

The Countryside is under attack!

Everywhere you look in rural Britain there is evidence of the public's uncaring attitude in the form of litter, fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles. Our National Parks do not escape this abuse; they are treated with equal disdain. Nobody ever admits to being responsible, it is always somebody else and it becomes somebody else's problem.

Although in strict legal sense it does not become the responsibility of the Dartmoor Ranger Service, it does unfortunately, become our problem. We have always held the view that much of the good work carried out by the Authority (be it environmental projects, caring for archaeology, village enhancement schemes or good planning practice), will fail to impress our residents and visitors, if their overriding perception of Dartmoor is one of neglect and squalor. For this reason we address the problem on a daily basis – a time consuming, frustrating and, it has to be said, seemingly futile business. I am sure that we feel on occasion like King Canute attempting to stem the tide.

Things has changed dramatically in a few short years, all adding to this major problem that is experienced right across Britain from the largest National Park to the smallest Local Nature Reserve. These include:-

- Mass car ownership
- Greater leisure time
- Cheap fast food
- Over packaging

This progress has been matched by a gradual decline in civic pride, respect for the law and respect for others. People have become selfish.

In recent years disposing of the unwanted baggage of modern life has become increasingly more difficult and expensive; waste has become an industry with costs, profit and loss, together with regulations which are ever more restrictive. The development of the Dartmoor Ranger Service has taken place alongside these changes.

Early solutions to the litter and fly-tipping problems included:

- Provisions of litter bins – emptied by the district councils
- Handing out paper litter sacks to visitors
- Mass summer litter picks with local schools
- Large council lorries twice a year to clear fly-tipping hotspots

We were able to cope – until things changed....

Litter bins became overloaded by locals and tradespeople, inappropriate items were deposited in them (a dead dog and a Ford Cortina engine block, spring to mind!). They were vandalised, upended, set on fire, and sometimes missed by the District Councils for emptying – they became a liability and we removed them. We were denied access to most tips – the rules were redrawn. Apparently as soon as we collected the blizzard of refuse deposited by the public, it became “trade waste” and therefore, ineligible to be accepted by the many Transit sites which are for household waste only. When we did continue to use the official licensed tip, things became more complicated – certain items

of waste were refused, invariably there were “chitties” to be completed and officious “jobsworths” always in evidence.

I have spoken to several District Councils, the County Council, The Environment Agency, contractors and to other National Parks. I am surprised at the inconsistencies in the interpretation of responsibilities and methods of implementation. As far as the Ranger Service is concerned, it would seem that we have no legal responsibility for dealing with either litter or fly-tipping – but deal with them we do. I estimate that we spend 7% of our time dealing with it. The cost to the authority in 2002 – 2003 was £32,879 (allowing for my limited accountancy skills!) This figure consists of a percentage of Ranger and Student Ranger time, transport costs, tipping charges, skip hire and the purchase of bags and litter pickers. It does not include any administrative costs or consideration of the thousands of hours of voluntary effort.

Our three local District Councils as the “Waste Collection Authorities” are responsible for collecting litter and fly-tipping from roadsides and “Public Land” – although in the eyes of the local councils the definition of what this “Public Land” is seems to be a bit grey.....As far as they are concerned the landowner is responsible for the collection and disposal of any litter or flytip dumped on their land. Is it fair to expect the owner of an area of moorland (who may have had public access imposed upon him), to deal with the aftermath of recreation and illegal dumping? I think not. We continue to deal with the problem, but this is a very serious business. There are massive health and safety implications for our own staff and for our volunteers. Litter collection involves many unpleasant and dangerous materials – broken glass, hypodermic needles, human bodily wastes and fluids (I don’t need to spell this out!), nappies, condoms etc. Fly tipping presents even greater hazards – one load we dealt with contained broken sheet glass, heavy washing machines, mattresses (dirty), several large drums of unidentified liquid, sheet asbestos and heavy bags of builders rubble – a health and safety officer’s nightmare.

#### What does the future hold?

It is time to give serious consideration to these problems. Things are going to get a lot worse. People will continue to drop litter despite the efforts of the Tidy Britain Group. Tipping charges will increase; local authorities will try to keep costs down; new directives on recycling will increase the likelihood of fly-tipping certain types of waste and health and safety legislation will become ever more stringent. For Dartmoor in particular one of our closest largest tips in Plymouth is due to close in the next 2-3 years. The following conclusions come from a lot of personal research (and 25 years + of picking up litter as a Dartmoor National Park Ranger.)

1. We need to carry out updated risk assessments of all aspects of handling waste material, paying particular attention of COSHH regulations
2. Define and agree with District Councils what is meant by “Public Land”
3. If we are going to continue dealing with this issue, consider and review our resource requirements, e.g. employing contractors directly, provision of more

- skips, seek exemption of charges at tips and legitimise use of Transfer Stations and Recycling Centres by Rangers
4. Consider whether we should require landowners to assume their legal responsibilities
  5. Insist that District Councils carry out their responsibilities to the letter
  6. Consider empowering Rangers to issue fixed penalty tickets for littering
  7. Review the deployment of Volunteers in litter collection.

I realise that this problem is not unique to Dartmoor National Park and is a nationwide problem. I would be very interested to hear from other countryside managers how they deal with the problem.

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