

**AN AGENDA
for
THE FUTURE OF THE NEW
FOREST**



**Policy Approved 1994
(Revised April 2005 and March 2011)**

**NEW FOREST ASSOCIATION
(Registered Charity No. 260328)
Striving to protect, restore and enhance
the natural and cultural heritage of the New Forest**

www.newforestassociation.org

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THE NEW FOREST ASSOCIATION'S POLICY

An Agenda for the Future of the New Forest

The New Forest Association was formed in 1867 at a time of great change when the very existence of the Forest was in doubt. It played a leading role in the successful fight to secure a future for the Forest. Since then the Association has continued to be an independent, campaigning charity based on its membership and volunteers. Additionally, following establishment of the New Forest National Park, the Association was recognised as the New Forest National Park Society and became a Council member of the national Campaign for National Parks. Today some of the problems facing the Forest are as challenging as those that the Association confronted at its inception.

The New Forest* is a unique survival of medieval Europe. It is internationally important to nature conservation and biological science. Cultural and natural elements have blended to form a unique landscape in which grazing by the commoners' animals has played a dominant role in shaping the nature of the vegetation. The undeveloped coast of the northwest Solent shore forms much of the New Forest's southern boundary.

The New Forest contains twenty Sites of Special Scientific Interest covering a wide range of habitats from grassland to freshwater and marine environments. The "New Forest SSSI" is the largest covering almost 29,000 hectares including the Crown lands and manorial commons. The UK Government has designated two Special Protection Areas under the EC Directive on the conservation of Wild Birds, and two Wetlands of International Importance in accordance with the International Convention on the Conservation of Wetlands. In addition much of New Forest has been designated within four Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) in accordance with the EU Habitats Directive. There are more than 200 ancient monuments in the Forest; and extensive areas covering the New Forest villages have been designated as Conservation Areas in recognition of their special architectural or historic interest. These various designations impose international as well as national conservation responsibilities. But designations alone do not avert threats and problems.

The Association supports:

- **The continuing role of the Verderers as a regulating authority for the pastoral use of the Forest and protector of its landscape and natural habitats.**
- **Provision of public funds to the Verderers through appropriate mechanisms that acknowledge the Verderers' independence.**

The Association supports:

- **Ownership and management responsibility for the Crown lands of the New Forest remaining in the public domain.**
- **The adequate resourcing of the managing authority for the Crown lands with estate workers, supervisors, keepers, recreational wardens and ecologists, to support it in its principle function of protecting and conserving the unique character of the New Forest.**

We will work with each of the principal New Forest Administrative bodies and act as a critical friend. Where we are able we will join them in partnership projects intended to further the protection and enhancement of the Forest. We will seek to influence their members and officers so as to ensure their commitment to the long-term conservation and enhancement of the New Forest. We will be ready to approve and actively support constructive ideas, but also to oppose and campaign against those that are not in the best interests of the Forest.

*In addition we will work to encourage **Natural England** to act in a strong and consistent fashion to protect the Forest in carrying out its statutory duties in relation to those areas of the New Forest National Park covered by legislation that falls within its remit.*

ADMINISTRATION OF THE FOREST (Key statutory bodies)

THE VERDERERS of the New Forest, though derived from an archaic institution, have powers and functions adapted to modern circumstances. They have statutory functions to regulate all matters relating to common rights, and they protect the Forest through a requirement that their consent is required for any development on the unenclosed Crown lands. Their court provides a forum for the expression of local views. We are aware that limited financial resources have sometimes been reflected in the ability of the Verderers adequately to fulfil their functions.

THE FORESTRY COMMISSION has managed the Crown lands of the New Forest since 1923. In the past it converted much of the Inclosures from broadleaved to conifer plantations, caused extensive damage to the unenclosed woodlands, bogs and other open forest habitats, and with the consent of the Verderers planted up large areas of unenclosed Forest with more conifers. Following the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981), which required the Commission to accommodate nature conservation, the damage diminished in scale. In more recent times the Forestry Commission has been involved in a new approach to landscape through Forest Design Plans; and is engaged in habitat restoration projects. These initiatives are welcome, but we believe that the Forestry Commission continues to show a reluctance to grasp the difficult nettles of intensified recreational demand and there remain some serious questions about the Commission's sensitivity towards the management of the Crown lands and its fragile and rare natural habitats. We contend that the management of the Crown land of the New Forest for the conservation and enhancement of its special qualities is a matter of national and international importance.

