

CLEAN WATER CAMPING

A LOOK BEYOND THE PITCH - WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE NEW FOREST'S FRESHWATER LANDSCAPE

Personally, you may love it or loathe it, but camping is a popular activity. It offers an opportunity, not only for people to reconnect with their families and friends but also to have a 'close up' experience with the landscape which they choose to 'pitch up' in. Each year thousands of holiday makers choose to camp in the New Forest, giving the local economy a boost and providing some well deserved down time from the busy lives people lead. But, are the campers and visitors aware of the special nature of the New Forest's wetlands, or possibly inadvertently damaging the very thing that attracts them here in the first place?

The catchment partnership undertakes regular catchment walkovers (a type of freshwater survey) to map opportunities and threats on the New Forest's rivers, streams, ponds and lakes. Part of the survey considers land use and activities which may impact on the water environment.

A pattern began to emerge:

- Land owners who came to us for advice on land management/water pollution issues, have begun to consider that their campsite business could be part of a package of works to reduce, reuse and recycle water (preventing runoff and reducing pressure on the local water environment).
- Visitors often make a beeline to water and there are clearly opportunities to help make them aware of the vulnerable nature of the habitats, and how to enjoy the New Forest's freshwaters without impacting on them negatively.
- Some motor home owners (day visitors) should be reminded about the safe disposal of waste water - e.g. don't tip dishwasher (plus detergents) into ditches cause nutrient enrichment, think about where your water flows. There's an opportunity here to do more to get the key messages enforced.
- Detecting an increase in nutrient pollution downstream from some campsites - not enough to cause significant harm to wildlife, but more than desirable given the high status of New Forest's freshwaters. We identify the need to be more proactive at these sites to help with measures which could reduce the volume of nutrients entering our rivers and streams.
- Increasing numbers of visitors just don't know why some types of water based recreation are bad news for the New Forest's fragile freshwater environments. Are we doing enough to spread the messages beyond the cattle grids?
- Rangers who interacted with the public didn't feel they had the tools and resources with the key messages, and facts and figures about freshwater habitats, to talk confidently about the water environment in the same way that they could talk about other New Forest topics such as the history of commoning, or heathlands.



Ditch water fouled by dish water, in a New Forest car park, where motorhomes park during the day.

- How can we ensure that the need to protect and conserve the water environment, is given the same high profile as, for example, climate change. We'd like to see freshwater included in every policy document and plan prepared by the agencies responsible for the management of the New Forest.

The New Forest is one of the most visited National Parks in England. It is also the National Park with the highest proportion of designated land of international value for nature conservation in the country. The freshwater habitats in the New Forest are extremely important. With 75% of all lowland bog and valley mire in NW Europe, hundreds of ephemeral ponds full of rarities, and a network of small streams of extremely high quality which have no lowland equivalent in the UK. This rare waterscape and high biodiversity value is underpinned by two important factors, traditional grazing management and a diverse suite of running and standing waters which are free from agricultural and urban pollution.

The impact of recreation on watercourses and waterbodies (and the species they support) has been identified in the Site Improvement Plan for the New Forest's SPA/SAC; "The New Forest attracts high numbers of visitors annually and there is evidence that disturbance affects the breeding success of SPA birds and SAC habitats through erosion, compaction and damage to vegetation and water bodies. Prior to 1972 it was possible to drive, camp or caravan anywhere on the unenclosed forest and a rapid increase in tourism led to considerable damage of habitats and resulted in the creation of 10 specified campsites and 134 car parks. Many of these campsites are located in sensitive areas and have impoverished vegetation due to trampling and infrastructure."¹

In addition to the small number of large capacity campsites which are on conservation designated land, there are increasingly a larger number of smaller low key sites (permanent and "pop-up" sites) located around the smaller rural villages, with direct access onto the Forest but not located on designated land. Let us look at the current known picture of camping and caravanning within the national park:

