

## Towards a country parks renaissance

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**In evidence presented to the 1999 Select Committee on Town and Country Parks the Countryside Agency stated, 'Country Parks are now at risk of neglect and decline...Action is needed now to ensure they have a better future.'**

### Summary

Research commissioned by the Countryside Agency<sup>1</sup> has revealed that whilst country parks were generally faring better than their urban counterparts, there was still a decline in their condition. This confirmed the findings of the Public Parks Assessment<sup>2</sup> and supported the evidence the Agency presented to the Select Committee's enquiry into Town and Country Parks in 1999.

The research analysed the reasons for the trend towards a deteriorating condition and was specifically designed to:

- consider how country parks have developed in the years since their inception;
- gain an accurate understanding of the size and distribution of country parks;
- examine the major issues facing service providers;
- examine the contemporary relevance of country parks and how they might relate to current and planned initiatives.

The work was designed to contribute towards a Rural White Paper<sup>3</sup> commitment to issue guidance on best practice to revitalise the country parks around our towns and cities.

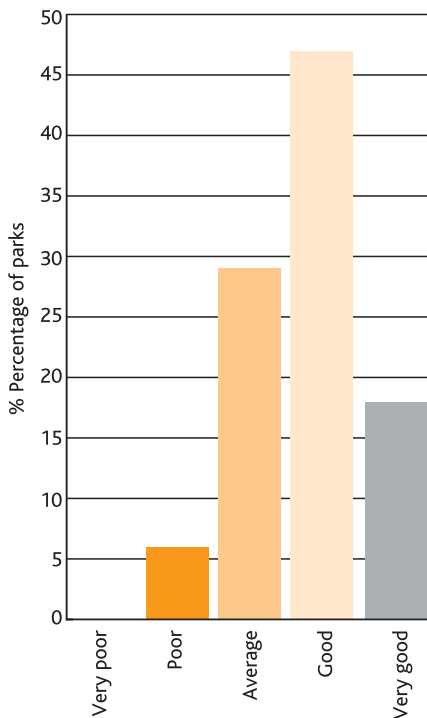
### Main findings

The study 'Towards a Country Parks Renaissance' found that:

- most of the 267 country parks in England are owned by local authorities;
- they receive an estimated 73 million visits per annum, equivalent to about 6% of all visits to the countryside in England;
- approximately 2,500 people are employed in managing and maintaining country parks;
- two-thirds of country parks are located on the rural-urban fringe;
- country parks offer a range of benefits, services and recreational opportunities to a variety of visitors at a comparatively low cost;
- good parks are continuing to improve whilst poor parks are continuing to decline, which reflects funding patterns;
- the continued relevance and appeal of country parks as popular, multi-functional greenspaces remains clear.

# The Countryside Agency research notes

Overall condition based on 133 responses



## Methodology

A comprehensive questionnaire was sent to all the 267 country parks in England, with responses received from 137 of them. The report draws on detailed information, provided by those parks that responded, about:

- the physical composition of the parks;
- condition and trend in condition;
- finance and funding;
- use and users; and
- management, including community/volunteer involvement.

## Physical composition

Country parks represent a substantial landmass, estimated to be in the region of 39,000 hectares. Over 70% of their area is designated as green belt or recreational open space, and an estimated 35% contain Sites of Special Scientific Interest.

## Condition and trend in condition

More than 65% of responding officers reported that their parks were in either good or very good condition, and only 6% described their parks as in poor condition, with the rest described as average. The majority of parks (54%) were described as improving, nearly a third (31%) were stable and less than a fifth (15%) were declining in condition.

Worryingly, of those parks that rated their overall condition as poor, 88% also rated their condition as declining and none rated it as improving. Twenty-eight percent of parks rated as average said that their overall condition was declining, and 33% said it was improving. Of those parks that were rated good, 65% stated their condition to be improving, with only 5% declining. Seventy-five percent of very good parks said they were improving, with none declining. Thus the majority of parks that were in poor condition were in decline, while those rated in good or very good condition were more likely to be improving.