THE NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK was designated in 2005, and in April 2006 the **NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY** assumed its full powers and responsibilities, including as the sole local planning authority for the New Forest National Park. We believe that the designation of the New Forest as a National Park could bring with it great potential for the future of the Forest.

The Forest is squeezed between the large conurbations of South Hampshire and South-East Dorset. Since the 1960s thousands of houses have been built in and around it. It has succumbed to many demands from the infrastructure associated with the growing development areas – roads, gravel extraction, pumped storage reservoirs, pipelines, overhead power lines and other utilities.

It has become a playground for the neighbouring urban populations, besides attracting tourists from further afield. There is evidence that in some areas these demands are exceeding what the Forest can sustain without damage to its natural habitats, wildlife and wilderness quality. Now is a time for firm policies and radical decisions if we wish the Forest to survive for future generations. In the face of many competing demands on this relatively small area of unique countryside, the New Forest Association believes that priority must be given to the conservation of the Forest and its tranquil wilderness qualities.

** New Forest or Forest refers to the area designated as the New Forest National Park*

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Our vision of the New Forest is a unique naturally beautiful yet living and changing place in which strong elements of tranquillity and wilderness are maintained despite the increasing pressures from the demands of local population, recreation and infrastructure. It is a vision of countryside and coast free from pollution, with a minimum of intrusion; an ancient unenclosed landscape set in a wider matrix of diverse, unspoiled countryside including historic settlements and character villages, with long-term ecological and cultural ties to the Forest.

Our vision of the Forest requires a viable commoning community as a vital part of our cultural heritage and an essential element to maintain the ecological habitat of the Forest. A strong rural community must be sustained by commoning, forest management and appropriate local trades and industry.

We visualise the unenclosed landscape as a functioning biological system whose component heathlands, bogs, woods and other habitats are protected against abrupt change, while responding slowly to the grazing of commoners' animals and deer which shape their distinctive character. It is a landscape maintained by sensitive land management, restrained from overuse and where damage in the past is reversed by remedial action.

It is a vision in which there are opportunities for public enjoyment of the Forest, but this is not the dominant management consideration. Education of the public to understand the unique quality and fragility of the Forest is important. Our vision expects all who are privileged to live or work in this special place to share some responsibility for its guardianship, accepting the benefits and limitations this requires.

The Association supports:

- **Education and information to increase understanding and appreciation of the Forest's special qualities, landscapes and habitats, so as to foster enjoyment of these for their own sake.**
- **Reviewing the education, interpretation, and information policies of the National Park Authority, New Forest District Council and the Forestry Commission to ensure that they are consistent, well co-ordinated and framed to foster quiet recreation in ways that conserve the special qualities of the Forest.**
- **Carrying out impact assessments of the effect of recreation and tourism on the New Forest, to provide an evidence base for future management.**

The Association opposes:

- **Promoting the New Forest in ways likely to lead to increased pressure or harmful activity.**

We will promote understanding and appreciation of the New Forest through our leaflets and other publications and by our presence at local shows in and around the Forest. We will initiate and collaborate with others to carry out research or surveys to increase understanding about changes to the Forest and the impacts of various activities upon it.

EDUCATION and UNDERSTANDING

The Association acknowledges the need to educate and inform the public. However, there is a fine line to be drawn between increasing understanding of the Forest by the local community and visitors, so that their enjoyment of the Forest is enhanced; and promoting recreation within the Forest in ways that could lead to harmful increases in activity. The impacts of many activities within the Forest, from camping to organised events or daily visits, such as for dog walking, have been poorly monitored or assessed in the past. There is a need for more methodical surveys to increase understanding about the impacts of various forms of organised and informal recreation within the Forest. The Association believes that the National Park Authority has an important role to play in this respect.

