

EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

21 April 2009

METHODS TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF CANOEING ON SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS WITHIN EXMOOR NATIONAL PARK

Report of the Head of Information and Access

Purpose of the report: To report to the Authority on discussions and desk research regarding methods to reduce the impact of canoeing on sensitive environments within Exmoor National Park as requested in June 2008.

Business Plan Reference:

2b1, G2.1, G2.2, G3.4

Legal, Equality and Human Rights Implications:

Section 65(4) Environment Act 1995 – provides powers to the National Park Authority to “do anything which in the opinion of the Authority, is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to-

- (a) the accomplishment of the purposes mentioned in s. 65 (1) [National Park purposes]
- (b) the carrying out of any functions conferred on it by virtue of any other enactment.”

This report is mainly for information purposes but the actions suggested are in line with existing policy and are not significantly different to existing service provision for which equality impact assessments have already been carried out.

Financial and Risk Implications:

The financial and risk implications of the recommendations of this report have been assessed as follows: This report is mainly for information purposes but the actions suggested are in line with existing policy and are not significantly different to existing service provision.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

1. That Members NOTE the contents of the Report.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Members may recall approving the Authority's policy 'Public Canoe Access to Rivers in Exmoor National Park' on 3 June 2008. At that meeting, Members also requested further information regarding the impact of canoeing on sensitive environments. A report entitled *Summary of advice regarding methods to reduce the impact of canoeing on sensitive environments within Exmoor National Park* has been produced by Dan Barnett, Access and Recreation Manager for Exmoor National Park Authority dated March 2009.
- 1.2 This report, which is included at Appendix 1, is based upon desk research and communication with 13 professionals and stakeholders with relevant local expertise and experience. The report outlines the key areas of concern and provides some practical advice. No substantive recommendations are proposed at this stage.

Tim Braund

Head of Information & Access

Background papers on which this report, or an important part of it are based, constitute the list of background papers required by Section 100 D (1) of the Local Government Act 1972 to be open to members of the public comprise:

Effects of canoeing on fish stocks and angling, Environment Agency technical report, Dr. Keith Hendry and Angus Tree, 2000

Exmoor National Park Authority Policy 'Public Canoe Access to Rivers in Exmoor National Park' June 2008.

Summary of advice regarding methods to reduce the impact of canoeing on sensitive environments within Exmoor National Park. Dan Barnett, Access and Recreation Manager, March 2009

APPENDIX 1

Summary of advice regarding methods to reduce the impact of canoeing on sensitive environments within Exmoor National Park

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Advice has been sought on ways to reduce the impact of canoeing on sensitive environments. This has been done by searching resource libraries of Natural England and the Environment Agency for relevant research and through conversation with 13 individuals with a range of expert interests. Details of these individuals are referenced below. This report provides an attempt to summarise the advice in a concise manner.

2. DISCUSSION

- 2.1 The issue of canoe access to Exmoor rivers is a controversial one within the riparian owner community. Key commercial fish species such as salmon have shown worrying signs of decline in recent decades across the UK and any further impact on populations is an understandable cause for concern.
- 2.2 There is an unfortunate lack of research on the subject of the environmental impact of canoeing. The most relevant research is an Environment Agency study (Hendry & Tree, 2000) which concludes that canoeing does not significantly affect fish stocks; however this study is based upon expert views rather than empirical data and is therefore treated sceptically by some. It is also questioned by some as to how relevant this report is to the shallow salmonid rivers typical of Exmoor. Thus, it is necessary to also gather opinion from a range of interested and expert parties in order to form a balanced view on the matter.
- 2.3 The general view is that canoeing on reasonably deep water (boat never touching the river bed) does not significantly affect fish stocks and that passing of canoes does not significantly disturb birds and mammals, or at least no more than human access to the river bank on foot.
- 2.4 Paddling in low water may disturb gravel spawning beds for fish, mostly via the need to get out of the craft and walk some sections, but also via paddles disturbing the gravel; however, this has to be viewed in the context of other more natural disturbance such as wood and other debris moving in flow and disturbance from fish and other animals. There appears to be a difference of opinion within the fishery community as to how robust the fertilized eggs are whilst within the gravel bed.
- 2.5 Canoeing in areas and at times when salmon are likely to be spawning may disturb the act of spawning itself although this again should be viewed in the context of a number of other more natural disturbances including other fish and wildlife.

- 2.6 Canoeing will cause disturbance to some animals, as does any human presence. Where public access to the bank on foot is already allowed, disturbance to mammal and bird wildlife from canoeists is likely to be relatively minimal particularly in comparison with the presence of dogs. However, increases in canoeing to rivers without current bank access will increase disturbance in areas where little human presence currently occurs and of course canoeists can access central areas of a river where walkers and others would not normally reach.
- 2.7 Some rare plants or lichens (e.g. river jelly lichen) in some locations may be at particular risk from the passing of canoes where boats, paddles or feet come into contact with the river bed or surrounding rock.
- 2.8 Canoeist ingress and egress points can be particular areas of concern, including those shallow or difficult areas where canoes frequently have to be carried, due to the need to walk on the river bed.
- 2.9 Any cause and effect relationship between canoeing and fish stocks is extremely difficult to establish due to the complexity of fish ecology and the range of factors that may effect populations both within their river and sea based life stages. Global warming and pollution are generally cited as key reasons for the decline of salmon stocks along with a range of other factors.

