A Visitor Management Handbook

A Directory for AONB Site Managers

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Produced 1994 for the Norfolk Coast Project

The Purpose of The Handbook

Introduction

This handbook is intended primarily for managers of coastal sites wishing to improve the management of visitors, but it will also be of interest to managers of inland sites. The contents are a combination of ideas and techniques used by reserve managers in Norfolk and elsewhere and the results of the 1994 Beach Study. It is based on the principle that wildlife quality and visitor enjoyment of a site are not mutually exclusive, but that wildlife and conservation interests should always come before visitors.

Many of the techniques outlined here are already in place somewhere within the Norfolk Coast AONB, but this report aims to draw together into a directory, the pool of visitor management knowledge that exists in Norfolk so that all wardens can benefit from both this and other experience gained outside the county.

It is not intended that the techniques contained within the report should be implemented as a complete package. It is left to the discretion of the warden to decide which sections may be useful on specific reserves.

All techniques are most effective if complemented by the presence of field staff. They are in no way intended to be used as a substitute for a full time wardening presence.

It has been impossible to include every visitor management technique in this Handbook. However, suggestions are welcomed for incorporation into future revised versions.

Defining the Problem

The Approach

Time spent planning before deciding on the best solution to a problem is vital. It may be useful to consider six key questions as shown overleaf.

Questions to consider

1. Is the problem serious enough to merit spending time and resources on it?

No: e.g. small amount of erosion may increase plant diversity.
Action: live with the problem.

Yes:
Action: consider nature of problem and decide on solution

2. Who are the main groups causing this problems?

- **Action:** target solution specifically at these groups.

3. Why are they causing problems?

- **Ignorance:** interpretation based solution
- **Curiosity:** interpretation and engineering solutions
- **Malicious intent:** wardening, statutory protection/police involvement

4. Where is the main area of the problem and what are the access points to it ?

- Important for effective positioning of signs.

6. What are the resource implications?

- Can a solution be budgeted for this year or would it be better to wait until next year?
- Are there any alternative sources of funding?

Resources

Interpretation Solutions

Leaflets

If properly produced and targeted accurately, leaflets offer one of the most efficient and accessible ways of presenting information to reduce erosion, disturbance and damage to species. However if poorly thought out and mis-targeted leaflets are largely a waste of time.

Key Points for Success

- Be original. The public respond to novelty, humour and directness.
- Aim straight at the target audience. If it is a leaflet for beach users then say so on the front. If it's aimed at cyclists then include the word "cyclist" in the title.
- Establish just how much information is necessary to get the message across and give no more than that. If it is a leaflet aimed at changing behaviour then resist the temptation to give unnecessary information e.g. about wildlife. The people you want to read the leaflet will switch off.
- Do not rely on the public's natural curiosity to make them pick up a leaflet. During the Beach Study the pick up rate was increased by 100% by adding a sign with a clear instruction e.g. **" Please take a leaflet before going to the beach."**
- Break up blocks of text with illustrations. Cartoons can be used to replace or emphasise text.
- Print only a small number of leaflets at first and test the response of the public. You will almost certainly want to make changes so don't print thousands until you are sure they will be effective.
- Keep the dispensers stocked. Empty dispensers, particularly with a sign indicating the public should take one, are frustrating and annoying.

Materials: Cost and Information

- Cost of 2000 A4 folded leaflets with black text on a choice of coloured paper: Approx £70
- Cost of cartoons: approx. £10 each
- Time taken to return from printers: 1 week

Advantages of Leaflets

- More interpretive than signs as complex messages can be explained.
- Can be used to present several messages simultaneously e.g. information on how to behave on the reserve and promotion of the managing conservation organisation.
- If the first attempt is unsuccessful changes can easily be made before the next print run.
- Inviting for public to take and read later where signs may be ignored.
- Cheap and quick to produce.

Disadvantages of Leaflets

- Require initial input of time to write.
- May not be read until the damage is done.
- Dispensers need to be filled regularly.
- One leaflet is unlikely to appeal to every user group of a reserve.

Signs

All reserves already use signs as a visitor management tool, but by following a few guidelines the effectiveness of signs can be greatly improved.