COMMONING

We believe that as well as being a distinctive part of our cultural heritage, the exercise of common rights is the most efficient and cost-effective means of maintaining the special qualities of the landscape of the unenclosed Forest, to which the commoners' stock also impart a character that is unique and vibrant.

The Association supports:

- **Commoning and the promotion of public understanding of the tradition and its modern relevance to the Forest.**
- **Initiatives by public authorities to sustain the use of common rights.**
- **Initiatives to retain existing Commoners' holdings and back-up land for the long-term benefit of the Forest.**
- **The provision of affordable housing for occupancy by commoners in the long-term.**
- **Returning former lawns lost within statutory Inclosures to the open forest.**
- **Restoring grazing to land within the wider New Forest that has been fenced and otherwise detached from the open Forest.**

The Association opposes:

- **The loss of active or potential commoning holdings or back-up grazing land.**
- **The loss of publicly owned housing stock suitable for occupancy by commoners in the long-term.**

We will keep under review initiatives that the Association can instigate or directly contribute towards in order to sustain Commoning.

HABITAT CONSERVATION and RESTORATION

Most of the New Forest SSSI, Special Protection Area, Wetland of International Importance and Special Area of Conservation are managed by the Forestry Commission. Nineteen other SSSIs, three National Nature Reserves and three Local Nature Reserves are managed by others, including Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust and Hampshire County Council.

We are conscious that there are sometimes conflicting requirements arising from the various Acts of Parliament and EU Directives, and also that commoners and biologists sometimes have different views about what management is required. Overall our perception is that much has happened in the past sixty years to detract from or damage the intrinsic character and special qualities of New Forest landscape embracing its diverse habitats.

The Association supports:

- **Reducing the impact of road traffic on the tranquillity and environmental quality of the Forest through traffic and demand management, road design and landscaping.**
- **Reducing the number of animal accidents on unfenced roads by physical design, speed limit enforcement and awareness campaigns.**
- **Experimental measures to investigate the benefits of different permanent or seasonal traffic management tools.**
- **Reducing the visual and noise impacts of the busy A31 trunk road crossing the Forest**

The Association opposes:

- **Proposals for road upgrading improvements or for new roads in the Forest.**
- **Piecemeal widening or straightening of secondary and minor roads under the guise of highway maintenance.**
- **Further highway fencing.**
- **The proliferation of highway signs or the replacement of signs with more intrusive ones.**
- **Kerbing, verge hardening or other urban highway treatment in rural Forest villages.**

We will press for traffic calming measures additional to the 40mph limit and will urge the highway authority to experiment with innovative or new technology measures, such as average speed limits on secondary roads. We believe that the New Forest Highway Strategy should be reviewed to consider radical new highway policies incorporating, for example, seasonal or permanent road closures, setting vehicle capacities, closure or relocation of car parks and control of verge parking.

ROADS

Highway developments have had a significant impact on the Forest since the mid-20th Century. The A31, A337 and the A35 have been widened and fenced. The terminal roundabout of the M27 at Cadnam was constructed at the expense of 7 hectares of prime woodland. Minor roads have been widened and straightened. Traffic density and noise penetration have become such as to seriously diminish the tranquillity of the Forest.

Despite a 40mph speed limit, and more recently 30mph speed limits in many Forest villages, road traffic accidents involving commoners' stock remain at an unacceptably high level. We believe that accepting some limitations on the use and speed of vehicles is a reasonable requirement in return for the privilege of visiting, or living and working in such a special landscape.

The Association supports:

- **Public authority policies (and if necessary legislation) which recognise that management decisions within the Forest should be consistent with the conservation of natural flora, fauna and physical features and the maintenance and, where appropriate, restoration to favourable condition of the 'Natura 2000' network.**
- **Initiatives to change the relative areas of conifer and broad-leaved plantations in the Forest Inclosures such that the latter are restored to their former dominance.**
- **Returning to the open forest the Verderers Inclosures and certain other intrusive conifer plantations, together with unenclosed woodlands trapped within statutory Inclosures at the time they were established.**
- **Returning some mature broadleaved plantations that make a special contribution to the Forest landscape and ecology to the open forest where they should be permitted to develop without further interference.**
- **Reducing fragmentation of habitats and restoring SSSIs that are in an unfavourable condition.**
- **Restoring historic mires and streams seriously damaged by previous drainage works, where this can be accomplished without the overall loss of grazing important to commoners' stock.**
- **Systematically eradicating self-sown pine, rhododendron and other intrusive species from the Forest on a sustained and rolling basis.**

