

## An oasis of calm?

The early May bank holiday in Richmond Park was mayhem, as you can see in the Park News item and photograph on page 5. There were cars parked everywhere, much off-track cycling and harassment of deer – and little police presence. In the past, the Park has experienced crowds of visitors on bank holidays, but this was exceptional. What is happening?

Obviously, the Park has become more popular, driven, I think, by on-line and social media. Search “Richmond Park” online and you will find many travel sites (see Yelp or Trip Advisor) and individuals (“Bald Hiker”) extolling the Park’s “oasis of calm”.

People are also using the Park more intensively. They play volleyball, pitch tents and picnic, cycle or run in large groups. Many visitors seem to be new to the Park on such busy days; listen and you will hear many different languages, and questions such as, “Which way do we go from here?”.

The area occupied by visitors on such days is growing steadily; for example, the area between Roehampton and Robin Hood Gates alongside Beverley Brook now becomes full of people, in a way it never has been before.

The popularity of the Park and the increased access are both good in themselves. But, as Friends of the Park, we are also concerned about the impact on the ecology and character of the Park. The crowds have a direct impact on the Park’s ecology. Adults get close to the deer to take photographs,

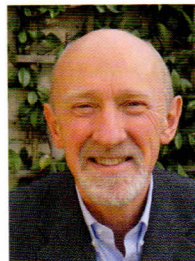
children chase them, and both feed them. Wild flowers are trampled and habitats destroyed as people move away from crowded areas to find space.

And, of course, the crowds erode the Park’s character – the very peace and tranquillity that they come to enjoy. On bank holidays a large part of the Park is little different from a local park.

What should be done? First, we need short-term measures to prevent the mayhem. This means sufficient police on duty, even though it is expensive (officers are paid double time on bank holidays). It may mean physical barriers, more temporary signs to prevent off-road parking and off-track cycling, and warnings at the gates when the car parks are full.

Second, we must quickly find a way to educate new visitors to respect the Park’s ecology and wildlife. The Friends’ and Royal Parks’ efforts are not getting the message across to occasional visitors and we have to re-think it.

Third, we may need further long-term restrictions. The capacity of the car parks already limits visitor numbers, but we may need to cordon off areas that are ecologically sensitive. It is something National Parks and other SSSIs already do. It is a pity but may be inevitable.



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