Signs must achieve two things. They must persuade people to start reading, and they must enable them to understand what they have read. Many signs fail on one or other of these points.

Key Points For Success

- Target signs carefully at problem areas. Several small signs near the problem areas may be more effective than one large sign at the reserve entrance. In addition large signs may contain too much information for people to take in.
- Position the sign *before* the problem area, not in the middle of it. For example place a "*No cycling*" sign at the entrance to a reserve. If a visitor has already cycled for 10 minutes before he/she encounters the sign then they are very unlikely to turn back or walk from that point.
- Try out new concepts before having them made into expensive permanent signs. As with leaflets, you will almost certainly want to make some changes.

- As with leaflets, try to be original. For example if the sign says "Keep Dogs on a Lead" try adding a Ringed Plover saying "*Thank You.*" The public has a very jaded palette for "No unauthorised Access" type signs.
- Use the cumulative effect of repeat signs to reinforce a message. While the policy of most conservation organisations in the AONB is to reduce the number of signs on a reserve, 2 small signs that work must be better than 1 sign that is ignored.
- Experiment with different planes of presentation to reduce the impact on the landscape. The public respond to the novelty value of a sign erected at 25 - 30° from the horizontal instead of the traditional upright design, and the visual intrusion is greatly reduced.
- Avoid similar looking signs containing different information. The first may be read but others subsequently encountered will be assumed to contain the same information and may be ignored. This was a frequent comment of visitors during the Beach Study when asked why they had ignored a sign.
- Use colour where possible. This need not be expensive as just a colour border will increase the number of people reading the sign.
- Never place signs where people have to go out of their way to read them. They won't! Main paths are best, preferably at natural stopping places e.g. stiles etc.
- Signs can be usefully employed to explain current management work. This is particularly useful for big, obvious works; works which disrupt visiting, or works which may be perceived to be destructive eg tree felling, use of heavy plant etc. Minsmere, Snettisham and Dersingham are three examples of reserves using such signs successfully.

Materials: Cost and Information

A4 paper, printed from computer then laminated: approx. £0.50 each. Best for experimental signs but waterproof for up to 3 months so could be used for a Summer season.

Styrene signs - e.g. useful for seasonal cordons approx. £3 each.

Aluminium small signs (50cm x 80cm): £500 including artwork.

Large aluminium interpretation panels: approx. £1000 including artwork.

Advantages of Signs

- Low maintenance once installed.
- Small signs are easy to put up and remove allowing for seasonal flexibility.

Disadvantages of Signs

- May have visual impact on landscape.
- Larger vandal proof signs can be expensive.
- May be ignored unless carefully worded and sited.
- Difficult and costly to reword once in place.

Soft Engineering Solutions

Engineering solutions include methods such as constructing cordons around sensitive areas and building boardwalks, bridges and viewing platforms. For best effect they should be used in conjunction with interpretation.

Large Cordons

Seasonal cordons are now widely used on many Norfolk AONB reserves to prevent the public entering areas of breeding Little Terns, Ringed Plovers and Oystercatchers. The basic cordon is constructed from a piece of baler twine strung between temporary posts and encompasses the main area of breeding shorebirds. Small signs placed along the cordon request that visitors remain outside the breeding areas and explain why.

The style of these large cordons varies across the coast. The variations involve subtle differences in the positioning and tone of the signs that line the cordons. Some wardens choose to emphasise the illegality of disturbing protected schedule 1 birds such as Little Terns, while some adopt a more conciliatory tone.

One additional problem with the signs is that people have to approach the cordon before they can read them. They may then be tempted to remain in the vicinity of the cordon in the hope of seeing eggs or chicks. Work by Mike Rooney and Vernon Eve at Holkham during 1993 found that Ringed Plovers for example respond by leaving the nest when a human approaches to within 100m. Two methods of preventing this are commonly used.

- Using two large signs at each end of the cordon explaining what it is for and why people should not enter. This signs request that people stay well away from the cordon and are backed up by the smaller signs around the cordon edge.
- Leaving a buffer zone when cordoning off the area i.e. roping off a larger area than is necessary so that anyone standing at the cordon edge is never too close to a nest.

Neither of these methods are 100% effective and this curiosity factor remains one of the biggest problems with the use of large cordons.

