

# Tourism and recreation

## Opportunities and threats to the visitor economy



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The Peak District National Park is the second most visited national park in the world, with around 22 million day visitors a year. It is also within an hours drive for one third of the UK population. It is a popular destination for a variety of outdoor activities, from walking and climbing, to horse-riding and paragliding. Tourism and recreation can provide opportunities for upland communities but the demands will have to be managed so that the people who visit places like the Peak District National Park do not damage the very qualities that attracted them in the first place.



### How do visitors affect the risk of fire?

UK fire services attend 71,000 vegetation fires a year on average, with most fires occurring in drought years. Fire risk is affected by both human and natural factors. Natural conditions, such as weather and the type of vegetation, create the potential for a fire. Human activity creates the fire risk by providing ignition sources.

Accidental or deliberate wildfires pose a serious risk to uplands. They can be widespread during drought and it can take many years for habitats to recover. Most wildfires are the result of arson or negligence, and it is rare for lightning to ignite fires or for managed fires to get out of control. Heather and grass are particularly vulnerable as they dry quickly and form continuous ground cover that helps fires spread fast. If the peat catches fire, then it becomes difficult to put out and can last for days. This can have serious

impacts on wildlife and their habitats, lead to extensive peat and carbon loss (e.g. up to 100 tonnes of carbon lost per year per km from Upper North Grain catchments on Bleaklow), and reduced water quality. Fire fighting costs millions every year and restoration of affected sites is extremely expensive.

A research team from Manchester University have analysed the where and when wildfires are likely to occur in the Peak District. Their models show that fire risk is greatest in most visited areas, particularly along the Pennine Way and on Bank Holidays, especially during dry weather. Being able to predict when and where there is an increased likelihood of wildfire means that fire management can be targeted, developing fire plans and locating equipment on the moors. It can be used to restrict access and to target manpower during fire watches.



## Has open access increased disturbance?

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CRoW) was implemented in England and Wales in 2005. It allows open access on foot to moorlands and mountains. Grouse moor owners have been concerned about red grouse being disturbed during the breeding season, particularly by dogs. Farmers are also worried about disturbance by dogs during lambing. However, 97% of people who visit the countryside stay on footpaths and do not venture across open access land. Some ecologists contend that disturbance of birds is unlikely to affect whole populations, apart from around particularly popular paths and access points.

Although the CRoW Act has increased the availability of land for recreation in UK uplands, demand has been falling since 1997. With so many competing ways to spend their leisure time, fewer people are using it to access the countryside. In 2005 visits to the countryside were down by 45% compared to 2002/03.

## Is the countryside open to all?

We often see upland spaces as tranquil places for walking and contemplation. In fact a recent survey by Moors For the Future found that 87% of visitors to the Peak District do so to walk, and 59% chose the Peak District for its tranquillity.

However, this use of the uplands tends to appeal to the middle classes rather than the working classes. As the population of the UK becomes more multi-cultural and the population who identify themselves as working-class grows larger, we need to find new ways to engage those people with the uplands so that they feel a responsibility to protect them.

There are two potential routes to take: one of education to promote the current value of the uplands; or one of deregulation that allows people to engage with the uplands in a different way to how they have historically been enjoyed. Deregulation would mean creating more opportunities for group activities which might reduce the value of the uplands for the people who currently visit.

## Is the countryside good for your health?

Mental and physical health benefits may be the most important non-market benefits that the countryside can offer. There are clear links between inactivity and levels of heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes and cancer. Exercise in green spaces has also been found to have positive effects on mental health by improving how people feel about themselves and by reducing stress. These benefits are widely promoted by government, most recently through Natural England's Green Exercise Programme. However, the countryside tends to attract those who already lead healthy and active lifestyles rather than those people who would benefit most by visiting and exercising in the countryside.



## Can tourism support the countryside?

Although tourism can provide opportunities to address the social and economic needs of rural areas it should not be seen as the solution for all rural problems. While tourism opportunities can be small scale, allowing easy entry particularly for those without skills, the wages are low and there are fewer opportunities for financial support or training. Tourism can bring money in from outside the region but that money does not directly pay farmers and landowners for the environmental services they provide. At the same time a lack of services within the region means that the money brought in by tourism often moves out again as locals buy services elsewhere. The tourism industry can also be severely affected by the weather, so making a living from tourism can be a risky strategy.

The importance of the tourism industry to the rural economy should not be underestimated. In 2005 £9.4 billion was spent on tourism and leisure services in England, £226 million in the North East. During the Foot and Mouth crisis in 2001 when much of the countryside was closed it is estimated that the tourism industry in the UK as a whole lost as much as £8 billion and many business either went out of business or were severely scaled back as a result. While the farming industry received compensation totaling over £1 billion only £39

million was made available to rural businesses affected by foot and mouth.

In the Peak District National Park, surveys carried out by the Park Authority and Moors For the Future show that visitors spend an average of £9.65 per person per visit. But relying on visitors to spend enough money to support the countryside may not be enough, as one in three visitors spend nothing at all.

Other options to generate income include visitor taxes, used successfully in many other countries in Europe, or car parking fees. In this way the people who benefit directly from environmental goods are required to contribute towards their upkeep.

More broadly, a recent study has shown that the general public does value the environment and many are willing to pay for the conservation of heather moorland and cultural heritage, for example, stone barns. However, there is a resistance to the increases in taxes that would be needed and it is not clear whether the money that could be raised through taxes would cover the costs that farmers and landowners would face in order to produce the desired landscape qualities.

*Edale Valley*





### Other Research Notes in this series:

1 - Breeding Bird Survey of the Peak District moorlands

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