

Editorial

John Thomson, Chairman, Countryside Recreation Network



Photograph courtesy of Dr Kevin Bishop

The smoke from the pyres was a familiar sight in the countryside during the peak of the Foot and Mouth crisis

Piles of smouldering carcasses. The stench of singed wool and charred hide. Farmers weeping over the loss of a lifetime's work. Tourist operators protesting at the threat to their livelihoods and the perceived inequity of their treatment by Government.

These are not the sights and smells that we associate with the British countryside. They are more reminiscent of civil war in the Balkans or our imaginings of medieval plagues. Yet they are precisely the scenes that confronted people daily, whether in their travels or through their television screens, for many weeks earlier this year. Even today the epidemic is not over and veterinary experts have issued stark warnings of the danger of renewed outbreaks later in the year.

The long term consequences of such a traumatic and (in many senses of the word) costly episode are hard to foresee. There can have been few of us who, on witnessing the slaughter, the disruption and the heartache, did not resolve that it could not be allowed to happen again. Yet the scientific issues are complex, the policy context international and the political stakes high. Whilst there can be little doubt that in certain profound ways rural life – and the relationship between town and country – will never be the same again, there is a risk that, as the countryside returns to something like normality, the determination to learn the lessons for future public policy will wane. This, it would appear, is largely what happened after the last two major outbreaks in the 1950s and 1960s, despite the thorough-going inquiries instituted at the time.

There are some grounds for hoping that things will be different this time. The major land using industries, agriculture in particular, were already in crisis before the disease struck. The epidemic has served to highlight the fact that the rural economy is far more diverse, and far more inter-dependent, than was the case in the past. Public attitudes towards authority have changed, with a weakening in particular of people's willingness to defer unquestioningly to "expert" opinion. Any perceived attempt to sweep discomfiting issues under the carpet and to return to "business as usual" is unlikely to wash with voters at large.

The debate that has begun and which will hopefully gather pace once the epidemic is finally brought to a close is of immense significance for CRN members. If there is one fact that the outbreak has brought to the fore, it is the importance of tourism and outdoor recreation to the rural economy. Furthermore it has highlighted just how dependent these activities are on access to the countryside and on the quality of the rural environment. These insights are directly relevant to impending decisions about the statutory framework for access in Scotland and to the ongoing dialogue about the basis for public support for the rural economy everywhere. Also germane to the arguments about the extent of public access that is compatible with land-managing interests is the high level of responsibility demonstrated by the public in response to the restrictions imposed to help to combat the spread of the disease.

It is still too early to draw firm and detailed conclusions from the experience of this outbreak as to how similar episodes could be better handled in future. But it is not too soon to begin pointing up the issues that will need to be addressed and drawing attention to some of the pitfalls to be avoided and examples to be followed. Much of this edition of *Countryside Recreation* is devoted to doing precisely that. We are grateful to all those who have contributed articles based on their own involvement, whether in a personal capacity or as a representative of their organisation.

If there are any lessons that stand out, even at this early and necessarily anecdotal stage, they relate to the need for co-operation between all the relevant interests and to good communication. Given the suddenness with which the disease erupts, arrangements that can meet these challenges need to be in place beforehand, rather than cobbled together in response. This underlines the importance of institutions like Local Access Forums, which just happened to be the subject of our last workshop! If you ever doubted the value and relevance of CRN.....