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TRANQUILITY AND THE NEW FOREST – THE VERDERERS' POLICIES

In 2007 the Verderers' Court published its policies for conserving the New Forest, prepared in the light of their statutory and customary duties and powers. Policies 6.1 and 6.5 are particularly relevant when applications for new recreational facilities or activities are under consideration by the Court. Protecting the tranquillity and other special qualities of the New Forest is a theme which runs throughout the policies and this paper expands upon the subject of tranquillity and the need to protect it.

The New Forest contains over 100 miles of off road cycle routes and probably twice this length of byways, bridleways and quiet lanes to which cyclists have unrestricted access. Pedestrians and horse riders have, according to the Forestry Commission, a legal right of access to all parts of the Crown commonable land of the Forest. The notes which follow relate to demands for ADDITIONAL facilities and their effect on the Forest.

A definition of tranquillity

An absence of disruptive human noise and activity, which allows quiet contemplation and appreciation of the landscape, sounds and wildlife of the Forest and the opportunity to experience solitude.

Tranquillity is not a quality capable of precise scientific description, any more than can a great painting or piece of music be assessed in such a manner. It is something experienced and is not a mere table of decibel readings or distances from noise sources, movement, or built structures. Despite its elusive nature in material terms, for those who value it, there is likely to be little disagreement as to whether a place is tranquil or not. In Southern England, outside such places as Dartmoor and Exmoor, together with a few fragments of the New Forest, it is now extremely difficult to find. By contrast, sporting and active recreational facilities are widely available across the entire country, even though the demand for more of them in the Forest is intense.

Tranquillity does not automatically imply a complete absence of human presence or land use, but it does need severe restraint on non-essential boisterous uses. A commoner on a pony looking for stock, an ornithologist in camouflage clothing watching birds through binoculars, a couple walking quietly down a forest ride are all examples of non-disruptive human presence which, except in excess numbers can be accommodated within a tranquil area. By contrast, a fun-run of twenty brightly clad people, laughing and shouting to each other and (as happens) perhaps using compressed air horns, is highly disruptive.

The resource which the New Forest comprises and the demands upon it

Large parts of the New Forest are, by any measure, no longer tranquil, yet deterioration to their present state is often something which has occurred only within the last few years. Traffic noise, intense recreational pressure, aircraft noise, and commercial activity have all degraded tranquillity, but there are still areas (largely those identified by the New Forest Committee) which retain a valuable measure of quietness and freedom from human disturbance – but they are few and comprise only a small portion of the Forest. Their quality has been reduced, even in the short

period since the Committee published its report, but they are capable of protection and, given the necessary will on the part of management, they could be restored to their former state.

Unfortunately the potential demands upon the New Forest are more than sufficient to eliminate all vestige of tranquillity if given free rein. Too many people seeking too much from the Forest do not simply threaten its future, but are actively eroding its value *now*. For this reason it is essential that the Forest as a provider of recreation is not considered in isolation, but as a part of a wider countryside capable of deflecting and meeting many of the demands which are at present simply loaded onto this small area of common land. *There should be a fundamental rule that demands which can be met elsewhere should not be accommodated in the Forest where they are plainly damaging to tranquillity or could potentially be so.* Only those uses which cannot be accommodated elsewhere should have a prime claim on the Forest. For example, sporting activities of many types can be located on private estates and farmland and sometimes in ex-commercial sites like restored gravel pits. We have good examples of this in the Avon Valley. Motor sport is provided-for on the Somerley Estate, motor boating is run in worked out gravel pits near Ringwood, mountain biking is encouraged in Ringwood Forest, cycle trails are provided over wide areas (such as the Wiltshire cycle way) and all byways and bridleways are open to cyclists.

Nationally many farmers are establishing equestrian access (with jumps and other facilities) – often creating valuable “diversification” opportunities. None of these organized activities and others like them needs to expand in the New Forest. They are not site-specific. The essence of such uses is often sociability, noise, speed, challenge and excitement – all unexceptionable in the right environment, but all in major conflict with the special qualities of the Forest. For those cyclists seeking a less active entertainment, there is the extensive network of routes which already exists in the Forest.

Uses which are in sympathy with the Forest and which, by contrast, cannot be undertaken elsewhere, include quiet appreciation of the special wildlife and landscape, education related to the Forest, indigenous commercial activity such as forestry and commoning. Camping and car parking are also specific to the Forest, although imposing unacceptable pressure in places. They at least do not impinge for the most part on the tranquil areas – Gorley Bushes car park excepted.

For new and expanded uses the test should be:

Is the new or expanded use one which cannot be accommodated elsewhere than in the New Forest? If the answer is “no”, it should not be permitted here unless there is absolute certainty that it can be accepted without damage to the special qualities of the Forest as defined by the Verderers. For example, a kite flying rally might be acceptable at Boltons Bench without damage to the tranquillity of the Forest: it would be wholly unacceptable at Cranesmoor. If the answer to the question above is “yes”, then there should be a presumption in favour provided that it can be demonstrated that there will be no damage to the special qualities (and especially to the tranquillity if in one of the designated areas).

Examples:- A party of schoolchildren on an ancient tree-recording outing, a film crew making a film about fallow deer, a map reading-exercise for a group of soldiers.

Conclusion

The Verderers’ regard the remaining element of tranquillity of the New Forest (defined above) as exceptionally important and will use their powers to ensure that it is not further damaged.

Verderers of the New Forest
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