

# ***Managing the right of Access to Open Countryside - The Role of the Ranger Service***

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## **Introduction**

The introduction of a new statutory right of access to open was always going to be an important and controversial event. What no one could predict was that the new legislation would come into force in the shadow of the 2001 foot and mouth disease (FMD) outbreak, against an irrevocably changed policy background. That event highlighted in a very painful way the importance of tourism and recreation to the economy of Wales, and it has also demonstrated the interdependence between the various elements of the rural fabric. FMD has concentrated official minds and public opinion on the future role of agriculture and other rural activities and, in particular, on priorities for future official funding regimes.

Perhaps predictably, discussion of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act) has focused on questions relating to the rights of countryside users and landowners (where precisely will people be allowed to go and what will they be allowed to do there?) and with policy structures (how many Access Fora will there be and what will be their precise role?). Debate about the implications of the new legislation for countryside management in its widest sense has tended to be more muted, and so this paper seeks to help redress the balance by considering the role of ranger and warden services in a post CRoW situation and urging action to ensure that the necessary services are in place before land is opened for access.

## **The Management Context of the CRoW Act**

The CRoW Act provides a framework for the management of the right of access to open country, embracing:

- mapping of access land (Sections 4 to 11)
- display of notices deterring public access (Section 14)
- creation of byelaws (Section 16)
- notices indicating boundaries (Section 19)
- codes of conduct and other information (Section 20)
- exclusion or restriction of access (Section 21 to 23)
- means of access to open country (Sections 34 to 39)

However, it does not prescribe the way in which the various parties involved (owners, users and regulatory bodies) should interact, other than to:

- require the establishment of a local access forum in each local authority area; and to
- Enable local authorities to appoint wardens/rangers for access land in their area (Section 18), in order to secure the compliance with byelaws, to enforce any exclusions under the Act and to advise and assist the public and persons interested in access land.

Given the numerous expressions of support from all quarters for the establishment of warden/rangers services to assist in the management of access during the passage of the Bill through Parliament, it is perhaps surprising that their appointment was not made mandatory.

## **The Need for Ranger Warden/Services**

The very existence of Section 18 of the Act confirms that government perceives the need for wardens/rangers to help administer the provisions for access to open country. A recent research study in

Wales has shown strong support for the principle of having rangers/wardens available to assist in the management of access land (Owen and Holdaway, 2001). All the parties consulted during the study - including user groups, landowners and regulatory agencies - expressed the view that such services were needed.

The numbers of wardens/rangers that will be needed will naturally vary from one area to another, according to such factors as the scale and complexity of access land found there and according to how many people choose to exercise their new rights there. It is widely held that there is unlikely to be a dramatic increase in the demand to use the countryside generally and access land in particular, rather it will gradually increase as more information becomes available and as public knowledge and confidence grows. However, it is clear that, irrespective of the level of use, a range of management issues will arise at a local level. Accordingly a basic level of ranger/warden service will be needed to deal with them.

The access provisions of the new Act are not to be implemented immediately. Nevertheless it will be crucial for central and local government to indicate as soon as possible that it is their intention to put rangers/wardens in place to help implement the legislation. This is vital in order to reassure all stakeholders that their interests are being safeguarded from the outset.

As the new provisions come into force there is likely to be some initial nervousness and perhaps some posturing on the part of users and landowners alike. The former will wish to exercise their rights to traverse areas that have previously been out of bounds. The latter will wish to know whether or not their worst fears are being realised: they will be extremely vigilant themselves and will wish to be reassured that access authorities are just as keen. For both these reasons the issue of the presence of rangers/wardens will assume great importance from the outset. Indeed, they need to be involved from the outset in all the planning and the practical work

that will be necessary in advance of the opening up of open country

### **The Role of Rangers/Wardens**

Figure 1 (see overpage) lists the key tasks that will need to be undertaken to deliver access to open country. Significantly, all of these activities have a direct or indirect ranger/warden component, suggesting that such services have an integral vital part to play.

