

## **Costing the Country Park benefit**

**In this second article in the 'Income Generation' series, Mike Thompson of Essex County Council presents a personal take on increasing income in Country Parks.**

Over the last few years there has been increasing pressure for Country Parks to become self-sufficient financially. It is my belief that to jump from no pressure to make money to suddenly being required to be self funding is too large a step unless large amounts of capital are invested, which may be high risk. A better option in my view is to increase income from visitor spend, so reducing the cost of Parks to the rate payer to a sustainable level. Using the bench mark of spend per visitor seems to be as relevant as any other measure.

There are two ways to increase Country Parks incomes from visitor spend as I see it. One is to look at existing provision with a view to improve spend per person. The second is to look at new enterprises that will generate income through both fees and secondary spend.

### **Existing Provision**

- **Visitor centre shops.**

In Essex Country Parks these sell hot drinks, light refreshments, ice cream and a gift range, from pocket money items to personal gifts. The hot drinks have a high profit element but can they be improved? If your current two hour old, stewed, filter coffee is replaced by fresh 'beans to cup' could this command a higher selling price and, through a regular standard give customer satisfaction and higher repeat sales? The range of drinks can, I believe, be reviewed in the same way to give more economical provision and so, greater profit. The move from polystyrene to bone china cups is too great a jump, involving the expense of dishwashing and perhaps more staff. But a move to a quality paper cup (recyclable? compostable?) may improve the image as well as improving the 'green credentials'.

Hygiene regulations cover food sales which may limit expansion to a 'café' style presentation. But do ask the question whether 'plastic' sandwiches are needed and, if so, are of good enough quality?

The sale of wrapped ice cream is easy, through self-selection, but the additional mark-up on soft scoop flavours dispensed in edible cones could give greater customer satisfaction. Other benefits of soft scoop are, I believe, a reduction in the range of wrapped ice creams giving improved use of storage space and ease of ordering, and a reduction in the litter problem.

What range of non-edible goods is on offer? Who are your customers and for what products? High numbers of children means that 'pocket money' items need to be offered or perhaps 'play items' kites, balls, model aeroplanes for use in the Park.

Question whether adults visiting the park would buy luxury goods, such as scents, CD's and ornaments or would it be better to aim for walking sticks, binoculars, cheap plastic Macs and wildlife books?

- **Events**

From my experience most Parks run a series of events. The relevance of these, too, needs to be questioned. How much time and resource has gone into the event and for what return? There are many elements to the provision of guided activities. Those which run

and cover cost, those which improve people's life styles, those that increase confidence in using the Country Park. The ultimate end product is in my opinion is to encourage return and repeat visitors who, hopefully, spend more money.

The Essex Country Parks education programme is an extension of public provision and uses both full time Rangers and casual 'zero hours contract' Education Rangers. The latter work when they are needed. Schools pay to use our education programme and that covers the cost of Ranger time and resources. The children gain confidence in the outdoors and use the shop to buy mementos, which is all part of the educational experience. The hope is that the children will encourage their family to visit these enjoyable places because the children had such a good experience.

- **Car Parking**

The introduction of car park charges, which arrived two years ago in Essex was met with some opposition and is not without problems, though these are fewer than originally anticipated. Some things that need to be considered here are:-

Look at the system from the payer's point of view. Is the scale of charge fair? Is it cheaper to feed the meter than pay for a full period? Is the season ticket an attractive alternative and, most importantly, what is going to force people to pay the charge?

Who will enforce the system? Is it fair to ask the pleasant, helpful friendly Ranger, whose customer care image you are fostering, to suddenly become the Car Park ogre virtually demanding money? Everyone using the car park should be treated the same. There should be regular checks to ensure compliance backed by an enforced penalty system for offenders.

### **New Provision**

Having looked at existing income streams for possible improvements the next step is to look for new provisions, which complement the ethos of the Country Park. Every Park is different and able to host different activities. A wide range of activities has been looked at in Essex, some adopted, some rejected and some put on hold. The range includes archery, model boats, football club, 'Go Ape', micro- lights, quality restaurants, play equipment, retail outlets, cycle hire, camping and caravanning, a sports barn and many others. All of these have an investment cost and are dependent on the facilities that can be made available.

No one can put a financial value on the returns achieved by Country Parks. They are derived from life long learning, recreation, enjoyment, increased confidence and understanding, improved citizenship, improved health and many other aspects. There is a need in the present financial climate to give value for money to both tax payer and visitor. A Country Park will never be commercially viable in strict accounting terms but its value is beyond any financial measure.

Mike Thompson  
Operations Manager Country Parks  
Essex County Council  
[mike.thompson@essexcc.gov.uk](mailto:mike.thompson@essexcc.gov.uk)