Advantages of Large Cordons

- Unnecessary to locate individual nests. Whole terneries can be protected in one unit.
- Areas of adjacent mud flat can also be isolated for undisturbed feeding.
- Very effective. Significant difference recorded between the success of breeding inside and outside the cordon:

Holkham Ringed Plover Study

- Outside cordon: 7 out of 10 nests lost.*
- Inside cordon: 1 out of 10 nest lost.

*all losses occurred at weekends during a two week study period with none in the intervening weeks, suggesting that visitor disturbance may have been largely responsible. (Rooney and Eve, 1993)[1]

Disadvantages

- Problems of ownership of and access to the beach may make cordons an inappropriate solution for some sites.
- They may create some bad feelings among visitors and be seen as negative PR for the responsible organisation.
- Labour intensive (although less so than full time wardening)
- Promotes unnaturally high densities of breeding birds making them vulnerable to predators.
- Does not prevent dogs entering the area. In the Holkham Ringed Plover Study 1 in every 6 passing dogs was observed to enter the Little Tern cordon.

Other Points

This proved to be the most successful method of nest protection at Holme in the 1994 season, but to be effective cordons must be removed promptly when they are no longer required, and maintained while they are in place.

One improvement that may help to keep dogs out of the area is the use of three strands of baler twine around the posts with the lower strand placed 15cm from the ground, and strands above it at approximately 30cm and 1m from the ground.

Small Cordons

[1]1993: Rooney M. and Eve V. The Number, Distribution and Breeding Success of the Ringed Plover in Norfolk 1993. A Norfolk Coast Project funded study.

A similar design to the large cordons but surrounding only a single nest or a group of nests.

Advantages

- Flexible and less work than large cordons
- More effective than individual nest guards

Disadvantages

- No provision for undisturbed feeding
- Less effective than large cordons as buffer zone between visitors and birds is proportionally smaller.
- Labour intensive

Nest Guards

A heavy metal cage originally designed to protect nests from trampling by cattle in Holland, placed over individual nests.

Advantages

- Nest can be quickly and easily protected
- Small and unobtrusive

Disadvantages

- May draw the attention of both public and predators to a nest that may otherwise have gone unnoticed
- The least successful local protection method. Although the failures due to trampling may be reduced, the risk of desertion remains the same, therefore this is an unsuitable method for busy areas.
- Very labour intensive in first locating nest.

Although this is the least successful method it is still felt to be worthwhile in the case of an isolated nest in an area with high passing visitor pressure e.g. near a footpath. At Holme during 1994, 3 nests (2 ringed plover and 1 oystercatcher) out of 4 nests that were in a similar location and protected with metal nest guards, successfully fledged young.

In this situation a nest guard may help to reduce nest failure from trampling (although tests on a larger sample size would be useful). However where visitors will be spending some time near the nest e.g. on a busy section of beach, this is a less suitable method as the risk of desertion may increase.

Hard Engineering Solutions

The location and style of structures such as hides and visitor centres obviously have an important role to play in managing visitors. The relative permanency of these structures means lower flexibility. Such facilities are not included in this Handbook, but are considered in more detail in the publication 'Guidelines for the Provision of Birdwatching Facilities in the Norfolk Coast AONB'.

However, more flexible solutions or tools include the construction of boardwalks, chalk paths, bridges, viewing platforms, fenced footpaths and facilities for disabled visitors including handrails and rest benches. They are the most expensive of all the solutions examined and are usually only be considered as a last resort to problem. In addition they are a very obvious form of management and can lead to a suburbanisation or "parkification" of semi wilderness areas like the Norfolk Coast AONB. However if used sensitively and sparingly they can form a useful tool for visitor management.

It is not the intention of this report to give details on costs of materials and methods of construction of the following hard engineering solutions. For a complete guide to this subject see The Practical Handbook series produced by the BTCV. The "Footpaths" and "Sand Dunes" books in this series are particularly relevant.

