

Missing Persons: Who doesn't visit the People's Parks

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Many people involved in British National Parks acknowledge that those who fought for their designation especially in the 1930s and 1940s would probably be disappointed if they could see who was out and about in the Parks this summer.

Reading the report of the National Park Commission (or the Addison Committee) (1931), and those who added their views to the debate, one can't but be moved by their vision of National Parks as a resource and a refuge for those whose lives were timed by factory sirens six days a week. Almost a precursor of the National Health Service, National Parks would provide for the health of the soul as well as the body, and were to be available for all.

Support was almost universal, although, with hindsight, sometimes misplaced. For instance, the Automobile Association recommended that *"in view of the rapidly growing number of aircraft owners, suitable level ground should be cleared for an aerodrome"*. *More alarmingly the National Union of Teachers said "The provision of National Parks is strongly supported – and a movement similar to the Youth Movement in Germany might be organised in this country"* (National Park Commission, 1931).

Group after group lined up behind the concept of National Parks for 'the people,' led by the Ramblers' Association, the Youth Hostels Association, the Councils for the Preservation of Rural England and Rural Wales, and the Co-operative Holidays Association.

John Dower captured their views when he said that National Parks should be *"for people – and especially young people – of every class and kind. National Parks are not for any privileged or otherwise restricted section of the population"* (Dower, 1945).

Fanatics and Idealists

Translating that into reality has been difficult. In the run up to designating the North York Moors as a National Park in 1952, one rural district council clerk said: *"It seems to me that this is a fight between the interests of the industrial areas and the interests of the countryside. The National Park is not generally desired, it is a scheme of fanatics, idealists and those who live out of touch with life in the countryside."* He then went on to demand that certain villages be excluded from the proposed Park because they had *"council tenants who work in the industrial areas. They should not be in the Park area"* (comments noted in the report of enquiry into designation of North York Moors National Park).

These concerns seemed pretty widespread in and around the Moors. A key member of the local NFU branch added: *"Where is the safeguard against people who, in five minutes, can destroy the work of 200 years? I refer not to the Ramblers' Association, but to bus parties"*. (comments noted in the report of enquiry into designation of North York Moors National Park)

These sentiments echo those of a century earlier when William Wordsworth foresaw tourism posing a huge threat to the Lake District. *"The imperfectly educated classes are not likely to draw much good from rare visits to the Lakes"*, he wrote to the Morning Post (December 1844), pointing his pen towards the promoters of the railway who he saw as *"tempting artisans and labourers, and the humbler class of shopkeepers to ramble at a distance"*.

But rambling at a distance was central to the National Parks: the trains of the 1950s, together with importance of public transport access, intellectual access, information style and available time in

the charabancs, brought *“clean limbed working folk ... enjoying the fruits of their labours and doing very little damage to the environment, give or take the odd ice-cream wrapper”* (Kelner, 2000).

The Right Type of Visitors

In the North York Moors - as elsewhere - a slow reduction in railways and commercial bus services especially during the 1960s allowed tourism to slip into a progressively more exclusive state. There were many external influences on this change but it was also encouraged by those who saw a potential threat from growing number of visitors. Far better to have fewer, but higher spending visitors, they thought. In essence they may also be ‘the right type of visitors.’

When the Parks grasped this nettle and remembered their socially inclusive mission, this placed them at variance with the tourist boards and local tourist agencies. Inadvertently, those welcoming visitors probably widened the gulf further through their language (written and spoken) which was pitched at their peers - middle aged, middle class visitors who tended to be members of the National Trust (when that organisation was also less inclusive than perhaps it is now).

There was a hunch that visitors were not drawn from across the whole of society, but it was not until the early 1990s that the North York Moors National Park was able to demonstrate this widening social gulf between those who visited and those who did not.

As a development of a major visitor survey, Postcode data was analysed by the English Tourist Board. This confirmed ABC1 visitors in abundance in the North York Moors, with the highest penetration being where access was exclusively the preserve of those with a car (or powerful legs). The conclusion was that *“visitors have an up-market profile, with significant numbers of visitors in the wealthy, older market, and family market”* (English Tourist Board, 1991).

A similar process in 1994, again working with colleagues in the tourist board, showed who was

visiting the Park - perhaps the ‘Persons of Taste’ in Wordsworth’s words. The data showed seven key groups who were ‘over-represented’ in the North York Moors.

Table 1: Source ACORN analysis of visitors to the North York Moors National Park, 1994

Code	ACORN group	Index
A2	Affluent greys from rural communities	154
A1	Wealthy achievers from suburban areas	143
C7	Prosperous professionals from metropolitan areas	141
A3	Prosperous pensioners from retirement areas	130
D9	Comfortable middle-agers from mature home-owning areas	127
B5	Well-off workers from family areas	122
D10	Skilled workers from home-owning areas	120

Probing deeper into these visitor profiles re-inforced the impression of a Park full of wealthy achievers – as visitors, but not residents. The top visitor groups were aged over 45, read the Telegraph, Times, Financial Times or Daily Mail. Their occupations were professional, managerial, self employed or retired, with incomes (in 1994) of over £30,000. How had the Park failed to attract those who were literally on its doorstep and could often trace their pedigree back to the moors before migration to the steel works and chemical works of Teesside a generation or two ago?