3. **ADVICE FOR MINIMISING THE IMPACT OF CANOEING ON SENSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS**

- 3.1 In light of the advice received, the following principles are suggested in order to minimise the environmental impact of canoeing on sensitive environments:
- (i) Canoeist access points should be kept to a minimum, designed to avoid damage to the bank and away from the best breeding areas for fish and birds and any known rare species.
 - (ii) It is important that canoeing in low water is discouraged, due to disturbance of the bed and to the banks when carrying canoes around shallow sections.
 - (iii) It is important that particularly vulnerable wildlife areas such as popular fish spawning areas are identified and treated with special care or avoided.
 - (iv) As a general rule, disturbance during animal breeding seasons has a greater impact upon successful propagation of those animal species. In relation to fish it is important to consider the egg incubation period as well as the spawning period.
 - (v) As with any recreational activity, the greater the frequency of participants, the greater the chance that the activity will cause significant disturbance. Consequently, where canoeing does occur, it is important to try to establish an acceptable maximum frequency and to monitor and manage this frequency.
 - (vi) Good information and knowledge can play an important role. For example, if canoeists understand where salmon spawning beds are likely to be, and dates of spawning and incubation seasons, this can allow them to be particularly careful in those situations.

- (vii) Wildlife monitoring for vulnerable species is important in order to identify any significant changes that might occur as a result of canoe access.

4. **ACCESS ARRANGEMENTS**

- 4.1 A complete ban on access, or too stringent an access agreement where there is significant demand, is likely to lead to canoeing at any time in any place where it is possible unless considerable enforcement activities are put in place, and thus propagate an unmanaged situation where wildlife and community relations will suffer.
- 4.2 In practice, the most effective way to manage the above factors is probably through an access agreement which allows a reasonable amount of canoe access but establishes a clear set of restrictions and code of conduct. In order to maximise compliance with the restrictions of the access agreement it is important to ensure that:
- canoeists understand the reasons for those restrictions,
 - and the need for those restrictions is based upon good evidence and sound reason
- 4.3 The current advice from the Environment Agency (Head of Access and Recreation Policy) is that access 'agreements' should be a set of conditions by which riparian owners allow canoeing, rather than an agreement with a particular canoeing organisation. Whilst this may concern some riparian owners, it is in line with the way permissive access on land is generally allowed. The canoeing 'community' on any particular stretch of river may still enforce the agreement where they become aware of breaches through their various methods of communication in exchange for the goodwill offered by the riparian owners.
- 4.4 Due to the importance and variability of water height on Exmoor rivers, agreements based upon specific flow height would seem the most logical type of access control. Excluded times of day and/or year may also be necessary to reduce the conflict with animal breeding seasons and with anglers directly (a separate but important issue). Where relevant, particularly vulnerable areas should also be identified and measures put in place to keep canoeists at a distance or to ensure that they take extra care (these measures would likely be based upon information, rather than any physical barrier). Wildlife monitoring should be an essential element of any access agreement and new agreements should not be confirmed until a monitoring programme for key vulnerable species is in place. The specifics of any agreement would need to be established via communication with riparian owners, neighbours, wildlife and fishery experts, and canoeists.
- 4.5 The development of new access agreements within Sites of Special Scientific Interest or Special Areas of Conservation will require particularly close liaison with Natural England and may require consents. Planning permission may also be required for the construction of canoe access points and the Environment Agency should be consulted upon any physical changes to a river bank.

5. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 5.1 Exmoor National Park Authority is well placed to help establish access agreements as a relatively neutral party with the relevant in-house skills and knowledge. In order to implement our canoe policy it is suggested that, where requested by riparian owners, the Authority may provide technical conservation and recreational management advice and act as an honest broker in order to help develop an access 'agreement'.
- 5.2 Where an access agreement is in place and where requested by riparian owners the Authority may also:
- Provide information at key access points, in relevant publications, on our website and via our Ranger Service and National Park Centres.
 - Consider sharing costs for on-site monitoring equipment.
 - Assist with design and, potentially, construction of works to make access points safe and robust.
- 5.3 This assistance would most likely be provided in partnership with other relevant bodies such as The Environment Agency and Natural England.

6. **REFERENCES**

- 6.1 Telephone or face to face conversations were held with the following individuals in order to develop this summary of advice:
- W Crookshank** – Head of Recreation and Access Policy, Environment Agency
- Nick Whatley** - Technical Officer (Recreation & Biodiversity), Environment Agency
- Jerry Boyd** - Environment Officer for the East Lyn, Environment Agency
- Nick Maye** –Environment Officer for the Barle, Environment Agency
- Flemming Ulf-Hanson** - Natural England
- Mike Pearce** - Access Lead for Exmoor and Quantocks Team, Natural England
- Andrew Watson** - Principal Access & Ranger Officer, Dartmoor National Park Authority
- Roger Furness** – South West Rivers Association
- Peter Thorn** – East Lynn Access Officer, British Canoe Union
- Dave Hoskin** - Ecological Appraisal Officer (Devon), Environment Agency
- Mike Maslin** – Environment Officer (Fisheries), Environment Agency
- Bea Davies** - Conservation Advisor (Farming & Wildlife), Exmoor National Park Authority
- John Hickey** - River Exe Project Officer, The West Country Rivers Trust

Dan Barnett
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4 March 2009