

P o l i c e & P C S O P a r t n e r s h i p

The role of the Ranger or Warden more often than not involves keeping an eye open for criminal problems from wildlife crime, vandalism or antisocial behaviour. For many people living near and/or visiting areas such as National Parks, AONB's and Nature Reserves the Ranger is often the first person a problem is reported to. As a result of this, many of us regularly have to call on our understanding of the appropriate legislation that applies to protected areas and open spaces and the diplomacy to use it - often in remote situations and alone.

Developing good links with the local Police and Beat Officers helps enormously in following up on problems as they occur but, with any luck, also goes along way in deterring problems from happening in the first place. This has certainly been the working practice by Rangers on the Quantock Hills for many years and this long-standing partnership has proven very successful in preventing wildlife crime such as theft of Peregrine Falcon chicks and poaching as well as searching for missing people, deterring theft from car parks and patrolling together during the foot and mouth crisis.

Regular joint patrols by the Police and Rangers have also become an established practice particularly at peak visitor times. In the main the outcomes of these joint patrols have helped visitors to understand and enjoy the area by helping those who may be lost or looking for a suitable place to have a bar-b-q.

It not just the more serious incidences that bring Rangers and Police together, earlier this year Volunteer Rangers were joined by a local beat officer and the Deputy Chief Constable on a litter pick to promote looking after our neighbourhoods. Opportunities have also been created to share training events on a number of different subjects ranging from collecting evidence to dealing with suspected wildlife poisoning. The main aim of all joint activities undertaken has been to get a better understanding of each other's roles.

The AONB Office has always been somewhere that Police regularly call in for a coffee and an informal catch up, however, in 2003 a Local Action Team (LAT) was set up involving not only the Police and AONB Service but also other conservation organisations such as Forestry Commission, Wessex Water, National Trust, English Nature and the Environment Agency. These meetings have become well-established forums pooling together knowledge and experience to deal with problems from fly-tipping and quick collection of burnt out cars to understanding the new CRoW and NERC Acts.

Issues such as illegal off-road driving are witnessed by and reported to Rangers on a regular basis and now that RUPP's have become Restricted Byways there is a need to inform and educate visitors wishing to use 4x4s and motorbikes of the changes in the law but in persistent cases of breaking the law enforcement action may be considered.

Increased recreation time and local building developments around the Quantock Hills seem to be leading to higher numbers of visitors to the AONB or at least a more constant use of the area than say a couple of decades ago. The vast majority of the public using the hills do so in a responsible and considerate manner, however a small number of people may choose to act anti-socially or even illegally and these few have the potential to spoil the enjoyment of others coming to the area.

Tackling problems of anti-social behaviour is a relatively new demand on Ranger's time when on patrol and really this can only be achieved when working in partnership with the Police. Despite tremendous support from the local Beat Officers, the reality is they have greater responsibilities and demands on their time to base their work in the settlements around the hills rather than policing remote car parks for the chance encounter with someone having an illegal camp fire or the occasional more serious offence.

The question "how is it possible to increase the Police resources to work in the protected area?" became a talking point at the Local Action Team. Could the example undertaken by Hospital A&E Departments where they pay for a Police Officer's time be copied by the conservation bodies? Budget capping or even cuts in funding meant this would be almost impossible for most organisations and how would a fair split of the costs be worked out e.g. those with a greater acreage of land pay a great share of the costs?

In 2005 as these discussions started to gather momentum the AONB Service was offered, by the Countryside Agency, the chance to administer a Sustainable Development Fund (SDF). Perhaps the SDF could be a source of funding towards some dedicated Police time within the protected area. The AONB's Development Officer, Iain Porter was invited to make a presentation on the purpose of the SDF to the LAT group. The main aims of the SDF are to support projects that bring social, environmental and economic benefits to the AONB. Within a short period of time the group had drawn up a draft project brief stating how each of the three main SDF criteria would be covered.

The chairman of the Local Action Team, Iain and myself on behalf of the other members met with senior Police Officers to see what support there would be from Avon and Somerset Police Authority as the SDF would only be able to fund 50% of the costs and the Police Authority would need to match that funding.

From an early stage the idea of funding a full-time Police Officer was going to be beyond the financial scope of the project but an alternative was to consider employing a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) who could work with and support the local Beat Officers. The very nature of working throughout the AONB would also mean that any PCSO would need a suitable vehicle to cope with the terrain along with specific training in wildlife law which would have to be included in the final cost of the project.

In July of this year, following a successful application to the SDF panel for an initial 12-month period, PCSO Eamonn Leniston was appointed to become the first official Police representative for the Quantock Hills AONB and possibly for any protected landscape in the country. Although Avon and Somerset Police Authority employ Eamonn his day-to-day work is governed by the priorities of the conservation bodies. Each day Eamonn starts from a local Police Station picking up any incident logs and his vehicle before beginning his patrol calling in on organisations like the Forestry Commission and AONB Service as well as individual residents and farms.

Although this initiative is in its early stage, it has already proven to be beneficial in addressing incidents of anti-social behaviour and vandalism at a key visitor site within the hills. A popular recreation site managed by the Forestry Commission started to become a popular location for rallying cars raising concern over a possible accident occurring especially as several cars had been flipped over. Some of the sites facilities such as the public conveniences were being badly vandalised to the point of having to be closed for public use.

Working with Forestry Commission staff, Eamonn has played a central role in tackling the problems by working shift patterns to co-inside with the times that the incidences have typically occurred whilst also ensuring that there is communication with local residents, giving them assurance and in return getting useful support and information.

All the partners in this project have been really pleased with the outcomes even at this early stage and I hope to keep you informed of its success through future Ranger magazine editions. From a personal point of view I have found that working closely with the local Beat Officers and Eamonn has helped enormously. As a Ranger my skills, I hope, lie in communicating environmental issues whilst Eamonn's are being able to provide the appropriate level of legal support when necessary and is a direct link to the Police for everyone who lives and works within the AONB and those who visit it.

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