South Downs National Park

Visitor Survey 2012:

Environment Element

Final Report: Executive Summary

For:	**South Downs National Park Authority**
From:	**Acorn Tourism Consulting Ltd and Natural Values**
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Executive Summary

Context

The Environmental Element of the Visitor Survey is part of a wider suite of surveys that are being undertaken by the SDNPA during 2012.

The aim of the Environmental survey was to identify and quantify the impacts visitors have on the landscape, biodiversity and cultural heritage they come to enjoy, so that appropriate visitor management, conservation and enhancement programmes can be developed and implemented.

The Environment survey involved undertaking two quantitative surveys: one with land managers of primarily privately owned or tenanted land, the other with specific nature conservation and cultural heritage sites. In addition qualitative data was collected through consultation with managers of nature conservation and cultural heritage sites to create best practice case studies.

The final survey samples were relatively small with 72 responses to the Land Manager's survey, which represents 8% of commercial landholdings in the National Park. The 73 responses to the Nature Conservation and Cultural Heritage Site survey represents 35% of the main nature conservation or cultural heritage sites and attractions in the National Park. Generalisations made from the data should therefore be treated with caution,.

Visitor issues impacting on Land Managers

The Land Managers' survey, distributed to 230 members of the SDLMG, elicited a 31% response rate and the 72 were well distributed geographically across the National Park and its Landscape Character Areas. However it should be noted that the relatively small number of limited the depth of analysis possible in some areas.

The majority (81%/58 respondents[1]) of respondents were located rurally, were using their land for livestock grazing (83%/60) and arable farming (68%/49). Public rights of way crossed most land holdings, in the form of footpaths (86%/62) and bridleways (63%/45), although there were relatively few cycle trails (10%/7). The public could also access around a third (37.5%/27) of these properties due to permitted access areas and open access land.

Not all land managers had visitors on their property; a quarter had no visitors at all (24%/17), while half (54%/39) had up to 5,000 per year and only five received more than 50,000 visits a year. The highest proportions of visitors to landholdings appeared to be clustered along the route of the South Downs Way and along the

[1] Due to the small sample size the number of respondents has been included alongside the percentage figures.

southern boundary of the Park, near the urban fringe. These locations appear to be hotspots for visitors.

Most of those that did have visitors accessing their property (72%/52 of all the respondents) felt that visitors caused issues with the management of their land. Not surprisingly, due to the accessible nature of the National Park, most visitor issues tended to be associated with public access (60%/44) and there was a predominance of sites with visitor issues located along the South Downs Way National Trail and the southern urban fringe, with a particular concentration of issues reported between Brighton and Seaford.

Walking was the visitor activity that caused the most (59%/81 out of 138 issues raised) issues for land managers, particularly when dogs were being walked off the lead. The main problem was with visitors that ignore rights of way and walk across private land, where no public access is allowed. This resulted in damage to wildlife and disturbance to stock, for example due to gates being left open or, in one or two cases, sheep being attacked by dogs. The lack of control over dogs was considered to be a major cause of disturbance to wildlife.

Cyclists riding too fast on footpaths and horse riders that don't keep to the public rights of way also caused problems with land management and wildlife, on 12% and 8% of sites (17 and 11) respectively. Motorbikes, quad bikes and 4x4s used the rights of way inappropriately on 11% of landholdings (15).

Wildlife or conservation designations applied to more than half (54%/39) of landholdings. The most frequent were Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and Scheduled Monuments. The types of visitor issues that were experienced at sites with conservation designations were similar to those reported across all sites, with no particular trend of issues specific to landholdings with Scheduled Monuments or nature conservation status.

Visitor attractions, both paid or unpaid, were provided by half of landowners (51%/37) and visitor accommodation was offered by a quarter (26%/19) of sites, the majority of which was self-catering. The farm stay experience is a popular concept for visitors generally and the lack of this type of accommodation in the National Park may be a gap in the market for land managers. The issues these sites raised in relation to visitors were similar to those experienced at other sites; there was no pattern between the types of issues and presence of a visitor attraction.

The busiest months for visitors were April to October, however visitors and their related issues were present throughout the year, which may reflect the Park's popularity for all year activities such as walking, riding and cycling.

