


EVENTS....

A Challenge to National Parks?



EARTH WISE

by Geoff Cooper



On a summer Sunday in July I watched as eager cyclists followed yellow route signs through Coniston village as part of their triathlon. At nearby Tarn Hows competitors were taking part in a series of trail events. On the road to Ambleside there were caution notices “Walkers on the Road” as groups followed a long distance route. A few miles further on a team of six burly men were pulling a car uphill to raise money for charity. Lots of people, different ages out and about enjoying their weekend, getting exercise and fresh air, putting money into the local economy and some raising funds for good causes. So is there a problem?

It isn't difficult to see the attraction of the Lake District and other national parks in Britain for events' organisers. These places provide spectacular landscapes, dramatic backcloths for races and entice competitors from far and wide. There are opportunities to use a dense network of footpaths and bridleways and gain open access to mountains, moors and forests which are ideal for fell running, mountain marathons and orienteering.

Dave Robinson, the Access and Recreational Developer for the Lake District National Park, suggests that there are at least 70,000 people taking part in organised recreational events in Cumbria each year and most of these are in the national park. Organisers are encouraged to register their event with the Events Advisory Group, Cumbria County Council. In 2013 some 129 events were registered in Cumbria although it is likely that these were only half of the total and they do not include over 90 traditional fell runs. Some activities such as triathlons and endurance mountain biking and running events have shown a dramatic rise in recent years and there has become a problem of managing the sheer numbers of people attracted to particular parts of the national park.

For the past 20 years I've been involved in helping with the Coniston 14 Road Race. This race around Coniston water was established in 1982 and is organised by a committee from the village who are supported on the day by 90 helpers from the community. £20,000 is raised each year for local

charities, clubs and community projects. The race takes place at the end of March and it was decided to keep the numbers to about 1600, which is a comfortable carrying capacity for the village. For the first time this year a trail event appeared unannounced on the day with their route cutting across the Coniston 14 Road Race and their competitors unsure whether one of our water stations had been set up for them.

So, yes I think there is a problem and it stems from the size of some of the events, the choice of venues and the need to co-ordinate with other activities taking place. In 1995 the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group organised a conference on “Large Scale Events and the Environment” and invited user groups, conservationists and land managers. At this time the main activities were fell running, orienteering and mountain biking and it was felt that sharing good practice and communicating with land owners and local councils rather than external regulation was the way forward. Several years ago Windermere Reflections published a guide to organising sustainable recreational events. This recognises the benefits of encouraging people to participate in challenging outdoor activities but asks organisers whether they need to base their event in a national park. It stresses the importance of considering the impact on communities and the environment when attracting large numbers of participants to particular locations. The authors of the guide are not simply concerned with problems such as litter but more fundamental issues such as disruption to local communities and other visitors from noise and increased traffic, damage to farmland and disturbance to wildlife.

National parks in Britain have always faced a compromise trying to balance recreation, conservation and the local economy. For many years there has been a national agenda to encourage a wider range of people to use our national parks. This has at times produced tension between those wishing to experience quieter activities and those attracted by large scale events where the parks become the arena for their activities. There is an argument that says that by bringing fresh faces and feet into these areas and offering enjoyable, challenging experiences, the same feet will begin to appreciate the environment and culture of these special places and may even take action for their protection in the future. This is a question ripe for research and debate. Some of these issues will be taken up at a BMC Conference on “Challenge Events in the Uplands: Managing the Way Ahead” in October this year. ■

References:

www.aea-uk.org
www.coniston14.com
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