

Foot and Mouth - Its Effects on Open-Air Recreation in Scotland

John MacKay, Scottish Natural Heritage

Foot and mouth disease had very serious direct effects on south Scotland, and very significant indirect effects elsewhere in the country. The Dumfries & Galloway outbreak was one of the main focal points of the national crisis, with 176 cases between early March and the end of May and there was some infection eastwards into the Borders region. Elsewhere, there was no infection, although there were some anxious moments over false alarm cases in Grampian, and there was one event of precautionary slaughter in the far north of Sutherland, arising from a dangerous contact.

As was the case elsewhere in the UK, there was a general closure of access to the countryside, and a very willing acceptance by the public of the need for restraint. The extent of this demonstration of responsibility has been praised by all who were involved. Out with the infected and at-risk areas, closures were mainly done on a voluntary basis, without the deployment of any formal regulations. Obviously, a main concern in Scotland was the great extent of open-hill country, where sheep might catch the disease unnoticed and harbour it for the future. But an equal concern was the prospect of the large open-range red deer population becoming infected, and also becoming a potential future reservoir of infection. Slaughter of the deer herd would have been impracticable.

As elsewhere, the outbreak began at a time when the volume of open-air recreation was seasonally at a low level, and the main infected areas in Scotland do not normally attract large volumes of day-trips from urban centres. But both Borders and Dumfries & Galloway are important tourism destinations, and there are important out-of-season countryside attractions such as the large populations of over-wintering birds in the Solway area. The outcome was

that the main effect of the earlier closures on the general public lay in the central belt, distant from the infected areas.

However, the winter sports-skiing and winter mountaineering and climbing were at the peak of their season, and this had been the best winter for these activities over recent years. It was agreed that the ski fields would stay open because of their important local tourism role, and because most of their income comes over a very few weeks at this time. The high hills mainly stayed closed to climbers and walkers, but credit should go, nonetheless, to some estates - such as Balmoral and Invercauld - who assessed the risk to the deer populations and kept their hills open, but with some precautionary measures of disinfection. At this time, the Mountaineering Council of Scotland played an important role in compiling information about access arrangements to the hills on its website.

Once the control measures had reached a point where they were having effect, the same concerns felt elsewhere in the UK, about the effects on other rural businesses began to surface and, by this point, the crucial Easter season was in sight. Credit is due here to the National Trust for Scotland, which took the lead in convening a meeting of the public and private sector interests to assess the scale of risk, and to debate whether we could not now begin to agree a programme for opening-up the countryside.

This turned into be an excellent co-operative effort between the voluntary recreation bodies, the Scottish Executive and the relevant agencies. At first, the Executive advised on dividing the country into three zones: the infected and at-risk areas in the south; a precautionary zone extending up to the central belt, and thereafter the rest of the country

where the risk was judged to be minimal, and where opening could proceed. Procedures were agreed for risk assessment, to assist owners and managers to take their own decisions on opening-up, and a campaign was developed to open-up the countryside, based on the 'Comeback Code'.

SNH was asked by the Scottish Executive to lead on the publication and promotion of the Code, which has a simple, nine-point message on common-sense actions by visitors to the countryside, to ensure that risk of infection is always minimised. The promotion was extensive, using newspapers and TV adverts, posters and wide distribution of an A4 folded leaflet - half a million were printed and distributed. The campaign aimed to both summarise the precautions and to promote that a wide range of sites and attractions were open. This also directed people to a telephone help-line and Website established by VisitScotland to field queries on which parts of the countryside could be safely visited.

The transfer back to normality took a few weeks and, soon after the cessation of new cases in Scotland (the last being on 30 May), the area of restraint was drawn back to the infected and at risk locations nearby. The slowish pace of opening-up some parts of the countryside did raise concerns, especially for the remoter areas, but Scottish Ministers have now taken a strong line that the only paths which are now formally closed are a few which lie in the infected area: elsewhere, the public may ignore any residual notices claiming restriction on the grounds of risk from foot and mouth.

The foot and mouth closure coincided with the Scottish Executive's consultation on the draft Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, which contains the proposals for a new general right of access to Scotland's countryside (and it also coincided with the consultation on the proposal for a National Park on the Cairngorms). The first and obvious outcome was the difficulty of holding consultation meetings in the rural areas, and the consultation periods for both of these proposals were extended. The admirable response by the public in showing restraint for a

common-sense reason has greatly reinforced our conviction about the merit of the approach of responsible behaviour, which will underpin the proposed new Scottish Access legislation. The new Scottish Outdoor Access Code will be the reference point for defining responsibility in access.

But there still remains an issue over the speed at which the countryside was closed down and the protracted process of opening it up. All these issues will be reviewed in the months ahead, to review the lessons from the recent crisis, and consider how best to react to any future events of this kind. However, the big message, already apparent from the Scottish experience, is that co-operative action between all the key parties is the best way of ensuring a measured, effective and corporate approach, should any crisis of such a magnitude arise again.

We must fervently hope that this will not recur. Meantime the process of recovery in the infected areas is under-way, with a multi-agency approach to promote a programme of environment and access investment to underpin tourism. But for all of us, there must arise some longer-term thoughts about how our support to rural land management can secure benefits for all of society in a way which helps bring rural and urban society closer together.

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