Rangers/wardens operate at the interface between landowners and countryside users, and so it is perhaps inevitable that the two groups will tend to view their role from a slightly different perspective.

Our research has confirmed that landowners are inclined to view the warden as a custodian of the countryside, whose job is to police areas of open access in order to ensure that rules are obeyed and conflict is minimised. User groups, on the other hand, view the mission of the ranger as being to inform, to interpret and generally to make the visit to open countryside more rewarding. To be effective, ranger/warden services must work on the premise that each of these activities is legitimate and that neither should be pursued to the detriment of the other. It follows that they should have a two-fold role in relation to access land:

- to provide information that will help visitors to enjoy and appreciate the countryside responsibly, without damage to the environment and in ways that bring positive economic benefit to rural communities; and
- to maintain a close and regular dialogue with landowners and members of the local community, to ensure that their interests are safeguarded.

### **Towards a Holistic Approach**

The CRoW Act provides an ideal opportunity to review the role of ranger/warden services in the context of the management of the wider countryside. Whilst the need to establish a ranger/warden presence is being driven by the

**Figure 1: The core tasks involved in managing public access to open country which require a ranger/warden involvement**

Policy formulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mapping of open land</li> <li>• preparing strategies for access</li> </ul>
Policy administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• implementation of bye laws</li> <li>• implementation of closures</li> </ul>
Resource management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• access management: signposting, waymarking, repair of paths and other environmental improvements</li> <li>• recreation management: provision of access points, car parking and traffic management</li> <li>• seeking economic benefit to the local community</li> </ul>
Visitor services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing information to visitors to help them plan and enjoy their visit</li> <li>• helping visitors to understand and appreciate the countryside (e.g. guided walks, events, talks, educational services)</li> <li>• promoting the health and safety of visitors</li> </ul>
Liaison and mediation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing a personal point of contact with landowners, conservation and access interests and the local community</li> <li>• trouble shooting and resolving disputes at the local level</li> <li>• servicing the Local Access Forum</li> <li>• provision of information to all stakeholders</li> </ul>

national policy imperative of achieving public access to open country, it also has a link with other key government policy objectives such as pursuing sustainable development and promoting biodiversity, a healthy lifestyle and social inclusion.

There is scope for a more integrated approach to countryside management, with rangers/wardens playing a key role at local level. This implies moving away from the concept of site management- with its focus on discrete recreation sites - in favour of countryside management, which is characterised by an area approach and an integrated way of working. The essence of such an approach was described by the then Countryside Commission in an advisory booklet published in 1993, whose key principles carry even more force twelve years later in a post-FMD policy climate (Countryside Commission, 1993).

The range of issues that access to open country is likely to present will require such a local grass roots approach, providing the first point of contact locally for landowners as well as users. This approach would

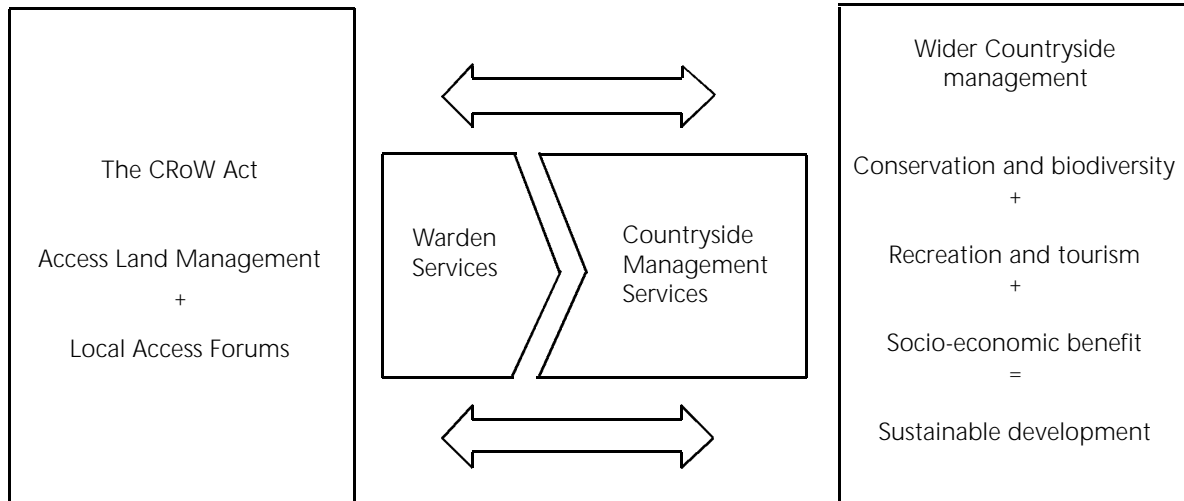
seem to be ideal to cope with these new demands and to ensure that they are linked to wider countryside objectives - landscape and nature conservation as well as helping to realise the economic benefits of access and conservation for local communities. Experience of managing access to open country in this way, in places such as the Pentland Hills in Scotland and in the Dartmoor and Peak District National Parks, shows that an integrated approach is crucial and workable.

