

Tackling obesity without spoiling the Park

Obesity is a preoccupation of government at the moment, and it is a serious problem. However, such a preoccupation can lead to ill-considered solutions and schemes.

One such scheme was the proposal by The Royal Parks for a 5-a-side football complex (complete with floodlighting) in Regent's Park, to be built and operated by a commercial developer on the site of a small wood. The proposal was finally defeated in January by a vociferous campaign led by the Friends of Regent's Park.

The 5-a-side scheme was discussed at a recent meeting between the Chairmen of the Friends of the Royal Parks (Richmond, Regent's, St James's, Hyde Park, etc) and the Minister, Margaret Hodge. Her view was that such facilities are vital for tackling obesity, and if the Royal Parks are the easiest place to have them because there is readily available space, so be it.

I made the point that the Royal Parks, and particularly the outlying parks (Richmond, Bushy, Greenwich) can provide a different kind of healthy outdoor activity through walking, observing nature, and generally being in the fresh air, which is as valuable as sport, and indeed more valuable because it is so difficult to find in London. The

Friends on birdwatching walk in spring



Alison Donaldson

Friends of Richmond Park promotes this kind of activity.

Our photography competition, which started last year, encourages 7-18 year olds to get out into the Park, observe and photograph what they see. The father of one of last year's winners recently told me how his son, who had previously refused to go near the Park, had been inspired by the competition to go into the Park to take photos in all weathers; his son continues to do so today, long after the competition is over.

Similarly, our education programme is working with schools to help pupils understand and enjoy the Park. We are in the midst of a trial programme with one school, which we intend to offer to others in due course (n.b. if you want to help us in our education programme, please contact Karen Rockell at forp@sky.com).

We want to do more. I keep coming across older people who say that when they were young they spent hour after hour in the Park, exploring and enjoying it, on their own and with friends. We want to encourage more people of all ages to do it, to help tackle the obesity problem.

At the same time, we will continue to resist ill-considered schemes which would turn the Park into an urban sports ground, and destroy the different and special experience the Park can give to young people.

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