Boardwalks and Chalk Paths

Advantages

- Effective at reducing erosion
- Channel people where you want them to go (and away where you do not want them to go!)
- Make walking easier
- Facilitate disabled access (for which grants may be available)

Disadvantages

- Expensive:

Boardwalks approx. £17 per metre to lay on sand dune substrate, excluding labour.
Chalk paths similar price dependant on source of chalk and stone underlay.
Contact Norfolk County Council National Trail Manager for more details.

- Considerable visual impact, particularly on rolling dune landscapes. However chalk paths may be less obtrusive than boardwalks in some circumstances and other materials are available for example crushed cockles which may reduce this visual impact.
- Wilderness value of a site reduced. Management is very obvious.

- Limited life expectancy
- Will require maintenance
- Can be buried by sand

Bridges and Viewing Platforms

The routes that people choose to take from A to B when given a free choice, are known as desire lines. It makes sense to construct paths and bridges etc. on desire lines as this is where people seem to want to walk.

Bridges can be used most effectively to reduce on erosion on a saltmarsh. Where there are many paths being formed, for example across a saltmarsh from a car park to the beach, building a bridge across one of the creeks will concentrate the paths at this point and reduce the erosion area.

The bridge can be of very simple design consisting of a few planks and a hand rail, thus keeping both cost and visual impact to a minimum.

Viewing platforms can be used in the same way; concentrating activity in one spot to reduce the areas of damage. For example most coastal reserves will have one area of dune that becomes a favourite spot for bird enthusiasts to use for sea watching. A platform at this point with a sign requesting that people use the platform and not the dunes will reduce erosion along the rest of the dune crest.

Platforms can also be used to give a focus or finishing point at the end of a boardwalk or nature trail. This gives the public a sense of achieving an aim and reduces the tendency to spill off the end of a boardwalk onto fragile habitats. This is also a good site for an interpretive panel.

Zonation

Zoning of reserves, or restricting at what times (temporal zoning) and in what areas (spatial zoning) visitors can enter, is an important visitor management tool. This gives wildlife periods or areas almost completely free from human disturbance.

Temporal Zoning

Only permitting access to a reserve at certain periods of the day, for example 10am until 5pm, gives the wildlife a valuable 17 hours free from visitor disturbance. Although it will not be possible in most circumstances to control access to beach areas from outside the reserve, closing reserve car parks will reduce the numbers of people in these areas.

Although initially there may be some resistance to this policy, most visitors readily agree to leave the reserve at the appointed time when the reasons are explained.

Special events, such as Open Days, should be carefully planned to avoid sensitive times for wildlife.

Zoning can also be used to protect species at particularly vulnerable times of the year such as the breeding season or in harsh weather, when they can be more susceptible to disturbance.

Spatial Zoning

Cordons are a small scale example of this where visitors are excluded from the most vulnerable areas of the reserve. This technique can also be employed on a larger scale using natural or existing boundaries e.g. fences, dykes, scrub or mud etc. For example at Holme, areas of grazing marsh are out of bounds to the public and is easily enforced as the areas is stock fenced and over looked by hides.

Case Study: Watersport Zoning on Blakeney Point

Spatial zonation with co-operation by local people worked well on Blakeney Point. The reserve manager had become concerned about the impact that water skiers and jet skies were having on the little tern and seal colonies. Through consultation with the relevant water sports groups a self policing system was established, whereby the participants agreed not to ski too close to the little tern and seal colonies and not to land in these sensitive areas. This system is still in place and the disturbance has been reduced.

The Directory

Introduction

This section of the report lists the possible solutions to visitor management problems commonly encountered by wardens of coastal nature reserves. Some solutions e.g. leaflets, can be used to solve more than one problem, so there is an unavoidable degree of repetition in this section.

The solutions are given in 3 main sections with individual user group problems within these sections:

- Erosion
- Disturbance
- Other Common Problems

The solutions are prioritised with the easiest to implement given first, and expensive last resort measures such as boardwalks given last.

