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Urban impacts on Dorset Heathlands: Analysis of the heathland visitor questionnaire survey and heathland fires incidence data sets

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Introduction

The Urban Heaths Life Project aimed to combat urban pressures on heathlands in south-east Dorset. This report analyses the results and discusses the methodology of two data sets collected by the project:

- a. the project Heathland Visitor Survey Questionnaire - this aimed to:
 - a.i investigate distances travelled by heathland visitors and their modes of transport
 - a.ii understand the recreational uses of the urban heaths
 - a.iii identify patterns in timing of visits and time spent on heaths
 - a.iv identify differences between different user groups on different heaths
- b. the project Incident Reporting Data Set - this aimed to:
 - b.i compare the frequencies of fires between different years, months, times of day and heaths
 - b.ii assess changes in the patterns of fire incidents between 1993-98 and 2002-03

What was done

The Visitor Survey Questionnaire asked 21 questions and collected data on visitor group size, bikes, dogs, horses, time, date and weather, between 23 July - 1 September 2003. This report analysed seven of these questions and the additional data from 193 questionnaires (totalling 396 people). The report also analysed all of the fire records (2813 from 1993-1998 and 1056 from April 2002 - December 2003), which recorded the fire start time, date, day and heath.

Results and conclusions

1. Timing of visits. No difference between weekday and weekend; minor differences between times of day. However, surveys were only conducted after 11:00 in the summer holidays.
2. Group size, age and gender. 53% of people were alone, 25% in pairs and 22% in groups of three or more. There were no significant age or gender-related results.
3. Access to heaths. 56% of visitors walked to the heath, for a mean distance of 378m, and 33% drove a car, for a mean distance of 4.2km. 54% lived outside the accepted 400m 'development control consultation zone' around each heath. 80% of walkers lived within 600m but 52% of

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drivers lived more than 2km away. The mode of transport and distance travelled is partly dependent on the ease of access and presence of additional attractions or facilities.

4. Time on heaths. Most visitors spent less than one hour on the heath (only 16% stayed more than 1.5 hours), with no difference between walkers and drivers, or with weather conditions.
5. Purpose of visit. Of 241 visitors, 45% were dog-walking, 14% walking, 12% nature-watching and 7% mountain or BMX biking. The proportion of dog-walkers is higher in early mornings (when no surveys were undertaken) and on certain heaths. Dog-walkers drove a mean distance of 1.6km to the heath, whereas other visitors drove a mean distance of 6.8km.
6. Frequency of visits. The most regular visitors lived close to the heath and walked. 80% of dog-walkers visited at least daily, whereas only 29% of other visitors visited daily.
7. Fires. The number of fires was variable over the study period with more fires from April to August, but no significant change in incidence. There were slightly more fires on Friday to Monday, and 75% were first reported between 12:00 and 21:00. Of 452 fires reported in 2002/3, the area burnt was estimated for 203 fires, totalling 100ha.
8. Other questions not analysed included "what do you like about the heath" (peaceful > views > open > wildlife > good paths); "which of the following activities do you think are damaging" (fires > motorbikes > dog mess); and "what would you like to be done to improve your enjoyment of the heath" (nothing > path clearance > more seats / benches).

Future work could include interviews in different months and early mornings, and assessment of total usage (eg recording effort and interview refusals). Some figures should be checked by direct observation, and some attitudes could be checked by a mailshot questionnaire.

English Nature's viewpoint

Planning consents around urban heathlands should note the distance travelled by visitors. Management of urban heathlands should be based on a good knowledge of each heath's visitors, their reasons for visiting and their views and attitudes to heathland management issues. The various project activities had had no noticeable impact on the incidence of fires, which were mostly from April-August, on afternoons and evenings on Fridays to Mondays.

Selected references

- BARNARD, A. 2003. Getting the facts - dog walking and visitor number surveys at Burnham Beeches and their implications for the management process. *Countryside Recreation*, 11, 16-19.
- KIRBY, J.S. & TANTRUM, D.A.S. 1999. *Monitoring heathland fires in Dorset: Phase 1*. Report to DETR. Northampton: Terra Environmental Consultancy.

Further information

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