Figure 2 illustrates in diagrammatic form the nature of the relationship might productively be developed between the wardening of access land and wider countryside management.

**A Renaissance for Wardens/Rangers**

In pursuing this holistic approach it will be very important to ensure that access to open country should be delivered in a consistent and equitable manner. This is based on the notion that both visitors to the countryside and landowners/farmers have an increasing expectation of the existence of

**Figure 2: The relationship between the wardening of access land and wider countryside management**



warden/ranger services to whom they can turn. Consistency and equity do not mean that all services should be the same. However, they should achieve broad consistency in terms of the purpose, range and quality of the services delivered, whilst at the same time allowing for local flexibility in terms of the scale and mix of service provision. It is also implicit that the services are provided on a countryside basis and that in certain circumstances joint working between authorities will be important - in many instances open access land tends to be on the edge of administrative areas.

This approach will need to be underpinned by the following principles:

- the development of common standards for operation of services;
- in service training and professional development;
- provision of appropriate education;
- the creation of a coherent career structure;
- the involvement of volunteers, though not as a substitute for full time professional services;
- the development of opportunities for the sharing of best practice;
- the involvement of local people as part of the services, providing that they have the requisite

technical and interpersonal skills.

In Wales, the first step towards the establishment of services across the whole country has been through the commissioning of the study already referred to, by CCW. One of its key findings was the seemingly low priority given to these services by local authorities in recent years, leading to a decline in resources and a lowering of morale. A process of retrenchment has taken place, whereby services are now concentrated at sites owned and managed by local authorities at the expense of the countryside at large.

The main thrust of the report was to promote a renaissance for ranger services in Wales. Its main recommendations were for the adoption of:

- an integrated countryside management approach throughout Wales by local authorities and national park authorities; and
- a 'concordat' for countryside management services throughout Wales, setting out common standards;
- a partnership approach between the National Assembly for Wales and local government, with the long term commitment of resources to it.

The broad conclusions of the report have been endorsed by the National Access Forum for Wales and CCW, who are now working together to develop the idea of the 'Concordat' for countryside management services in Wales.

### **Conclusion**

If the management of access is to be trouble free, then urgent decisions need to be taken about the establishment of appropriate services. The study of ranger services estimated the cost of their delivery at a basic level across Wales to be in the order of £3.5 million per year. This is a modest sum by comparison with the benefits that can be derived from such services, not only for users of access land but also for farmers and landowners and local communities. An exciting opportunity exists for taking an holistic approach to the management of the countryside, one that is wholly in tune with post FMD thinking and with the pursuit of sustainable development. It is an opportunity that is not confined to Wales, many of the issues and principles apply in England too.

### **References**

Owen, R. E. and Holdaway, E. (2001) *The role of rangers/wardens in implementing the new right of access to open countryside in Wales, unpublished research report to the Countryside Council for Wales, Bangor. (Copies can be obtained from the Recreation, Access and European Affairs group in CCW in Bangor.)*

*Countryside Commission (1993) Countryside Management - An Advisory Booklet*

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