

The Impact of Foot and Mouth on Three Outdoor Recreation Providers in Northern Ireland

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Following Northern Ireland's first outbreak of foot and mouth in Meigh, Co. Armagh on March 1 2001, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland (DARD) issued guidelines which included that recreational visits to the countryside should be avoided. This decision had significant impact on many sectors of the community.

Although the media focused on the devastating effect foot and mouth was having on the agricultural and tourism communities, this short paper:

- describes the impact the disease had on three outdoor recreation providers;
- considers some of the major issues experienced; and
- proposes a series of changes, which could help overcome similar problems in the future.

The three organisations chosen for this study were an Education and Library Board Outdoor Centre (equivalent to a field centre in the UK), a commercial outdoor centre specialising in corporate training and the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Following consultation with each, the following comments are made:

All three organisations reported that the foot and mouth crisis had significant implications with respect to staffing and financial loss.

The Education and Library Board Outdoor Centre was closed to groups for a period of five weeks. During that time permanent employees (instructors, administration staff, catering and domestic staff) continued to work their regular hours although some annual leave had to be taken during the period. However, during the period of closure, the Centre

did not require its normal complement of part time staff. This resulted in three people losing their main source of income for the five-week period.

A similar position was reported by the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, although they were able to maintain their own staff throughout the period, they were aware of staff redundancies within some voluntary organisations that use the scheme, due to group cancellations.

It is estimated that group cancellations during the five-week period cost the Education Centre approximately £25,000 in lost income. The full extent of the income lost from the commercial centre will not become apparent until next year. This is because there is still a belief within the general public that much of the countryside is still closed and people are therefore reluctant to initiate visits to the countryside.

Although the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and the commercial centre reported that they were able to carry on a limited programme of activity using urban-based facility sites this was not an acceptable alternative to all customers.

In comparison the Education and Library Board Centre's programme was halted until restrictions placed on the use of forest parks for recreational purposes were lifted. The venues that were used were those deemed to be of 'lower risk' by DARD. Because of this, one suggestion by the Education and Library Board was that consideration should be given to increasing the development of facilities for outdoor recreation in the urban fringe/urban locality. All three organisations recognised the importance of

the recreational community adopting the advice issued by DARD and emphasised the importance of their organisations acting responsibly and not adding to the already existing stresses on the farming community. Although the organisations recognise that their daily activities are only possible because of the goodwill of the farming community in allowing permissive access onto their land, it was proposed that further research was required to assess the risk of spreading the virus associated with the use of the countryside for recreation by those who otherwise had no contact with the farming community.

Concern was expressed that land owned or managed by local and central government or other major land-owning bodies had adopted a reactive approach to the re-opening of the countryside. It was proposed that a more proactive countryside management approach was required to determine risk so that those areas deemed as posing no significant risk were re-opened as soon as possible. Or indeed, whether such venues need to be closed in the first place!

One of the greatest concerns expressed was the apparent lack of communication between all the interested parties. This ranged from no communication between the three organisations and those bodies responsible for managing the land they wished to access; to poor communication between the land managing/owning bodies and DARD. This caused confusion among the recreational community as the guidelines issued by DARD, which advocated the re-opening of the countryside, were "woolly" and that rather than issuing statements that required interpretation by the land agencies, it would have been preferable if DARD had given clear and specific guidelines as to which land could be 're-opened'. What was required, therefore, was clearer advice with fewer ambiguities, which could be acted upon immediately.

It was felt that although the closure of the countryside for recreational purposes was well publicised, this was not the case for the re-opening of the countryside. One such proposal is that current public perception of the countryside needs to be

changed so that it is seen to be safe and acceptable to return to the countryside.

One positive consequence of the crisis was the work of the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN). The network is an umbrella organisation which represents the full cross section of countryside recreation and other relevant interest groups including participants in recreational activities, local and central government organisations, farmers, environmental and community organisations and outdoor education and youth organisations. The Network's main objectives are to:

- ensure that recreational use of the Northern Ireland countryside is managed in a way which provides a high quality and consistent experience for all recreational users;
- ensure that new and developing facilities for countryside recreation within Northern Ireland are resourced, supported, provided and managed in a strategic way; and
- raise the public's awareness of countryside recreation opportunities within Northern Ireland and encourage participation in countryside recreation by well-informed users.

All three outdoor organisations commented favourably on the work of CAAN during the foot and mouth crisis. CAAN acted as a central co-ordinating body, giving up-to-date information on those areas closed/re-opened for all land owned or managed by the statutory agencies namely, Environment and Heritage Service, Water Service, Forest Service and Rivers Agency and also for the National Trust. It was proposed that if the need arose again, the service offered by the Network should be extended in future to embrace the tourist and farming industries --- provided that the Network were adequately resourced to perform this role.

Therefore, the key lessons from the foot and mouth crisis in Northern Ireland are:

- the need for a facilitator of information, such as the Countryside Access and Activities Network, in times of uncertainty so that the general public and all recreation providers are informed of

developments as they occur.

- to provide proper research on the risk of people movements in countryside and the spread of the virus.
- to encourage a more proactive countryside management approach to determine risk by major land-owning bodies so that areas deemed as not posing a significant risk can be re-opened as soon as possible or not closed at all!
- to generate a conscious effort to provide accurate information to the public so as to counter false perceptions of the impact of foot and mouth on the countryside, 'often fostered by the media'.

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