

Is Richmond Park sustainable?

by Nick Coleman and Ron Crompton

For the last 150 years, since an 1872 Act established it as a public park, Richmond Park has provided an experience of nature close to a big city. This has required a delicate balance between the needs of the wildlife it harbours and the demands of visitors.

The recent rapid increase in visitors and the intense way the Park is now being used is challenging that balance and questioning how long it can be sustained.

There were 5.5 million visitors to Richmond Park in 2014, up 35% in six years and approaching the 6.8 million visiting the British Museum, which is the largest visitor attraction in the country. Population pressures, the popularity of sports such as running and cycling and Richmond Park becoming 'cool' on social media all contribute. The pressure is most evident on warm weekends when parts of the Park are a "peoplescape" rather than a landscape.

The impact on wildlife and the natural fabric of the Park is widespread. Human footfall erodes the paths and compacts the roots of veteran trees, gradually killing them. Den building (there are more than 100 at our latest count) destroys deadwood, home to a range of invertebrates including the iconic stag beetles. Getting too close to deer makes them stressed and potentially dangerous and litter such as energy gel packs affects their health. Disturbance of skylark

habitats reduces the number of nesting pairs and threatens their survival.

In response, Park management is being forced to re-surface paths with gravel or hard surfaces, put fences around vulnerable trees, dismantle dens and put warning notices and partially fence off the skylark fields.

At this rate, one can see a scenario in 10 to 20 years' time where all the present natural earth paths will have gravel or hard surfaces, all veteran trees will have fencing around them and areas will be set aside for children to build dens and climb trees. The deer will be contained in large enclosures to protect them from the public (and vice-versa) and there will be large areas of the Park, similar to Sidmouth Wood at present, which are closed to visitors to protect wildlife.

Richmond Park is not alone in this. Nature reserves worldwide face the same problem and are forced into a similar response. UK National Parks get large crowds in popular spots and have to hard-surface paths and viewing areas (Snowdon has a paved path to the summit). Some US National Parks, vast though they are, are overwhelmed in some areas on public holidays when ecologically sensitive areas are sometimes closed to the public.

The problem is clear. How can we maintain the balance between nature and people so that Richmond Park retains its unique character? We need to solve it otherwise we'll see a steady deterioration in the fabric and wildlife of the Park until it becomes like any other city park.