## Finance and funding

Responding officers were asked to provide information about the amount they spent on running and maintaining their park for four specific date periods, from 1984/85 through to 1999/2000. Only 23 (17%) country parks were able to provide total gross revenue expenditure figures for each of the date periods requested.

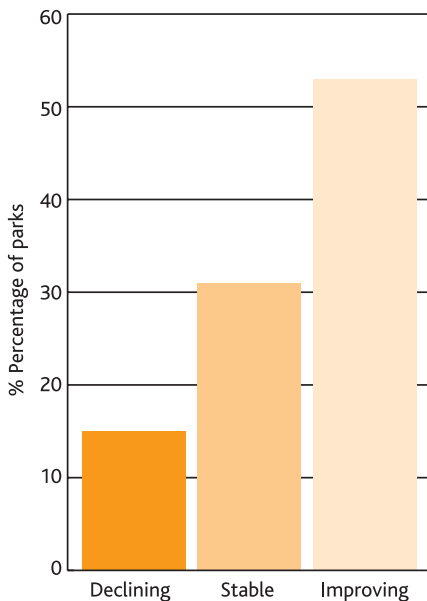
Initially the figures provided appeared encouraging, with an apparently small but steady increase over the years. However, when the effects of inflation were added to the equation, the financial situation facing country parks was reversed. In real terms, the amount of total gross revenue expenditure – applied to the 23 country parks responding to this section of the questionnaire – had declined significantly. The 1999/2000 budgets would need to be increased by 28% in order to have an equivalent value to the real term value of the 1984/85 budgets.

There was a significant increase in charge introductions during 1990/1991, most commonly for car parking, which relaxed until the mid-1990s when a marked increase was again observed.

## Use and users

Increasingly, country parks need a good level of knowledge about their customers. Park managers are under pressure to increase visitor numbers and the income generated by visitors in order to supplement the declining value of revenue budgets. Modernisation of local government through Best Value legislation and the introduction of Local Strategic Partnerships place a substantial emphasis on the involvement of the community and customer feedback.

Trend in overall condition based on 131 responses



The range of visitor activities indicated by the responding officers

Activity	% of parks
Interpretive walks/talks	85
Special themed events	76
Orienteering	62
Cycling	61
Angling	54
Horse riding	46
Fetes	42
BBQ	35
Musical events	31
Sporting events	29
Camping/caravanning	26
Boating	19
Sailing	18
Weddings	16
Stock rearing	13
Miniature railway	11
Sports pitches	11
Cycle hire	9
Golf course	9
Markets	8
Fairs	7
Swimming	7
Murder/mystery events	4
Water-skiing/power boating	4
Crazy golf/putting	4
Ski facilities	2

Country parks offer a range of benefits, services and recreational opportunities to diverse and varied visitors at a comparatively low cost.

Through the questionnaire, the study sought to examine park managers' general awareness of their customer base and the needs and preferences of their customers. In order to achieve this, responding officers were asked:

- how often visitor surveys were being undertaken;
- whether visitor numbers were being estimated, at least on an annual basis;
- whether schools are specifically targeted;
- details about visitor activities catered for by the park.

Responding officers were asked to provide details of any visitor surveys carried out in the previous five years. Forty-three percent of responding officers (59 parks) said that they had completed visitor surveys in the previous five years, and provided the date of the last survey. Fifty-three percent of parks did not carry out visitor surveys.

Based on visitor survey comparisons or park staff impressions, 42% of parks felt their visitor numbers were stable, with 41% increasing and 17% declining.

## Management

Whilst 64% of responding parks reported the existence of a management plan, only 46% of these were updated at intervals of less than two years. The plans covered a broad range of subjects but were by no means uniform in their approach. The Public Parks Assessment<sup>1</sup> in May 2001 found a clear link between the presence of management plans and an upward trend in park condition.

