

We all affect the Park

Some research I saw recently prompted me to think about the impact we all have on the Park day to day.

The study, done in woodland near Sydney in Australia, showed that dog walking seriously disturbs birds' normal habitat. Birds abandoned areas up to 400 metres from where the dogs were walked regularly.

As a result, the numbers of birds in areas where dogs were walked was 35% less than in areas without dog walking, and 50% less for ground-nesting birds.

This research should come as no surprise to the Friends. For the past few years, there has been a skylark protection zone next to Pen Ponds, with people asked to stick to the paths and keep their dog on a lead during spring and summer. There are now 12 pairs of skylarks nesting in the area compared to just two pairs in the late 1990s.

This research refers to dog walking, but the message I want to draw is that all of us, however we use Richmond Park – dog walkers, non-dog walkers, cyclists, motorists, picnickers, kite flyers, children climbing trees – affect its environment.

Richmond Park is a particularly important and sensitive environment. It is a National Nature Reserve, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and a Special Area for Conservation, not just an ordinary local park.

Our impact on the Park is steadily increasing as more of us visit it more often. Greater leisure time and interest in exercise, government access initiatives, The Royal Parks' marketing activities and growing commercialisation all encourage greater use of the Park.

This increase in visitors could be the greatest threat to the Park in the long term, as it already is in some National Parks.

Eventually there may even need to be restrictions on people visiting the Park, or the fencing off of certain areas simply to protect them (or let them recover) from the tramp of feet.

Interestingly, in an opinion poll I saw last year, 33% of respondents agreed that "only a limited number of visitors should be allowed to visit areas of natural beauty", so there is already some public acceptance of this.

What can we do about the impact we have? Well, one action is to take more care when we are in the Park. After all, one of the Friends' objectives is "to encourage the preservation of the Park and the protection of trees, plant, bird and animal life".

It is a responsibility we should all take seriously. We should not drop litter, cycle away from the designated paths, climb veteran trees, take away wood that shelters beetles, or let our dogs run in sensitive areas.

As Simon Barnes said in the Times, commenting on the Australian research, "we don't want to destroy what we love by sheer carelessness".



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