses the Forest for horse riding. They are there by general permission of the Forestry Commission (as walkers are at present - although *their* status is about to be enhanced) and will be there in exactly the same way after the access provisions of the Act come into force. For them, nothing whatever will change. The prohibited actions under the Act (roughly equivalent to the existing Commission byelaws) will not touch them because they have permission from the landowner. Mountain bikers and all the rest of the public will continue to use the Forest (within the existing regulations) just as before the granting of the right to roam. Nothing, except as Parliament has dictated in respect of nesting bird and livestock protection from dogs, will change, and that only until the restrictions are set aside.

There is next the curious assumption that the New Forest has somehow been singled out for some specially severe treatment of dog-running by a malevolent local management

egged on by some sort of ornithological conspiracy. That is wrong. The CROW Act's granting of a right to roam (with its accompanying dog controls) applies to almost all "open country" and common land. There is nothing special about the New Forest, except perhaps, in the breadth and apparent power of its conservation designations. These designations, as I have indicated before, are likely to prove no more than very fragile paper tigers which will be rapidly torn up by the weight of dog running public opinion.

Finally, there is the mechanism by which the restrictions on dog-running in the New Forest will be lifted. These are much the same as elsewhere in the country. The "appropriate rural authority" will put forward the necessary proposal to the Forestry Commission (representing the landowner) which will then approve the removal of the controls. I have already described the Commission's likely discomfort in doing this, but I have no doubt that it will be done – national and European conservation law (and English Nature) notwithstanding. There will be no difference from, say, the Dorset Heaths. The Countryside Agency may decide it is desirable to see off-lead dog-running during the nesting season on those heaths and it will put an appropriate proposal to the National Trust as owner of much of them. The Trust may agree with the Agency that such dog-running in the nesting season is desirable and the CROW Act restrictions will be removed. Similarly, the Agency may wish to see dog-running in the vicinity of livestock on part of the Sussex Downs and may put a proposal to an owner/beef farmer to this effect. If the owner wishes to see the restrictions removed, then that will be done. Of course the problem for English Nature in all of this is that once the restrictions have been removed from the New Forest, perhaps the most highly designated conservation area in the country, they will collapse everywhere else – apart from those cases where the landowner refuses to agree to relinquish them.

There are two curious final twists to the procedures for lifting the restrictions. If the New Forest becomes a national park, it is the park authority which will have the power to seek the opening of the Forest to dog running during the nesting season. The park authority has a very clear and specific statutory duty to put conservation before recreation in the event of conflict. English Nature at least has concluded that there is just such a conflict at certain times and places. However, I think the park authority will inevitably give precedence to the wishes of the dog runners – but the park, like the Forestry Commission, may not find it a comfortable decision. The other peculiarity of the removal of restrictions is that, unlike the Sussex beef farmer who will decide whether or not he wants off-lead dog-running on his downland in the vicinity of his herd, in the New Forest the owners of the ponies and cattle will have no say in the matter. The restrictions will be lifted by agreement between the national park authority and the Forestry Commission, irrespective of the opinions of the farmers.

Water Company's achievement

Contractors of all types operating in the New Forest (and perhaps elsewhere) have the reputation of being little better than vandals – ploughing deep ruts, damaging trees and leaving a trail of rubbish and tangled wire behind them. It is therefore a pleasant change to be able to record the remarkable achievement of the Bournemouth & West Hants Water

Company which is laying a pipe in the Open Forest running north from Bramshaw Telegraph. I have never before seen such care taken over a civil engineering operation in the Forest. Turf is being stripped and carefully replaced by hand following the filling of the trench. All surplus soil is being brushed up and, once it has rained sufficiently, it should be impossible to see where the workmen have operated. If only this standard of care could be repeated elsewhere, the utility companies would find it a great deal easier to obtain concessions in the Forest. Unfortunately the same water company has fallen very far short of the new benchmark in recent work on National Trust land nearby, perhaps through using different contractors or a different team of workmen.

Anthony Pasmore