

Demand for outdoor recreation in the English National Parks

National Park Authorities have not been as pro-active as they might in promoting opportunities for enjoyment of their areas and have been overly defensive in their approach to recreation in the past.

Summary

This document is a summary report of research commissioned by the Countryside Agency arising from the 2002 Defra Review of English National Park Authorities (NPAs). This research investigated the demand for outdoor recreation in English National Parks and explored the capacity of National Parks for meeting that demand. The study also considered whether NPAs were undertaking their second purpose to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Parks effectively.

The study concludes that outdoor recreation demand is extremely significant in the National Parks, but NPAs have not been as pro-active as they might be in promoting opportunities for outdoor recreation. NPAs have been overly defensive in their approach to recreation, and focused on environmental education, visitor management, and their statutory duties with regard to access in this field.

However, the situation is changing. There are many examples of innovative and exciting good practice in all the NPAs. The study concludes with a list of recommendations to assist NPAs in reinforcing their commitment to their second purpose.

Main findings

The report is based on findings from an extensive review of recreation demand literature, structured interviews with selected officers in all the English NPAs, and an email survey of selected recreational user groups. The research focused on outdoor recreation activities other than rambling or hill walking.

National Park Authorities and their purposes

The 1995 Environment Act defines National Park purposes as follows:

- **to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Parks, and:**
- **to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities (of the Parks) by the public.**

These purposes are of equal standing in the legislation. The Sandford Principle – also enshrined in the legislation – states that where there is irreconcilable conflict between recreation and conservation, then conservation should take precedence. However, government circulars have emphasised that this is likely to be in exceptional circumstances, rather than the norm.

The Countryside Agency research notes

Plans and policies tend to focus on education, visitor management, and NPAs' limited statutory access duties.

The study concluded that NPAs have been ambivalent at best, and at worst quite negative about their second purpose. The evidence came from several areas:

- An assessment of National Park Management Plans indicates that the second purpose has often been interpreted to emphasise the environmental education aspect of the purpose (i.e. 'understanding'), rather than the pure recreational element (i.e. 'enjoyment'). Management Plans tend to focus on education, visitor management, and NPAs' statutory access duties, rather than a pro-active approach to outdoor recreation.
- This defensive approach is mirrored in other documentation. Straightforward promotional recreation policies or strategies are very limited. Public information and promotional material emphasises the resolution of potential conflicts and management of visitor behaviour, rather than positive, welcoming messages. Such promotional material that does exist is often dated and restricted in its distribution.
- User groups' and other stakeholders' perceptions of NPAs reflect this view that NPAs have been negative about recreation in the past. Relationships with some recreation user groups are good (the British Mountaineering Council is a good example), but productive partnerships with other user groups are less consistent. The study also found that few NPAs have a good relationship with Sport England in their regions.
- Most significantly, NPA staff themselves concur with the view that they have been less than pro-active concerning outdoor recreation activities in the past, and probably focused too much on potential conflicts with their conservation purpose without good evidence on which to base these fears.

However, this study also found that these attitudes are changing. This has often been as a result of the development of the sustainable tourism agenda (particularly after the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease crisis).

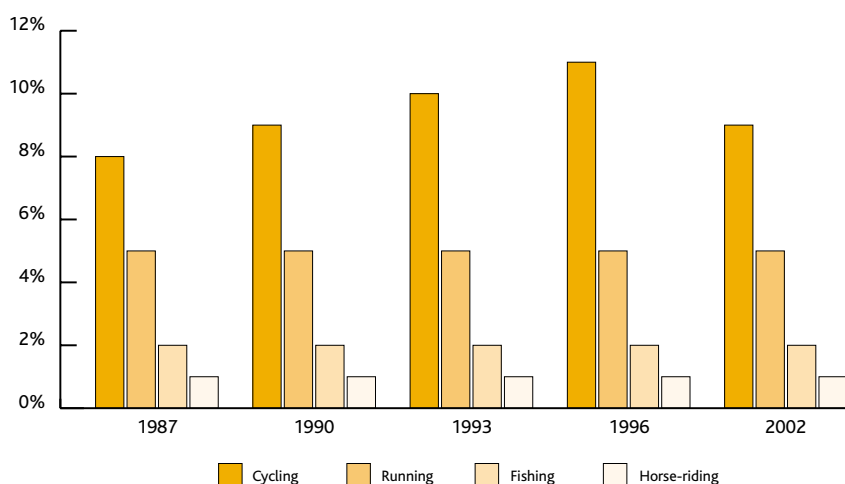
A comparison with national data on participation in other sporting activities reinforces the importance of all outdoor recreation activities to many people.

Demand for outdoor recreation

Overall demand for outdoor recreation is high. National surveys suggest that walking remains the most popular of all recreation activities, while cycling also remains at high levels relative to other sports. A comparison with national data on participation in other sporting activities reinforces the overall significance of all outdoor recreation activities.

Overall trends are less clear. There is some evidence that the UK population may be participating in all recreation and sporting activities at lower levels than in previous years. Generally, outdoor recreation participation appears relatively stable, and has been since the 1990s (see Graph 1).