The untimely death of Sue Glyptis of Loughborough University curtailed a research project which aimed to identify, amongst other things, the relative importance of public transport access, intellectual access, information style and available time in determining why certain people chose not to visit the Park (if indeed, choice was a factor).

An Omnibus Park

A further bit of the picture was revealed in 2000 when comparative surveys were undertaken of users of car parks (a surrogate for 'typical' visitors) and passengers using the Moorsbus Network.

This was, in part, to test the hypothesis that transport was at least a contributory factor in visitor patterns and type of users. The data obtained included satisfaction levels with a number of services and facilities, information on journey patterns, activities undertaken, information sources used, newspaper readership and home Postcodes.

The Postcodes were analysed in conjunction with the Yorkshire Tourist Board to give an indication of social groupings using 'CAMEO UK' categories. (A summary of the Moorsbus Network surveys 1994 – 2001 is available on the web at www.moorsbus.net).

These analyses showed that whilst there is some consistency between car park users and Moorsbus passengers, there are also significant differences. These suggest that the Moorsbus Network is achieving one of its goals, that of encouraging a wider social group of visitors to the National Park than the 'traditional' National Park visitor.

The research shows that skilled manual workers, poorer retired couples, young single parents and students are all more likely to access the Park as a result of the Moorsbus Network, whereas they are usually poorly represented in surveys at car parks. These groups do not (or cannot) access the area by private car. Conversely, those living in larger houses, and who are considered to be well-off are more likely to access the National Park by car than by bus.

This research implies that Moorsbus users are drawn from a wider range of social class than car-borne visitors. There is, however, a group of visitors who are from higher social groups and who choose to use public transport as a result of their environmental concerns. For a number of years, these groups have been evident in the Moorsbus surveys. They are often readers of *The Guardian* or *Independent* and

are likely to be either car owners who are willing to abandon their car for the bus ('switchers'), or non-car owners with a 'green conscience.' Surveys also reinforce the fact that half of Moorsbus users are over the age of 60, with many being active retired (the 'silver foxes'), or those who have given up car ownership and who find the Moorsbus one of the few ways of visiting the countryside with confidence as 'independent' travellers and with complete confidence. (See table 2 overpage)

The year 2001 was particularly difficult for the tourism industry in the North York Moors and a comparison between that year and the previous year suggests that certain groups were deterred, especially walkers. Conversely, the elderly continued to use the bus services, possibly in the belief that they were a safe and 'officially approved' way of accessing the countryside.

Parks for All

This type of analysis will continue so the Park can track change resulting from a revised philosophy about 'promoting' the Park as a tourist destination in appropriate circumstances. A new 'reaching out' project is underway working with communities in the surrounding urban areas. A study of ethnic participation is also being undertaken under the direction of Ash Amin of Durham University.

Questions continue to be asked about the carrying capacity of the area, and how widening the audience can be managed. However, all the surveys of residents acknowledge that it is not visitors who are generally the problem or the threat, it is their means of transport.

Since 2001 there has also been a greater acknowledgement of the role of tourism in the local economy, although this needs monitoring to ensure that there is no reversion to the 'fewer, but bigger spending' target.

However, there will undoubtedly be tensions. The most broad group of visitors appearing in the North York Moors recently has come as a result of TV

Table 2: Cameo Categories

Ref	Description	Moorsbus	Car Park
1E	Affluent singles and students	212	59
2B	Retired home owners in pleasant suburbs	128	172
2C	Older flat dwellers (areas of mixed tenure)	260	129
2E	Older couples in retirement towns	172	126
3A	Younger families in larger dwellings	48	196
3B	Wealthy older families, large houses, exclusive areas	38	173
3F	Well-off families in spacious semi detached houses	66	143
4B	Well-off older families in detached properties	141	184
4C	White collar workers in areas of mixed tenure	175	103
4E	Younger and more affluent families in urban developments	196	131
5B	Older families in larger dwellings	120	141
5C	Suburban families with school age children	197	203
5F	Skilled manual workers with older families	206	69
6A	Active home owners in larger dwellings	152	161
6D	Small, privately owned dwellings	345	194
7C	Poorer retired couples, singles	139	46
9A	Young single parents & students in small flats / bed sits	220	31
9C	Single parents & retired residents (low quality terraced properties)	164	35

(An index of 100 would signify that the proportion of users in that group is the same as the proportion of households in that group within the UK. An index of over 100 suggests that a group is represented at a higher proportion in the databases than in the population.)

Source: North York Moors Visitor Surveys, 2000

tourism. 'Heartbeat' attracts over a million visitors a year to the small village of Goathland (and more may follow seeking 'Harry Potter' at the same location). But there are concerns that they are seeking a myth, a fantasy of the rural idyll. They are not our 'normal' visitors who would be readily assimilated because they are exactly like everybody else who visits the Park.

Instead, these 'new' visitors come in their coaches from the South Yorkshire steel works social clubs, or from Hartlepool. They are given only a muted

welcome and sometimes labelled as the 'wrong sort' of visitor. Other than their age, they are probably exactly those who the Parks were aimed at sixty years ago, although their motivation is very different.

If they lack Wordsworth's 'eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy' then we need to accept that we have collectively failed somewhere along the line.

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