

PSP0 Evidence - Livestock Petting & Feeding

Personal Statement

Name	Charlotte Belcher
Organisation	Forestry England
Job title	Community Manager
Role description	<p>I manage the New Forest Recreation Ranger team and Volunteer Service; I am responsible for planning and delivering community engagement and education campaigns and programmes and I take an active lead in joint operations with partner agencies.</p> <p>A core part of my role involves planning, managing and participating in patrols of the Crown Lands managing visitors and visitor behaviour through engagement and education and- where necessary and possible - enforcement, working with Hampshire Constabulary and other agencies to deal with inappropriate activity that has the potential to cause harm to the estate and its visitors.</p>

The Activity

The Rangers and Volunteers frequently encounter livestock petting and feeding whilst out and about on patrol; it is an issue which is widespread across the Crown Lands and it happens so frequently it is impossible to report every instance of this type of activity. We also get calls from concerned members of the public reporting petting and feeding and frequent calls for action from partner agencies, local communities and stakeholders. I personally have witnessed the standard type of feeding - carrots, apples and other types of foods considered safe by potentially well meaning people - but I have also seen forest animals being fed all sorts of human food which would be completely inappropriate,

unsafe and alien to their natural diet - for example pringles and sausages. There is signage in place but time and time again I have experienced people ignoring this and continuing with their intended activity. The Rangers engage with people on this topic every day and often we explain and ask people to keep their distance, not to touch or feed, only to move away a few steps and look back to find the people continuing to interact with the animal. I do believe some people perceive the free roaming livestock to be equivalent to a petting zoo and because of the lack of understanding of the number of visitors and scale of the issue, they do not see their individual actions as causing any problem.

The Impact

Obviously there are detrimental impacts to the health of animals through eating inappropriate foods, or even too great a quantity of human food leading to choking, colic and potentially death. There is also the behavioural impact it has on the animals, encouraging them to hang around car parks and roads thereby putting them more at risk from traffic collisions, and also causing more of a hazard to the public as we see increasing levels of interactions between humans and livestock. Some of the animals learn from a young age where they can get attention (for example Hatchet Pond or Boltons Bench) and so they behave in a way where they may pursue people or actually begin raiding peoples bags to get to food, I have witnessed several incidents where people or dogs are injured as a result of this, and many more whereby people have had their belongings trashed and picnics eaten - often the people who are impacted by this may not have been the ones feeding or touching the animals but innocent onlookers.

The staff time it takes to stop every few hundred metres along the road to jump out at the sight of a carrot or a bag of apples is vast, many times we are late to engagements due to having to stop multiple time to deal with people touching or feeding livestock along the way. We can explain and educate to the best of our abilities but some people refuse to listen and believe it is their right to come to the New Forest to see, touch and feed the animals. This causes a lot of frustration amongst the team who are left with no other action to take, it also causes a lot of criticism from the local communities and partner agencies who don't always understand why we have been unable to control this issue and perceive a lack of action. It frequently is mentioned at Verderers Court due to the impact on the local Commoning community as their animals may become sick, or die, as a result of these activities. This directly impacts their way of life and heritage and is something many people are very passionate about.

There is also the impact on people in terms of their safety, there have of course been incidents where people have been kicked or bitten and this can potentially lead to serious lasting injuries or in the worst case fatality.

Timing

This activity happens year round, we are now seeing sustained visitor levels throughout the year as a result of the pandemic, so whereas incidents used to be focussed around peak holiday times there is a more consistent issue across the year now.

Geography

Though there are some reliable “hotspot” problem areas (well known “honeypot” sites such as Hatchet Pond, Wilverley, Bolderwood, Blackwater, Whitefield Moor, Linford Bottom, Bolton’s Bench); these incidents are occurring widely over the New Forest, I believe this is evidenced by some of the incident data provided. Many tend to be in and around the vicinity of car parks, but many are also around access points to the forest, so informal laybys or pull ins as people come off of the main roads across the cattle grids, however because the livestock is free roaming it really can occur anywhere at any time.