We will participate in opportunities to set long-term or annual management programmes for the Forest and will maintain a watching brief over forest operations carried out within the particularly sensitive and ecologically important Crown land. We believe that a precautionary approach should be adopted in line with the Sandford Principle, which states: "Where irreconcilable conflicts exist between conservation and public enjoyment, then conservation interest should take priority".

LANDSCAPE

The distinctive and special qualities of the open forest landscape are intrinsically bound to policies and practices for forestry, habitat protection and restoration and commoning. In recent years the Forestry Commission has begun to take a more long-term strategic approach to Inclosures through Forest Design Plans. Historically villages and much of the enclosed countryside were strongly related to the open forest through commoning. Settlements formed an important part of the overall New Forest landscape with scattered traditional houses, fragmented villages and paddocks.

In the past 50 years, with increased rates of development and redevelopment and demand for land for recreational or other non-agricultural uses, there has been a steady but insidious loss of the rural quality of the New Forest as a whole. Many of the changes are small-scale in themselves but cumulatively there has been a general suburbanisation of the Forest. Gaps in villages have been filled in with the loss of run-back land; small cottages have been extended or replaced; and trees and hedgerows have been removed. Dark skies have been reduced by the increased glow of nearby conurbations and within the Forest street lights, security lights, floodlighting and illuminated advertising has proliferated. Noise levels are higher and penetrate further into the Forest as traffic volumes and aircraft flights have risen. These visual and aural changes taken together with increased recreational activity have significantly reduced the extent of tranquillity pervading the landscape. It has become increasingly difficult to escape into the Forest and enjoy a feeling of remoteness in a place set apart from the nearby extensive, busy, noisy and built up south of England.

The Association supports:

- **The protective policies of the local planning authorities.**
- **Small-scale development that assists the rural economy or sustains the exercise of common rights within the Forest.**

The Association opposes:

- **Further residential development within the National Park.**
- **Large-scale development adjacent or near to the National Park, which would have a direct adverse impact upon the Forest or increase traffic flows across the Forest.**
- **Small scale built development and changes of use, which cumulatively erode local character and gradually suburbanise the Forest.**

We will monitor planning applications in and around the National Park and will make representations to the local planning authorities about those likely to have a harmful impact upon the New Forest. We will actively engage with the local planning authority in the preparation or review of planning policies and if necessary we will submit the Association's views to public inquiries or examinations. Section 62(2) of the Environment Act 1995 requires public authorities, including neighbouring local authorities to have regard to national park purposes when performing any of their functions that might affect the designated landscape. When necessary we will remind statutory undertakers or neighbouring authorities of their responsibilities under this legislation.

PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

For much of the second half of the 20th Century the New Forest was badly served by the local planning authorities responsible for its protection. Fine words were written about the Crown lands and open forest landscape, but the overall pastoral economy and the need to conserve a wider New Forest that made up its totality was ignored. Larger Forest villages were expanded with new estates developed on grazing land to become commuter settlements; smaller loose-knit villages were in-filled; and large-scale regional growth took place within and beside the Forest fringes. In particular the Waterside settlements and Coastal towns were either engulfed in, or significantly expanded by new residential estates. The sight of Forest ponies grazing beside Southampton Water has been almost totally lost. Major highway, other infrastructure and industrial developments were proposed, some of which took place, and some, opposed by the NFA and others, such as a new container port at Dibden Bay, were resisted. The result has been a large increase in activity in and around the Forest, including traffic flows across the Forest.

By the 1990s, designation of the New Forest Heritage Area and its recognition as having National Park status for planning purposes, together with planning policies for restraint superseding those for growth, increased protection of the Forest from harmful development. This has been consolidated by the formal designation of the National Park. Unfortunately, once again the need to protect the wider New Forest area was not grasped and the final National Park designation boundary was drawn to omit significant areas that had been proposed for inclusion. More recently the National Park Authority has designated additional Conservation Areas, recognising the landscape value of much of the Forest's built heritage alongside its natural landscape.

