

The Impact of Foot and Mouth Disease on the Youth Hostels

Helen Smith, Youth Hostels Association

YHA (England and Wales) is one of the UK's leading charities, serving the recreational and outdoor educational needs of young people. We have approximately 300,000 members, and many of these are outdoor enthusiasts (walkers, cyclists etc) and countryside lovers.

The immediate impact of the outbreak of FMD on the YHA has been severe. We offer a programme of led walking holidays (eg the "Coast to Coast" and the Dales Way). We also offer a central booking service for independent walkers covering accommodation (Youth Hostels and alternatives) on the main long distance footpaths in England and Wales. YHA also markets and administers more than 50 privately run camping barns in networks covering Exmoor; Dartmoor; the Peak District; the Forest of Bowland; North Yorkshire; the Lake District and the North Pennines. With the countryside being effectively 'closed' for many weeks (with rights of way and public open spaces being out of bounds) our visitors all but disappeared.

We operate 230 Youth Hostels across England and Wales. Of these:

- 99 (43%) are in, or adjacent to, National Parks;
- 135 (59%) are on, or close to National Trails;
- 24 (10%) are in areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; and
- 26 (11%) are in historic cities (including seven in London).

About 20 hostels were closed shortly after the outbreak, where the hostel was on farmland or depended on the goodwill of a farmer for continuing operation. A further 90 hostels were closed because visitor numbers dried up and we faced an urgent need to reduce operating costs. (At the time of writing, August 2001, all but six of our 230 hostels

have now been re-opened). Beyond closing hostels, the main action has been to discontinue the employment of all seasonal staff. This has left 200 rural jobs unfilled.

Our Youth Hostels recorded more than two million overnight stays last year (2000) and the financial turnover was £30,701,000. More than half a million overnights were accounted for by visitors from overseas, including:

- 17 per cent from Germany;
- 14 per cent from Australia;
- 12 per cent from the USA;
- 8 per cent from France; and
- 5 per cent from Japan.

In financial terms, the YHA had incurred a net loss of £2 million by the end of April and a further net loss of £3 million through May and June. As the rights of way re-open and the countryside starts getting back to normal, visitor numbers are beginning to pick up again, but the medium to long term impact of the crisis on visitor attitudes in respect of the countryside remains to be seen. A major concern is the extent to which people from overseas will have been discouraged from visiting Britain, now and in the future.

What the crisis has demonstrated, above all else, is the value of the countryside as a recreational asset, both in economic and social terms, and the vital importance of the Rights of Way network. YHA, along with many other stakeholders in the rural economy, has suffered greatly as a result of the FMD crisis and the closure of the countryside. We cannot afford for something like this ever to happen again.

For more information about the YHA visit their website at: www.yha.org.uk