

New Forest Association (Registered Charity No: 260328)

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019

Having had the honour of being this Association's President for nine years, I will be stepping down at the next AGM, and this will therefore be my last report. Rather than look back, I would like to use this opportunity to look forward and express a few thoughts on what the key challenges are that I think lie ahead for the Forest.

Recreation

This will always be the greatest challenge. Since this Association was formed over 150 years ago it is recreation that increasingly has caused so much concern. The way that the public (visitors and residents alike) use the Forest for their enjoyment has changed in so many ways, and now the sheer number of people (15 million day visits per annum) and the multitude of sports and activities that take place on the open Forest pose the greatest long-term threat to survival of the landscape as we know it. The problems are well rehearsed, and there is no easy answer.

Forest history has shown that nothing will be achieved unless we all work together to find solutions. I am happy to report that over the last six years a very close working relationship has been forged between the Forestry Commission, the Verderers and the National Park Authority. In 2013 they formed a Steering Group (which I chair, and which I have mentioned in my earlier reports) to work together and create a new long-term strategy for managing recreation.

This year is when that group will, it is hoped, begin to roll out its plan. It has taken a long time, and it has been a complex and at times very delicate task, and involved two public consultations. It has been essential to build a case that can, if challenged, be shown to have asked the public for its input. That group deserves, and needs, the wholehearted encouragement and backing of influential non-statutory bodies like this Association now more than ever. Nothing is more likely to influence a ministerial decision if the Secretary of State, who will have the final say on key aspects of the strategy, can see that the recreational plan has the support of public opinion and the blessing of independent organisations like the Friends of the Forest. Let us lend that support.

Glover Review

The first review for over 40 years of England's national parks is still underway and due to report in the late autumn. Its chairman, Julian Glover, has given little away about what conclusions and recommendations his panel might be making to government. It is fair to say that the review has the potential to have far reaching effects. My own guess is that Julian Glover will wish to recommend an overhaul of the whole set-up, with the main aim being to somehow re-invigorate

the “National Park movement” in the way that was enkindled in the 1930s by the famous Kinder Scout mass trespass in the Peak District. We shall see. In any event there have been some excellent written responses from Forest organisations to the Review’s request for evidence (including our own Association’s) and the case for the New Forest has been very well put.

Brexit

As I wrote in my 2016 report, whatever happens to farmers’ subsidies is important because whatever affects farmers and landowners here in the Forest will affect the landscape, flora and fauna and fragile agricultural practices like commoning may suffer.

The same strong partnership between the Forestry Commission, the Verderers and the National Park Authority brought about the formation in 2017 of a specialist Forest Farming group to work out what would be best for the farming and commoning community. The group is well down the road in preparing a robust argument for the Forest being a place where its farmers deserve public subsidy in return for the many public benefits that they provide through agriculture and commoning. This Association’s full support of that case will be vital, especially as we now move towards the stages when government is preparing to make firm decisions on what the future system of subsidies will actually look like, and what the rules will be.

As we heard from Charlie Burrell at our Wilding Event earlier this year, the New Forest remains a landscape, which inspires with its unique commoning culture and the incredible mosaic of habitats and wildlife this supports. We must be tireless in our campaign to reveal again and again the wonder of this special place and inspire future generations to care for it. Taken together, Brexit, Glover and Recreation are the three areas where, one way or another, the New Forest’s future will be decided for generations to come. My parting message as President is, when the time comes, for this highly respected Association to fully lend its influence and support and thus reinforce the Forest’s working partnership.

Finally, as President and on behalf of all the members of the Association, I would like to conclude my report by thanking the Council for all its vigilance and hard work over the year, and for the years ahead.

Oliver Crosthwaite-Eyre