

Dartmoor Commons Owners Association

Position Statement: Camping on the Dartmoor Commons

Overview

The Dartmoor Commons Owners Association (DCOA) recognises the benefits of backpack (“wild”) camping on many parts of the Dartmoor commons. Most of its members support this practice and actively work with the Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) to allow it to happen while finding ways to restrict car-based (“fly”) camping. We remain concerned at the limited resources available to the DNPA to keep Dartmoor’s environment pristine under increased visitor pressures, and acknowledge the consequently increasing burden on our members.

Context

The DCOA represents the interests of the owners of Dartmoor’s commons. Most of our members are individuals, but there are several institutions as well. The DNPA is a common owner (as well as a regulatory agency), and so is a member of DCOA. By its nature, the DCOA represents many of or the majority of owners, but not necessarily all of them.

Dartmoor is a landscape that supports multiple uses. Owners are bound by law to protect its many scheduled ancient monuments and Premier Archaeological Landscapes, and to conserve its nature as defined through extensive Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Special Areas of Conservation. Against these must be balanced the production of food through farmers’ exercising of grazing rights, the storage and abstraction of clean water, and military training. Recreation is but one more factor, and we have recognised the need for certain recreational rights that are compatible with other values and uses of the commons.

The Dartmoor Commons Act 1985 at Part III, Section 10 provides that “the public shall have a right of access to the commons on foot and on horseback for the purpose of open-air recreation”. Responsibility for the damage caused in doing so, however, is defined in Section 14: “Where a member of the public enters upon the commons for the purpose of open air recreation on foot or on horseback and causes damage to the commons or any thing therein, the Park Authority may make good that damage.” This provision was sustainable when visitor numbers were relatively low and DNPA resources were relatively plentiful. Now, however, it is widely agreed by all stakeholders that visitor numbers are significantly greater than they were in 1985, while the DNPA itself accepts that its resources are inadequate to make good the damage caused by public access. This means that the owners are forced to accept an uncompensated liability for bearing the costs of repairing the damage caused by fly camping.

The current Dartmoor Byelaws refer only to “camping”. Since discussions started in late 2020 regarding revisions to the byelaws, it has become common practice to distinguish between: (a) “wild camping”, which involves short-duration, backpack camping at significant distances from roads; and (b) “fly camping”, which is usually car-based camping close to roads but extending to at least 30 minutes’ walk (the distance that people seem able to struggle with non-backpack gear). We use these terms below to distinguish between the two.

DCOA’s Position

The DCOA considers that responsible wild camping is acceptable on the remoter parts of the commons (i.e. more than 30 minutes’ walk from a road), and many of our members actively encourage this. We recognise the benefits of it to physical and mental health, and young people’s sense of adventure.

The DCOA acknowledges significant problems for many of its members with fly camping and is keen to see this controlled. There are numerous campsites in the national park (but off the commons) where this can be done inexpensively with sanitation provided. However, there is extensive evidence that the commons are being used for fly camping that involves binge drinking and sometimes drugs, which would not be tolerated at campsites. Fly camping has been getting worse over the last few decades, as cheap equipment and the “festival culture” have expanded. No one should have to clear up the mess and excrement we often have to deal with.

We consider that the intention of landowners, the Dartmoor National Park Authority and the wild camping proponents is the same: to ensure that Dartmoor remains a pristine, uncluttered and undamaged environment. Most landowners have a lifetime or multigenerational commitment to the moor, and most have a strong commitment to conservation.

We do not envisage circumstances whereby wild camping, including that organised such as by the Ten Tors Challenge and Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme, will be affected on the majority of the Dartmoor commons as a result of the legal case by one owner for clarification of the meaning to Section 10 of the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985. Environmental restrictions will always need to be discussed and agreed, as they already have been for many years (such as the avoidance of key bird nesting habitats).

Further considerations

Parts of the Dartmoor commons are currently the only places in England where camping is allowed without consent, so they attract people from many parts of the country. This seems to be one reason why fly camping has become more widespread on Dartmoor. Few visitors to Dartmoor understand the intricacies of what is common land and what is not, or look carefully at the schedule in the byelaws that lists the parts of the commons where camping is currently permitted. Since the early 2000s, social media has undoubtedly played a role in making large numbers of people aware of remote areas where they can park and camp for free.

It is hard to establish the relative proportions of genuine and responsible wild campers, and fly campers. If the large, organised groups of wild campers (i.e. Ten Tors Challenge and Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme groups) are excluded, then our members’ impression is that responsible wild campers and irresponsible fly campers are roughly equal in number. The wild campers tend to be individuals or small groups, whereas fly campers are usually in larger groups. Certainly the fly campers create almost all of the damage and burden of restitution, even if the organised wild camping groups are included as well. For this reason the practice of fly camping needs to be resolved.

The DNPA had to resort to court orders to exclude camping altogether in 2020 at Holne Moor and at Bellever, because there was no other way to control it. As a result, the DNPA, supported by owners, have in 2021 and 2022 (though still in procurement) had to hire in security guards as Dartmoor Marshals to patrol the key areas to ensure compliance with the existing byelaws.

Some of the DCOA’s members have been successful in restoring damage caused by fly camping on non-common moorland because they have the option to manage camping in those locations. In general, most DCOA members would agree that it would seem to be better to have wild camping on the commons managed through owners’ good land stewardship and consensus than, as now, by an under-resourced regulator, security guards, court bailiffs and police.

Dartmoor Commons Owners Association,
11 July 2022.