## The future

The report identifies a set of factors most likely to influence the future success and development of country parks:

- the need for a champion;
- a system of support;
- a shared identity and common goals;
- minimum standards;
- finance and funding;
- staff training and support;
- management plans.

The report looks in more detail at how this success can be achieved. Country parks can become even more successful if they can be shown to address many of the national issues facing government today. For example, country parks can contribute to policy aims on:

- **Health** – through participation in sport and outdoor recreation, including healthy walking and green gyms, and the ability of greenspace to relieve stress-related symptoms;
- **Social inclusion** – by providing specifically for the needs of people with disabilities, families on low incomes and other excluded groups;
- **Social cohesion** – as places where a wide cross-section of society can enjoy a quality environment communally;
- **Culture, sport and the arts** – as venues in their own right, as quality environments, and for a diverse range of events;
- **Employment** – through education, training and lifelong learning programmes for staff and students as well as active members of community groups;
- **Children and young people** – by providing safe and stimulating environments for play, learning, social interaction and support and recreation;
- **Sustainability** – by acting as examples of good practice utilising sustainable resources and operational methods;
- **Biodiversity** – through their contribution to local and national 'Biodiversity Action Plans' and the active conservation and enhancement of nature and wildlife within the parks and surrounding areas;

- **Community engagement and active citizenship** – by engaging the local community and park users, by supporting community-based groups, and by offering opportunities for participation in a wide range of activities;
- **Linking town and country** – many country parks link town and country physically because of their urban fringe location. Country parks have an important function in the urban fringe, both in conserving strategically important greenspace and in providing recreational opportunities for both rural and urban dwellers;
- **Tackling urban/rural divide** – country parks link town and country socially and culturally. Their principal users comprise urban or suburban dwellers making visits to the countryside;
- **Heritage and tourism** – country parks have the potential to play an important role in local tourism, especially where they are based around a heritage property;
- **Education** – country parks can provide important educational opportunities, not always in terms of the national curriculum, but also in terms of allowing a general appreciation and understanding of the countryside.

## Conclusion

The report concludes with a set of recommendations:

- include country parks in local authority parks and greenspace strategies;
- ensure the continuity and enhancement of the country park image;
- develop incentives that encourage the participation of all country parks in the renaissance programme;
- develop a shared vision for country parks;
- realise the potential of country parks in linking the town to the countryside;
- develop a set of eight core activities in the work programme of all country parks, including recreation and sport, and education and interpretation;
- adopt a set of minimum quality/service standards for all country parks,
- address ‘people’ as well as ‘place’ in all country park work;
- promote, to all relevant bodies, the ability of country parks to assist in achieving social agenda objectives and targets;
- market and promote country parks, the services they provide, and the benefits they can offer;
- establish a national “delivery group” to link strategic development to delivery on the ground.

The Countryside Agency is working with partners to address these recommendations through:

- supporting the development of the Country Parks Network into a national forum for the discussion and exchange of information;
- developing a country parks website to promote and disseminate good practice within the country parks ‘community’;
- compiling practitioners guidance and a self-audit database for inclusion on the country parks website to support country park staff;
- securing the commitment of local authorities to the wider social worth of country parks;
- identifying funding and income generation opportunities for country parks and promoting them through the network and website.

## Further reading

For further information please contact Liz Waters at Greenspace on 0118 946 9060, or email [lizw@green-space.org.uk](mailto:lizw@green-space.org.uk)

The full report is available at: [www.countryside.gov.uk/WiderWelcome/Countryside\\_Recreation/countryParks/index.asp](http://www.countryside.gov.uk/WiderWelcome/Countryside_Recreation/countryParks/index.asp)

<sup>1</sup> *Towards a country parks renaissance* (July 2003), prepared for the Countryside Agency by the Urban Parks Forum and the Garden History Society.

<sup>2</sup> Urban Parks Forum (May 2001): *Public Parks Assessment – A survey of local authority owned parks, focusing on parks of historic interest.*

<sup>3</sup> DETR (November 2000): *Our Countryside: the future – A fair deal for rural England.*

**Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:**  
[www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)