Graph 1 – Trends in outdoor activity participation
(General Household Survey data)



However, demand for outdoor recreation in our National Parks is extremely difficult to quantify. Information is fragmented and inconsistent. There is very little data comparable over any length of time or between areas. The last All Parks Visitor Survey was undertaken in 1994 and has yet to be repeated.

Local data is even less evident – although some NPAs have limited site-based surveys. These site surveys provide useful information on specific activities which may be extremely significant in individual National Parks (for example, climbing in the Peak District, water sports in the Lake District, etc.).

If existing demand is difficult to quantify, then latent demand is virtually impossible. Recreation demand can also often be supply led, and therefore the impact of new or improved opportunities is often difficult to predict. It would appear that most current recreational demand in our National Parks is being met comfortably at present – this appears to be the case for climbing, horse-riding, orienteering, most non-motorised watersports, all airsports, field sports and others. There are exceptions:

- Constraints on access to rivers for canoeists continue to cause conflicts. Access to good white water is particularly lacking for the more serious canoeists – and this leads to clear evidence of unmet demand in some National Parks.
- Where motorised recreation – on water or land – is being actively discouraged by the NPAs, there is clear evidence of unmet demand. This might be more accurately termed ‘displaced demand’ – as the resource is increasingly reduced, existing demand must find alternative facilities.
- There is some evidence that participation in both cycling and horse-riding would increase if the infrastructure and support facilities were improved.

Some recreation groups require greater help from national and regional bodies to find appropriate locations for their activities outside National Parks.

There are important exceptions, but generally outdoor recreation is not in conflict with the conservation of the special qualities of the English National Parks.

Evidence of conflicts between recreation and conservation

NPA officers perceive very little evidence of any over-riding environmental conflicts between recreation and conservation in our National Parks. This reinforces the conclusions of the 1995 House of Commons Environment Committee Report. It has also been more recently supported by English Nature’s 2003 SSSI Condition Survey.

However, there are important exceptions to this conclusion:

- There are specific problems on some local sites. These include, for example, disturbance to breeding birds through specific activities and some acute problems of trail erosion. However, NPA officers report these are generally well managed.
- All NPAs continue to be concerned about the impacts of continuing traffic growth. There are good examples of NPA initiatives aimed at promoting public transport and attempting to limit car parking etc., but the underlying causes of traffic growth remain.
- Most of the NPAs consider that the promotion of motorised sports – on land and water – within National Parks is in conflict with the protection of the special qualities of the Parks. Of particular concern is the growing impact on tranquillity and conflicts with other users. Where existing use is already high, there are some excellent initiatives by the NPAs to manage legal use in co-operation with the user groups concerned.
- There is some evidence that the use of the National Parks for organised events is growing. In most cases, NPA officers are managing these events well, working closely and co-operatively with events’ organisers. An excellent code of practice has been published by the Association of National Park Authorities recently, and this should be more widely promoted and used.

Recommendations

- NPA policies in their Management Plans and their Development Plans should be clear and unambiguous in promoting their second purpose.
- Adequate research and monitoring should be undertaken and should reflect both national and local needs for information. Support from relevant national agencies, as well as the NPAs, should aim to develop shared methodologies and provide adequate resources.
- New partnerships with government agencies, particularly the Forestry Commission, Sport England, and regional bodies, need to be established to promote the benefits of outdoor recreation across a range of government agendas.
- Real stakeholder involvement is crucial, with a broader range of bodies than has traditionally been the case.
- As well as developing close working relationships with user groups, NPAs also need to consider the wider public. Specific agreements with specific organisations may not meet the NPAs' own social inclusion objectives or the needs of the casual participant.
- Rights of Way Improvement Plans present significant opportunities to extend access for different outdoor activities. NPAs should pro-actively engage with their constituent Highways Authorities to ensure that these plans meet their needs and are subsequently implemented.
- The promotion of recreational opportunities should be up-to-date and relevant to the interests and needs of today's users. Greater use could be made of the internet.
- Greater links should be established with the education sector (perhaps through local outdoor activity centres, the YHA, and others) to address the possible decline in children's use of the countryside.

A good practice guide

A further result of this study will be the production of a good practice guide which seeks to provide advice about the planning, management and promotion of outdoor recreation in protected areas. It will be developed in partnership with the NPAs, using existing examples of good practice to demonstrate sound principles and innovative ideas.

Further reading

Countryside Agency (2004),
*Leisure Day Visits: Report of the 2002-03
Great Britain Day Visits Survey.*

Countryside Commission (1994),
*Visits to National Parks: Summary of the
1994 All Parks Visitor Survey*

English Nature, (2003),
*England's Best Wildlife and Geological Sites:
The condition of SSSIs in England in 2003.*

House of Commons Environment
Committee (1995),
The Environmental Impact of Leisure Activities,
HMSO

Office of National Statistics (2004),
*General Household Survey: Sport and Leisure
Supplementary Report 2002.*

**Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website:
www.countryside.gov.uk**