

## **'Paws on the Moors' – a positive approach to responsible dog ownership**

**The last two issues of Ranger featured articles describing approaches to managing dogs and their owners, from a site based and national perspective. Dan Boys, Moors Care Project Officer with the Peak District National Park provides more food for thought.**

I have to admit, I am no dog lover. I don't mind other people's dogs, but I can safely say I will never own one. That doesn't mean that a little role play cannot put you into the mindset of those that concur with the phrase 'man's best friend'. I have three young children and preventing them from wee-ing up the neighbour's wheely-bin and sniffing each other's bottoms is a shared problem.

### **Flamin' Dogs**

Listen to any moorland landowner in the Peak District and they will tell you there are two major conservation threats; summer wildfires and uncontrolled dogs (or is that owners?) disturbing wildlife. My new role, back in 2004, for the Moors for the Future Partnership was to influence the behaviour of six million visitors to Britain's first National Park.

Wildfires seemed easier to tackle in awareness raising terms and the dogs issue was put on the back burner for over a year whilst we produced leaflets, undertook road shows and distributed disposable ashtray pouches to everyone who smoked, or looked like they might. I knew the day would come when I would have to devise an initiative that would bring more dog owners into line. Visions of Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Kindergarten Cop* came to mind. Dog owners marching to the sound of Rangers' whistles; their canine pets 'under close control' (whatever that means!).

### **Andrex Puppies (softly, softly approach)**

In reality, a softer approach was needed. Dog owners often feel unwelcome to the countryside. At many access points seasonal signage, often left out all year long, discourages them. The aim was to innovatively and positively inform dog owners that letting their pets run around like, well, dogs was not beneficial to moorland wildlife.

Looking for a source of inspiration, I began to leaf through a copy of 'You and Your Dog in the Countryside'. I read page two of the booklet, which I had always skipped. You are invited to photocopy this page and insert information about your dog, insurance details, microchip number etc, so you have it to hand if your dog gets lost.

In my newly found 'dog lover' role, I decided I would not keep a tatty piece of photocopied paper in my pocket, but I liked the idea of having this information to hand, especially if I could stick a picture of old 'Fido') in there too. Although I should tell you now, my dog is the best behaved dog in the world and never gets into trouble!

## **Pet 'Passports'**

After the success of the disposable ashtray pouches, I realised that arming Rangers with another freebie, a wallet sized 'passport' replicating some of the details found on page two, could provide a nice ice-breaker with dog owners.

The card was launched at the start of the bird nesting season in 2006 and deemed an instant success by all parties, staff on the ground reporting that dog owners became more receptive to dialogue on this subject. Key to this was the advisory role that Steve Jenkinson from the Kennel Club played.

Besides the extra publicity the card gained from the local media, it delivered three, very carefully worded key messages highlighting that 'responsible dog owners are welcome on the moors':

- Please keep your dog close by, under control and in sight; however always use a short 2 metre lead:
  - Between 1st March – 31st July when rare moorland birds lay their eggs on the ground (CRoW Act 2000)
  - Near farm animals – all year round. Sheep are particularly sensitive to dogs (Animal Act 1971)
  - If you cannot rely on your dog's obedience
- If livestock chase you and your dog, it is safer to let your dog off the lead – don't risk getting hurt trying to protect it.
- Please follow official signs that illustrate the sensitive times and places where dogs are not allowed.

## **Podcast or should that be dogcast?**

We toyed with the idea of producing a dog walkers *Audio Trail*, but realised that a radio-style play that could be listened to anywhere, would be more appropriate and reach a wider audience. A local scriptwriter was commissioned to write the play, the Kennel Club and the Hearing Dogs for the deaf charity contributing expertise. The University of Derby's Graduate Theatre provided the voices for the 25-minute podcast, which followed the light-hearted adventures of dogs on the moors. The objective was to relay the facts from the dog's perspective.

The story features Barney, a young collie-cross, learning about moorland delights and dangers. Through his online "dog-blog," Barney makes new friends, including two experienced working dogs who help reform the mischievous Bingo, a Lakeland terrier who likes to bite off more than he can chew.

The play was written about a generic moorland setting, making it applicable beyond the Peak District. A number of other Local Authorities are promoting the podcast in their areas. The podcast received great publicity when it was launched at Crufts, the world's biggest dog show in March 2007 and even found its way to a number of podcasting sites in North America. Over 200 downloads were recorded in its first week.

### **Best in Show**

During the development of the podcast the scriptwriter intimated that it would make a fantastic live performance. We adjusted the script and selected eight venues where 'Paws on the Moors' LIVE would be performed. Whilst May 2007 was mainly wet, over 400 people attended the shows and the 10% share of the audience we interviewed found the show fun, informative and educational and took away the play's messages, plus the wallet-sized card as an *aide memoir*.

In November 2007 the Association for Heritage Interpretation commended the initiative in its annual 'Interpret Britain and Ireland Awards', which recognise "the very best examples of interpretation...that demonstrate innovative, inspirational and provocative interpretation in projects".

### **Paws for the Future**

On the back of this success we have further initiatives planned including the launch of an animated version of the play for 2008, which will be shown in visitor centres, sent to schools and will no doubt end up on 'You Tube'.

To keep up to date with the latest developments please visit [www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/mfff/information/dogs.htm](http://www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/mfff/information/dogs.htm), our dedicated popular pages where you can download the podcast and access a vast array of information, including doggie first aid, dog-friendly B&B's and local vets.

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