- There are 82 camping and caravanning sites distributed across the National Park, equivalent to one campsite every three square kilometres.²
- These provide 6,566 pitch spaces throughout the open season, roughly 29 camping pitches per square kilometre.²
- Around 20% of the campsites (50% of pitch spaces) in the New Forest National Park are on land covered by the primary conservation designations (i.e. SAC, SPA, SSSI, Ramsar). Up to 57% of the campsites (20% of pitch spaces) are within 500m of the primary conservation designations.
- In addition, there are an equivalent 15.2 million days visits per year to the National Park.³

Through the Living Waters Our Past Our Future Project we identified the need to begin to review and pull together information on the issues and opportunities around camping and recreation in the New Forest specifically relating to the freshwater environment. This review will form the basis for a new project to showcase what's special about the Forest's freshwaters, and help local businesses and visitors alike to engage with and benefit from the conservation work underway to protect and restore the New Forest's freshwater landscape.

The review found that planning policy for the National Park acknowledges that there is already good provision for campers, and therefore seeks restraint in new sites. There are however gaps in the regulations. Advice and guidance for the camping and caravanning industry related to how sites operate,

and what provisions they must provide, follows national guidance, but may not acknowledge the sensitive nature of the New Forest as a protected landscape.

Discussions with stakeholders revealed strong feelings that visitors are unaware of the unique nature of the New Forest with recreational activities inappropriate to place where sensitive freshwater locations occur. There is also a growing concern over the levels of provision of waste water disposal facilities and the effect this may have on sensitive waterbodies. Of particular concern were campsite and caravan sites, and day visitors in motor homes which fall outside regulatory schemes. However, there is a strong view that there are plenty of opportunities to work with local business, increase New Forest landscape knowledge amongst visitors and campsite owners, engender a care and responsible usership, promote local tourist attractions and robust visitor locations to protect sensitive places.



People pressure at Hatchet Pond following relaxation of the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Hatchet is one of the most wildlife rich small lakes in lowland England, supporting a suite of species vulnerable to disturbance.

The New Forest's Wilder for Water project 2021 - 2024

The New Forest Catchment Partnership have proposed a three-year project that will manage the threat of Protected Area deterioration posed by recreation and camping activities and raise awareness of priority freshwater habitats and species in the New Forest. The project sets out four main key areas of work:

Ensure appropriate regulation and guidance is in place to protect sensitive locations:

- New Forest statutory agencies to take stakeholders views into account when policy, regulations and local plans are under review.
- Policy, regulation and local plans to recognise the importance and sensitivities of the New Forest freshwater environment.

Ensure adequate sanitation facilities at campsites that can accommodate busy periods:

- Investigate camping and caravan site sanitation facilities and waste water disposal are adequate for the location.
- Provide advice and guidance where necessary to site owners to ensure sanitation facilities are not impacting on freshwater habitats.
- Develop and promote a 'Clean Water Camping' award for owners and visitors alike, raising the standards of facilities, promoting responsible countryside access, and increasing understanding of the important freshwater landscape.

Undertake capital works to reduce and intercept nutrient rich runoff from entering streams in the New Forest and flowing downstream to the coastal waters:

- Target sites where individual inputs are small but the collective runoff may lead to significant impacts
- Monitor outcomes and use as demonstration of best practice for the wider catchment, adjacent catchments, SE region and National Parks across the country.

Ensure appropriate behaviour, activities and footfall of visitors and dogs, at sensitive locations:

- Identification of sensitive locations - impacts/recommendations.
- Champion specific freshwater locations in the New Forest, create a narrative of their special qualities and 'how' they can be enjoyed.
- Promote good practice through partners and visitors looking to recreation and engagement staff to advocate on our behalf amongst the public.

We are currently seeking funding from partners and hope to begin work in Spring 2020. The full findings of this report will be uploaded to the Freshwater Habitats Trust website, in the near future.

Dr Naomi Ewald and Gemma Stride

July 2020

References: ¹ *Site Improvement Plan: New Forest (SIP147)*. ² *Data compiled from the New Forest National Park Authority figures*. ³ *New Forest National Park—Recreation and Leisure Visits October 2018*