Erosion

Walkers and Beach Users

- Erosion caused by dune jumping can be solved by erecting a dune cordon along the bottom of a chosen dune system. Similar in design to the breeding cordons, baler twine can be strung between posts with small signs requesting that people stay off the dune face. Stressing the sea defence function of the dunes was found to work well and on several occasions at Holme, people ignoring the signs were reprimanded by other members of the public.
- Include a section on keeping to paths and off the dunes or other fragile substrates in a visitor guidance leaflet and on rule boards.
- Keep designated paths well managed and inviting or visitors will find alternative routes. For the Peddars Way and Norfolk Coast Path National Trail this is the responsibility of the Norfolk County Council's National Trail Manager.
- Simple signs saying "**Best Access to the Beach**" may help to reduce the number of paths through the dunes. A plain arrow with no explanation was found to be effective at Blakeney in directing people around a breeding area and could also be employed to direct people on a single route to the beach.
- Try diverting a path onto a more robust area. One sign tried on a Red Zone site says **"To reduce erosion please use alternative route.**" with an arrow indicating to a chalk path. This is successful with the general public although birders ignore it as it blocks a short cut to a hide!
- Consider a way marked trail, for example marked with low white posts and regular intervals to reduce the number of paths through the dunes. This could be used as a

useful interim solution rather than a costly and intrusive boardwalk and may be accompanied by a leaflet, in effect giving a self guided reserve tour.

- Consider building a bridge to facilitate easy access across a saltmarsh creek and concentrate the area of erosion into one path.
- If erosion is particularly bad consider funding and visual impact implications of building a boardwalk or chalk path. Proceed only if alternative solutions are unsuccessful.

Cyclists

- Signs requesting that bikes should be walked across dunes or other fragile substrates can be effective although they are most effective if regular offenders know there is also a warden present.
- Place interpretive material in nearby cycle hire centres or mountain bike shops.
- Decide on a robust bike route through the reserve and reinforce this with signs.
- Consider banning cycling on the reserve. With diplomatic liaison with local people and explanation of the reasons behind the decision, this can be achieved with minimum animosity.

Horse Riders

- If the horses are stabled locally then personal contact with the riding stable is the best option.
- If the horses are coming from further afield some interpretation in the area where the horse boxes are parked may be useful.
- Consider providing one clearly marked access point to the beach as this is what most riders will be looking for.
- Liaise with the British Horse Society, local Pony Clubs etc to explain the issues and encourage good behaviour.
- Explore the provision of alternative routes.

Disturbance of Wildlife

Dogs

- In a visitors leaflet, emphasise the harm to breeding birds that dogs can do. One important point to make is that dogs can lead to nest failures, seals deserting pups etc., by their very presence. They do not have to be chasing and/or eating the wildlife for this to occur. Many dog owners do not realise this.
- Try innovative signs - they work. Use cartoons, unusual language, colour, pictures of dogs or anything to attract the attention of the owners. The old fashioned **"Dogs on Leads"** type signs have lost all impact, but most owners do respond to original signs that make them realise that the warden really means it.
- Try a poster campaign during the peak wader feeding season.
- Try an extra two strands of baler twine around breeding cordons, with these lower strands positioned to deter dogs. The majority of "dogs in cordons" incidents recorded were a result of exuberance at being on the beach rather than actually chasing birds, and it is unlikely that the majority of dogs will jump a fence for no reason.
- Use the local press to publicise this issue. Parish magazines and local free newspapers are usually pleased to publish information about wildlife areas and the "dogs on leads" message can be slipped in whenever the opportunity arises. Remember you have the support of the public on this issue. The general public are becoming increasingly irritated by loose dogs on beaches, and in the wider countryside.
- Consider banning dogs on all or part of the reserve. A "Dog Free Zone" within the reserve may be better received by local people than a total ban.
- Liaise with District Council dog wardens to explain dog-related concerns on reserves and dog management policy. Persistently offending dogs can be removed from the reserve by the dog warden if owners cannot be found.
- With persistent offenders e.g. several instances of the same dog chasing Little Terns, involve the police and invoke schedule 1 protection.

Walkers and Beach Users

- Large cordons with signs are the most effective method of protecting breeding shorebirds.
- Smaller cordons and nest guards may also be useful when large cordons are impractical.
- Place signs at main access points to the beach explaining what the breeding cordons are. Localised signs can be used to explain other aspects of disturbance e.g. by Natterjack Toad breeding pools. Make them original and eye catching.
- Place leaflet dispensers at the main access points to the beach/reserve and aim to ensure that all beach users obtain a leaflet before they reach the beach.

