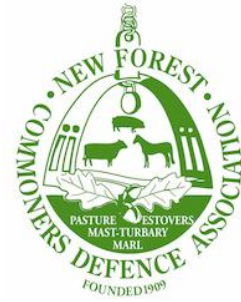


New Forest Commoners Defence Association



PRESS RELEASE

7TH MAY 2020

“RE-OPEN CAR PARKS NOW” DEMAND NEW FOREST COMMONERS

The organisation representing the 700 people whose animals maintain the historic practice of New Forest grazing have called on Forestry England to re-open car parks in the New Forest.

The Commoners Defence Association had previously supported the closures, to reinforce the “Stay Home” lockdown message. Its Chairman, Tony Hockley, has written to Forestry England (attached) which manages the 145sq.m of Crown Lands in the New Forest saying that the level of harm being done by parking on verges and in gateways is “*substantial*” and “*worsening rapidly*”.

Mr Hockley pointed out that the commoners had never imagined that Forestry England, which already receives £50m a year from the Government, would use the Job Retention Scheme to furlough essential New Forest keepers. He said:

“It now feels as if Forestry England has locked the gates and walked away”. He added: *“A decade of work to protect and restore precious verge habitats ... is being undone in the space of a few weeks”*.

Speaking about the situation Mr Hockley said:

“We have all failed to explain the natural value of New Forest verges, as precious habitat and as grazing for the livestock maintaining them. All over the country people have made huge sacrifices in their daily habits to tackle coronavirus. Sadly, a sizeable local minority have not, and insist on driving into the New Forest, damaging the protected habitats and blocking emergency gates. Ahead of another holiday weekend we must not allow this harm to continue. For the time being the message is still to “stay home”, but the lasting damage done from closed car parks far outweighs any perceptible benefit”

ENDS

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Bruce Rothnie
Deputy Surveyor, Forestry England
Queen's House, Lyndhurst, SO43 7NH

By email

6th May 2020

Dear Bruce,

Commoners supported the decision to close New Forest car parks, to reinforce the "Stay Home, Save Lives" message. In my 24th March email to you I also said that all partners would need to step up our work to prevent parking on the grazed verges if the car parks are closed.

In light of what has happened since then our Association is now **calling for the immediate re-opening of car parks on the Crown Lands** of the New Forest. The harm being done to the SSSI habitats is substantial, with people parking in the same places day after day. Commoners, agisters and emergency services have also faced serious difficulties due to the number of gateways blocked by parked cars. This puts our animals, all Forest users, and the designated habitats at risk.

The situation is worsening rapidly, partly due to weather, but for two other reasons:

Firstly, the guidelines issued by the College of Policing on 16th April have been widely reinterpreted as negating the edict to stay local; to exercise at or from home. Secondly, we had never imagined that Forestry England would furlough operational staff under the government Job Retention Scheme. As we understand it, this includes the New Forest keepers, whose work is vital to the management of the Crown Lands; it always has been and always will be.

It now feels as if Forestry England has simply locked the gates and walked away. The Minister's Mandate for the management of the Crown Lands requires that conservation is prioritised over corporate finances. The decision to take advantage of the Job Retention Scheme seems to be in direct conflict with this clear duty. The local police have been doing as much as they can, but it is the Forestry Commission that is supported by the Exchequer to conserve the New Forest.

A decade of work to protect and restore precious verge habitats, funded by the Verderers HLS, is being undone in the space of a few weeks. We are deeply concerned that new parking habits are being formed and new informal lay-bys are developing in verges throughout the Crown Lands. This has enhanced the need for enforcement and education activity. This work needs to start now, and it is certainly not the time to walk away from these important responsibilities to a protected landscape.

Yours sincerely

Tony Hockley
Chair, CDA