Although a high proportion of sites raised issues relating to the management of visitors, it was remarked that only a small minority of visitors cause the problems. However land managers felt that visitor management in the National Park could be improved and some of the visitor impacts reduced through better signage of public

rights of way and improved education about the meaning of public access with both visitors that travel away from home and those that live locally.

Visitor Impacts on Nature Conservation and Cultural Heritage Sites

The Survey

Having identified the main issues associated with visitors on privately owned or tenanted land from the first survey; the second survey aimed to further understand the impact of these issues on visitor attraction sites that had either a nature conservation or cultural heritage designation, or both, or were heavily used for recreation.

A total of 205 sites that matched the criteria were surveyed, 73 sites (35%) replied. The sites showed a reasonable geographical distribution and covered the main LCAs. However the maximum numbers of sites in each habitat was 50 with 20 or less sites being present in most habitats. This made it difficult to identify representative trends in visitor impacts and visitor management for each habitat area. The only sites that completed both surveys were the five visitor attractions in the Land Manager's survey that receive more than 50,000 visitors per year, plus one other.

Eighty per cent (59) of sites had nature conservation or cultural heritage designations with a quarter (26%/19 sites[2]) having both. As with the first survey, SSSIs and Scheduled Monument designations occurred most frequently (38%/28 and 30%/22 respectively), a quarter of sites (27%/20) were also Local Wildlife Sites.

Visitor activities and their impacts

Learning and education featured as a visitor activity at over 80% (59) of sites. The nature conservation and cultural heritage sites manage their sites to offer an educational experience to visitors which brings environmental benefits by encouraging the public to get involved in volunteering and by raising awareness of conservation objectives.

Walking and wildlife watching and photography were the most popular outdoor activities (at 78% (57), 60% (44) respectively), with picnicking, cycling and horse riding and other land-based activities occurring at more than 20% of sites (49% (36), 40% (29), 32% (23) and 26% (19) respectively).

The impact of these visitor activities usually creates a combination of environmental and social issues. Pollution due to litter and dog fouling (both arising at around half of the sites (38 and 37 respectively)) occurred most frequently. Trampling, soil erosion and the loss of wildlife habitats or species were the environmental only impacts identified (at 37% (27), 22% (18) and 16% (14) respectively).

[2] Due to the small sample size the number of sites has been included alongside the percentage figures.

The positive benefits of visits were primarily socio-economic and related to education, health, income generation and employment (81% (59), 60% (44), 58% (42) 50% and (35) respectively).

Impacts on habitats and species

The impact of visitor activities was assessed for each of the local habitats: woodland, chalk downland/ grassland, other grassland habitats, heathland, arable, wetland and marshland, rivers and streams, coast and sea and formal gardens and parkland.

Overall the impact of most visitor activities on local habitats was considered to be neutral. (264 responses for neutral, 145 for positive and 140 for negative)

All habitats, except arable and coastal sites, recorded the positive impacts generated by guided walks, wildlife watching and photography.

In terms of negative impacts, walking and cycling caused the majority of problems, particularly where visitors walked with dogs and cycled off marked tracks.

Chalk downland was more sensitive to path erosion from walkers and horse riders than woodland. It also experienced more activities such as grass boarding, zorbing, and kite flying that could cause damage to plant life and aerial activities that could disturb wildlife.

Woodlands were less susceptible than other habitats to path erosion caused by walkers and horse riding but suffered disturbance to wildlife from most activities.

Heathland was sensitive to erosion and wildlife disturbance from walkers, cyclists and horse riding.

Disturbance to wildlife was the main problem reported for wetlands. Formal gardens experienced path erosion and sheep worrying from walkers with dogs. Issues specific to arable land were crop damage and erosion caused by motorised off-road activities.

There was no negative impact reported on species by three quarters of sites (71%/52 sites), however where there was an impact it was most likely to affect plants (35%/12 sites) through trampling, birds (32%/11) through general habitat disturbance or invertebrates such as butterflies (15%/5). Where they occurred these impacts were spread across the Park and not related to any specific type of habitat. It is also important to note that alongside visitor presence, a range of variables can affect the presence of species including natural population changes, climate change and habitat management regimes.

Impacts on cultural heritage sites

The impact of visitor activities was assessed for sites that incorporated Scheduled Monuments, archaeological sites, historic houses, historic industrial heritage, other historic features and historic gardens. The features occurring most often at sites were Scheduled Monuments (33%/24) and archaeological sites (27%/20).

