

Walkers with dogs: using psychology **to improve management**

Stephen Jenkinson -
Kennel Club Access Advisor

A recently published research report by the University of Portsmouth highlights new ways for countryside managers to minimise conflict and maximise the benefits of dog walking.

The study “Understanding the psychology of walkers with dogs” was jointly funded by Hampshire County Council, Countryside Agency and the Kennel Club, and illustrates how a better understating of what influences where dog owners go and what they do, can lead to more effective management practices on the ground.

Whilst it can seem difficult to rationalise the behaviour of some dog walkers, general visitor management principles tell us that there is always a reason why people do what they do, be it to provide a pleasurable outcome, or avoid a negative experience. Although countryside managers will point to ‘issues’ surrounding the UK’s 6 million dogs, in truth this is a people management issue, given that the nation’s 15 million dog walkers are ultimately responsible for their companion’s behaviour.

And in these times of shrinking budgets, user satisfaction surveys and political pressure through the ballot box, savvy countryside managers will also recognise the benefits of much more positive rapport with dog walkers, as one of the most frequent, year-round visitors to the countryside and open spaces around towns.

This report and related developments are particularly helpful, as whilst various studies have attempted to observe and quantify the impact of dogs, there has been scant scientifically valid work done on exploring how best to actually change the behaviour of dog walkers.

Here’s the science!

This research used the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explore why dog walkers might behave in certain ways, through a multi-disciplinary team making use of the University of Portsmouth’s psychology and land management experience.

Data was collected from dog walkers visiting Hampshire’s countryside sites through focus group meetings, where they were encouraged to rationalise their attitudes and behaviours. A group of site managers also met to discuss dog walkers who visit their sites. This process revealed that dog walkers’ behaviour is influenced by attitudes and beliefs relating to three key factors: their dogs, other site/access users, and land managers.

(Wo)mans best friend

The relationship *between dog walker and dog*, is of great importance and a major influence on dog walker behaviour given the physical, psychological and social benefits stemming from dog ownership. The preferences and needs of dogs influence where people choose to walk; favourite sites are those where dogs are perceived as most happy - where they can be off-lead and socialise with other dogs away from traffic.

Other site users

Turning to the relationship *between dog walkers and other path/site users*, participants chose to walk where they believed their dog could enjoy socialising with other dogs. This also provided beneficial social opportunities for dog walkers to interact with each other, and provided a sense of safety not experienced when walking in more remote areas.

As a group, dog walkers reported occasional conflict with other people such as walkers without dogs, cyclists and joggers. Consequently - given the choice - dog walkers often avoided walking at certain locations or times to minimise such conflict.

Site managers

Relationships *between dog walkers and site managers* were mixed. Dog walkers presented positive attitudes toward site staff, but often perceived more senior officials as 'anti-dog'. Site managers discussed negative impacts of dogs (mainly fouling and control issues that affect people, wildlife and livestock) alongside positive aspects; dog walkers were described as unofficial countryside wardens, and said to pick up litter and report problems that may not otherwise be identified.

Management recommendations

This research suggests management measures that embrace a positive approach to dog walkers, that will in turn deliver increased respect for others, a cleaner environment, happy customers, and happy dogs. Such measures acknowledge how dog walkers as a group can promote good behaviour and better mutual understanding.

In practical terms, this suggests developing integrated policy and practice that:

- improves communication with dog walkers
- provides clearer and more consistent messages about expected behaviours of dog walkers and other visitors
- encourages dog walkers to take responsibility for ensuring their dog's good behaviour and to promote this with their peers
- makes dog walkers feel valued and welcomed at sites using dog-related facilities, products and events
- provides alternative locations for some activities to draw dog owners away from sensitive sites

Not just for the puppy huggers!

Whilst this may seem far too 'puppy hugging' for some site managers, we all need to face the reality that - from what CMA members say - current management approaches are failing to sufficiently resolve issues... so what do we do?

Do we keep on using the old approaches in the hope they will magically start to be more effective... and then moan if they don't? Or is it time for something new to complement existing formal approaches, which will at times still be needed against owners who, eg, wilfully and persistently allow their dogs to foul children's play areas etc?

This need to acknowledge the limitations of past approaches and develop new solutions is being increasingly embraced by organisations including the Forestry Commission, Countryside Agency, Hampshire County Council and the Moors for the Future project in the Peak District.

Working with the Kennel Club, these partners are actively delivering new approaches including:

- doggie 'pit stops' where free dog food samples build dialogue between rangers and dog walkers
- awareness workshops and good practice guidance for staff
- on-site dog training sessions to improve recalls and walking on-lead without pulling
- pilot activity trails where dogs and owners can keep fit and learn greater control through specially designed 'natural' obstacles
- ensuring signs about sensitive times and places - eg lambing and nesting birds - are clear, credible and promptly removed
- canine community notice-boards where access information appears alongside details about lost dogs, local vets and charity events etc
- increasing accessibility for dog walkers at visitor centres and other interpretive opportunities
- trial 'flick it off the path' schemes in less intensively used areas, to reduce poo bin costs and the landfill of a biodegradable waste product
- special 'dog day' events with stalls and competitions intertwined with messages about responsible behaviour
- a podcast 'dog-blog' where canine characters explain responsible behaviours that benefit themselves and the environment

All these approaches are crucially designed to firstly secure engagement through themes that are important to dog walkers themselves; messages about responsible behaviour can then be delivered once you have your audience's attention. Such approaches are also far more likely to win the hearts and minds of dog walkers through an approach that is perceived as promoting "responsible dog ownership", rather than reinforcing current "anti-dog" perceptions, arising from traditional reliance on negative and restrictive messages.

- *Understanding the psychology of walkers with dogs*, published August 2006 is available on the websites of the Countryside Agency, Hampshire County Council and the Kennel Club – or just Google the report's title.

- Losehill Hall is running the course "*Managing dogs and their owners*" on 14-15 March 2007, to help countryside managers benefit from the latest research, case studies and emerging good practice – tel 01433 620373.

- Thanks to Phil Buckley, Victoria Edwards, Jo Hale, Sarah Knight and Abi Townsend for contributions to this article.

For more general information contact:

Stephen Jenkinson - Kennel Club Access Advisor

PO Box 3715, Hope Valley S33 8XZ

Tel: 01433 623129 Email: steve@sjacm.co.uk