The Association supports:

- **Traditional management of meadows, hedgerows and woodlands.**
- **Protecting the remaining most tranquil and remote areas of the Forest and seeking to extend them.**
- **De-cluttering the landscape by removing signs wherever possible.**
- **Replacing flat highway signs by traditional finger posts.**
- **Reducing unnecessary lighting, including street lighting, illuminated signs and floodlighting.**
- **Removal or undergrounding of power lines.**
- **Measures to mitigate effects of sea level rise and retain the tree-fringed landscape of the northwest Solent Shore viewed from the sea.**

The Association opposes:

- **Suburbanisation of properties through, for example, hard surfacing, loss of hedges to close boarded fencing and the loss or degradation of grazed verges.**
- **Subdivision of pasture land into small paddocks with visually intrusive fencing or buildings.**
- **Piecemeal encroachment of open forest land.**

We will identify unsightly infrastructure, wire-scapes and signs and will seek their removal, replacement with a more sympathetic design, or relocation as appropriate. We will press for the wider use of road surfaces that reduce traffic noise.

RECREATION

More than 13 million day visits are made to the Forest annually. 10 million of these are from home. 130 Forestry Commission car parks give vehicle access to the Crown lands and provide space for over 4,000 cars, but there are probably nearer 7,000 parked in the core of the Forest at peak times. With substantial development close by the Forest, its use as a local playground has outstripped its enjoyment as a very special national outdoor experience. There are more than 20 campsites providing 4,500 pitches. Within the open forest ten Forestry Commission campsites accommodate over 3,300 pitches. There are pressing demands to use the Forest for a multiplicity of events; for example in 2010 the Forestry Commission issued permits for over 2,400 specialist recreation and other activities events involving about 55,000 people. The Forest also has major destinations catering for day-visit recreation off the open forest – for example, the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu and Beaulieu River to Bucklers Hard. The main places for the public to access the coast are Lepe, Calshot and the Lymington – Keyhaven Nature Reserve, managed by Hampshire County Council.

Traditional outdoor activities such horse riding and walking are part of the New Forest landscape scene, but horse riding is causing erosion in some areas and dogs disturb wildlife or sometimes harass stock. At times cyclists stray from Inclosure roads onto more fragile areas of open forest. There is severe erosion at some 'honey pot' locations such as beside Forest streams. We believe that the demand for recreation has passed the threshold of sustainability and the Forest, the resource on which recreation depends, is deteriorating both in terms of the degradation of landscape and the loss of those special but elusive qualities of tranquillity and wilderness.

The Association supports:

- **Quiet recreation, which appreciates and respects the special qualities the Forest offers.**
- **The production of a strategic approach to managing recreation in the Forest based on a review of present recreational facilities and management within the whole New Forest.**
- **Consideration of the disposition and size of car parks, campsites, and other facilities leading to policies for their continuation, relocation or removal as appropriate.**
- **Implementation of a strategy of supervision and education of the public, including, for example, the positive control of dogs, the effective regulation of mountain bikes, and the management of horse riding.**
- **Provision of local outdoor recreational facilities outside the New Forest to divert some of the daily pressure on the Forest fringes from residents of nearby settlements.**
- **Provision of country park facilities within the conurbations to the east and west of the Forest to serve these areas and act as a counter attraction to some day visits to the New Forest.**

The Association opposes:

- **Development of new recreational facilities or promotion of outdoor activities within the Forest that will further adversely impact on its special qualities.**
- **Use of the Forest for intrusive recreation that could just as well be carried out in other more robust locations better able to withstand its impacts.**

We will continue to press the view that such policies are required by the need to contain physical erosion, disturbance of wildlife, harassment of stock and loss of wilderness arising from recreational activities. We further believe that any decisions, which flow from a review or strategic approach, should be guided by the principle that recreational use is constrained within environmentally sustainable limits; and that a precautionary approach should be adopted in line with the Sandford Principle.