- Ensure rule boards are visible and tackle the issue of disturbance.
- Establish quiet time periods for the reserve and adhere strictly to stated opening hours.
- Consider seasonally excluding visitors from sensitive parts of the reserve.

General Bird Watchers

- Ensure maintenance of hides and trails.
- Use path techniques (see Erosion section) to steer birders away from sensitive areas e.g. Natterjack breeding pools in spring.
- Consider building a platform for sea watching (See Bridges and Viewing Platform section).
- Warden the area and respond to feedback from other birders on visitor behaviour near birds.

The Big Twitch

Most wardens will already have formulated their own method of dealing with the Big Twitch scenario. This is one tried and tested example of how to deal with such a situation.

- Do not put out any information about the bird until prepared for the masses.
- Add detailed access information e.g. opening times, parking arrangements etc., to "Birdline" message.
- Draught in as many volunteers, friends and sympathetic local birders as possible to help.
- Prepare extra car parking space on a suitably robust area of the reserve.
- Prepare or have ready some signs directing people to the temporary car park and from the car park to a point where they can be guided to the bird. "This way" and "No further please" are good all round signs for this occasion.
- Position people at the site of the bird to ensure the twitchers do not enter the area in an attempt to flush the bird out.
- If possible cordon off the area around the bird. This will clearly only be possible if the bird is stationary for a period of time.
- Encourage people to leave the reserve once they have seen the bird to free more car parking and viewing space.
- Consider collecting extra contributions from twitchers e.g. donations or car park charges to help offset the extra staff costs and to make good any physical damage.
- With proper liaison with Birdline it is sometimes possible to suppress a record at sensitive times of the year. There must however be a good reason for doing this.

Aircraft

- Record all incidents of low flying. These will be used as supporting evidence to deal with offenders and also to support the introduction of flying height restrictions where needed.
- Liaise with local clubs/air fields to explain problem and encourage self policing by participants.
- Report persistent rogue pilots to English Nature who are investigating this problem.

Other Problems

Wildflower Picking

- In cases of sea lavender picking, try small seasonal signs on the main access points to the plants.
- Educate using the visitors leaflet, rule boards and coastal code that wild flowers should not be picked.

Fires

- Intensive wardening is probably the best method of stopping fires occurring. Friday and Saturday nights are danger times and be aware of peak party times such as the end of 'A' Level exams etc.
- Regularly removing driftwood from the beach and dune areas is an extremely effective way of preventing party style beach fires although this is clearly difficult on a heavily wooded site like Holkham. It will also reduce available habitat for invertebrates, so the benefits must be considered carefully.
- Publicise the risks of lighting fires and barbecues in visitor leaflets, on rule boards and by using the coastal code.
- Have a strategy to cope with fire should it break out. Maintain beaters and emergency vehicle access points.

Egg Collectors

- Participate in the local constabulary Eggwatch scheme and warn other nearby reserves if you see suspicious activity in your area.

Off Site Approaches

In conclusion

Due to the restricted time available for this study it has concentrated mainly on the possible on site approaches to visitor management. There are of course many other factors influencing the nature and impact of visitor visits and the ability of a reserve's visitor management systems to cope. Many of these are discussed in more detail in the main report from the beach study, but a brief summary is given below.

The way a reserve is promoted and advertised has a strong influence on visitor management. Many reserves now have an agreed promotion policy. For example this could include only local promotion, or only promotion at quieter and less sensitive times of the year. Of greater concern however is promotion by others which may be unwanted, and over which reserve managers have little control. The promotion issue is highlighted in the Visitor Management Strategy (policy F9).

In a similar vein, many reserve managers may have little control over the management of car parks used by visitors which are adjacent to their reserve. Close co-operation is encouraged in these cases, especially to ensure that accurate information is being given out.

Finally the use of newsletters, reserve friends or volunteer groups and the giving of talks also have an influence on how the site is used and can be an effective way of building up support for a reserve, particularly amongst local people.

The handbook has hopefully illustrated some of the wide range of techniques that can be employed to improve the management of visitors to coastal sites, thus increasing visitor enjoyment and also safeguarding the AONB's distinctive habitats and wildlife.