

English Nature Research Report 649

### **Dogs, Access and Nature Conservation**

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## **Introduction**

The project was commissioned by English Nature to assist decision making in relation to access and the management of people and dogs on sensitive nature conservation sites.

## **What was done**

A literature review sought information relating to the potential impact of dogs on wildlife. This included disturbance to birds, mammals and other animals, the fertilising effect of urine and faeces, and issues related to stock and site management. Additionally, cultural and social attitudes to dogs both in the UK and internationally were examined.

A national survey sought information on the different management techniques employed by countryside managers to manage dogs on sites important for nature conservation and the relative success, in terms of effectiveness, of different management techniques. The survey also recorded observed interactions between dogs and wildlife on these same sites, and the effects of dogs on land management practices carried out for nature conservation.

## **Results and conclusions**

Both research and anecdotal evidence shows that dogs in the countryside have a disturbance effect on birds in particular:

- A walker with a dog may provoke a bird disturbance response at greater distances and for longer periods than stimuli from other recreational activities, including people without dogs.
- Birds may react to the presence of a dog as if to a predator. Disturbance is greater if the stimulus approaches more directly, the distance to a refuge is greater, and the cost of fleeing is lower.
- For breeding birds (and in particular ground nesting birds) there is clear evidence that disturbance can expose the eggs or young to a greater risk of loss to opportunistic predators, especially corvids.

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The presence of dogs can exert a significant influence on how a site is managed for nature conservation:

- On approximately 25% of sites the presence of dogs had caused grazing management for nature conservation to be prevented, discontinued or changed.
- Integrated multi-faceted management strategies are likely to be more effective than one or no management policies.
- The most effective means of managing people and dogs is the presence of a warden, use of regulations and steering people away from sensitive areas. Leaflets and signage alone are less likely to achieve desired results.
- Control of potential predators that benefit from the presence of dogs, such as corvids, should be considered.
- Dog fouling can cause significant enrichment and associated vegetation changes but this is normally confined to areas near car parks and path edges.

The presence of dogs can affect the quality of the countryside experience for other user groups:

- Some dog owners fail to clear up after their dog or to keep them on a lead. This figure varies between sites but campaigns to promote responsible behaviour amongst dog owners can help address these problems.
- A proportion of non-dog owning visitors will take evasive action to avoid contact with dogs. This was most commonly observed in people of non-European origin, people with children, horse riders and cyclists.
- Bulls or suckler cows with calves present the biggest health and safety threat to dog walkers but only 13 life threatening incidences have been reported to the Health & Safety Executive in the last 10 years.
- Dog borne zoonoses are shown not to be a significant threat to human health.

## **English Nature's viewpoint**

We will carefully consider the findings within the report which will assist any future review of the management of people and dogs on designated nature conservation sites managed by English Nature. The report will help English Nature provide appropriate nature conservation advice to other organisations, including Relevant Authorities under CRoW, in situations where the presence of dogs may be a cause for concern. In the longer term the report may support the development of policy in relation to dogs in the countryside.

## **Selected references**

Due to the large number of references readers are referred to the full report.

### ***Further information***

For the full report or other publications on this subject, please contact the Enquiry Service on 01733 455100/101/102 or email [enquiries@english-nature.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@english-nature.org.uk)

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