The sites that were set up primarily as visitor attractions; the historic houses, gardens and industrial heritage sites, generated the most positive impacts from their visitors. By contrast, Scheduled Monuments and archaeological sites tended to lack interpretation or specialised visitor management and suffered from damage and erosion from walkers, cyclists, horse riders and metal detectors.

Visitor management

Overall the nature conservation and cultural heritage sites felt that the positive impact of visitors outweighed the negative issues they can create.

A relatively small (28%/12) proportion of impacts caused by visitors were considered to be permanent; the majority of impacts could be reversed, given sufficient time and funding.

More than three quarters of sites (77%/50) wanted to attract more visitors in order to increase visitors' knowledge and awareness of the Park's natural and cultural heritage; to support the financial management of the site; and to help with habitat and species management. The sites that didn't receive any financial benefit from visitors tended to be the ones that did not want more visitors.

The main costs associated with managing visitors are the tidying up of sites, the cost of signage and interpretation, repairs to gates, fences and access roads. Less visitor management expenditure is associated with habitat restoration or the restoration of heritage features.

A wide range of visitor management activities were employed by sites including the provision of information, managing access, education delivered through guided walks and information sessions, regular site maintenance and wardens.

Although sites provide information about their own attraction there is a clear lack of information being provided to visitors about how their behaviour can impact on the National Park. These sites are well set up to deliver information to visitors and could be an effective channel to help inform visitors of their responsibilities to the countryside.

The majority of sites (82%/46) considered that they were not over capacity and could take more visitors and more than half (56%/41) had aspirations to develop their sites further with increased educational opportunities, interpretation and visitor facilities.

Where alternative sites for visitors were recommended they tended to be managed by the same organisation or were Country Parks and forests where more visitor facilities were available, than on sensitive wildlife sites.

Overall the nature conservation and cultural heritage sites were well placed to attract more visitors and there may be opportunities for them to work with private land managers to alleviate visitor pressure and assist with visitor management practises.

Case studies

Following completion of the two surveys and analysis of the data, a range of organisations were contacted for further information on the management of visitor issues associated with their sites. Organisations were selected based their known expertise in managing sites, the large number of sites managed by them within the National Park, or their ability to provide useful insights into visitor management. Organisations that responded to both surveys were also contacted.

The case studies highlighted the findings from the two surveys. In addition, further examples of good practice in visitor management were identified.

Issues relating to uncontrolled dogs, especially dog fouling and disturbance to wildlife and livestock, were frequently cited in the case studies; responsible dog walking was a recognised need. Examples of good practice in preventing visitors from wandering away from designated routes included creating clear paths and desire lines and positioning objects or materials to prevent people from creating their own routes thereby causing erosion.

Providing visitors with information on why certain management interventions are required was considered one of the most effective ways of addressing issues. It was generally felt that people respond to requests if they know the reason why something is necessary.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Visitor activities cause issues that are mostly localised, reversible (given sufficient time and funding) and therefore do not cause an overall detrimental impact on the National Park's landscape.

At natural and cultural heritage sites the manager generally deals with issues that do arise, although there is a wider problem with the erosion caused to Scheduled Monuments. These sites would mostly welcome more visitors. However on privately owned land nearly three quarters of sites reported issues that affect the management of their land. Both survey's highlighted that walkers and cyclists not staying on public rights of way and uncontrolled dogs are the main cause of litter pollution, erosion and disturbance to wildlife.

In terms of the impacts on local habitats, woodlands suffered less impact from visitors than chalk grassland, which is more sensitive to erosion and trampling. The low number of respondents in wetland and river areas and on the coast made it difficult to assess the impacts on these habitats but no significant issues were raised.

Visitors to the National Park benefit from the educational activities offered and from the health benefits of the outdoor activities available. In turn they contribute to conservation activities and bring economic benefits to local communities through income generation and related employment.

Both surveys highlighted the need to educate visitors about their responsibilities to the National Park and that good visitor management helps deliver positive benefits and minimise the negative impacts.

Recommendations therefore concentrate on the need for a Visitor Management Strategy that focuses on educating a wide range of audiences about the benefits of good visitor management and the impacts visitors can have on the environment in the National Park.