

The unintended consequences of the camping byelaws at Forest Drive

Description



Overused camping area by Loch Achray. The National Park claimed the camping byelaws would reduce damage to vegetation by enabling camping to be controlled. The opposite has happened – by concentrating campers into a few permit areas this type of (minor) damage has almost certainly increased.

Following my post ([see here](#)) on why people should be sceptical about the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority Board paper which claimed the camping permit system had been successful, I have been passed information from two readers about complaints submitted to the LLTNPA. Both concern Forest Drive and accord with what I saw when I visited there with Ross MacBeath at the end of September. This is that the camping byelaws have made things worse, not

better, for the great majority of responsible campers.

Complaint 1

The complainant has agreed I can publish the information on parkswatch but has asked I summarise rather than quote from their complaint.



While the person did not tell me what area they had booked, the description fits with what we saw in Zone I.

The person had booked to stay in a specific permit area by Loch Drunkie because they knew the area well, having used it in the past to launch their canoe and a canoed and had mountain biked around Forest Drive. While on previous visits they had come across campers, they had never noticed any significant camping related problems. However, on their stay they found the area was covered by fire scars, litter, human waste and toilet paper, far worse than they had previously experienced and reported this to the Park. They made a point of saying they would no longer choose to launch their canoe from the area because of the high risk of stepping in excrement and also that while they appreciated that people when they book are being advised about good practice (as set out in the permit terms and conditions) this is clearly not working. They feared for what the sites will look like in future.



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The Park used the existence of fire scars to justify introducing camping byelaws. They clearly haven't worked. The metal barbecue (right photo) is good idea – perhaps it was brought in after the tree in the centre was burned? Fundamentally though, forcing people who want to be able to enjoy a fire to camp under trees is asking for trouble. People used to be able to camp on loch shores away from trees and the majority did so. The byelaws are creating, not solving, problems.



All around the areas of trimmed and flattened vegetation in Zone I there were little paths into the bracken. These invariably ended at heaps of crap and toilet paper. This is not all campers fault. The ground under the trees is covered with lots of roots and digging a hole deep enough to bury crap properly would not be that easy. It should have been quite predictable that if you provide very few areas which are suitable for camping – and the vast majority of ground in each permit area at Forest Drive is totally unfit for camping ([\(see here for example\)](#) – that impacts would be concentrated. Add to that a failure to provide toilet facilities and the LLTNPA have created a major problem. Simon Jones, the Park's Director of Conservation, acknowledged the problem at the last Board Meeting when he said that human waste was a major problem in certain places. What he didn't explain was the role the byelaws and the LLTNPA's failure to provide facilities in creating this.



The irony is there is an FCS toilet block on Forest Drive. The problem is its not in or near any camping permit area. Despite there being flat areas in the trees near the toilet block which would be good for tents, camping is banned here – you would be committing a criminal offence to put a tent up within reasonable walking distance of the toilets! The reason, it appears, is that neither FCS nor the LLTNPA want campers and day visitors to mix – talk about social apartheid – although recently a single campervan permit place was added to the carpark. Lucky campervanner! Just one hitch, if they have their own toilet, there is no chemical disposal point.

If the LLTNPA and FCS want to concentrate people in certain places, as is happening at present, they should have a duty to provide facilities such as toilets. Facilities should come first. Towards the end of the summer the LLTNPA and FCS deliberately started to increase the number of campervan “permit places” on Forest Drive and encouraging visits from campervanners but without any plans to to

provide chemical disposal points. The LLTNPA has submitted a planning application for a new campsite at Loch Achray and the toilets there will help but I can see nothing in the toilet block plans to indicate a chemical disposal point is included ([see here](#)).

Complaint 2

I received this from someone involved in outdoor education and it concerned a DofE group. The Leaders had apparently obtained permits for the group to camp at Loch Drunkie, with staff accessing the site by vehicle. On arriving at the Forest Drive gate (which is locked after 4pm) one leader was trying to find the code for the gate on his phone when van full of people appeared wanting to get through as well. They shouted out the code – “Park have never changed it, so we came once officially, then been coming whenever there’s good weather for a party. Our friends are on their way”.

My informant went on: *“Needless to say the party went on into the early hours, despite repeated requests to consider the youngsters. Tents & people all over the place. The youngsters were moved on at first light to get them away. Throughout the night, leaders phoned Park staff on the contact forms – ansaphone saying office closed till next day; police – no response, etc. Leaders have sent in “feedback” to Park including videos and photos but heard nothing back. The feedback system says: thanks for your feedback and Park will review things at end of the season.”*

“This was the first time the leader used this particular site and never again... He also said that at other private campsites there are stories of people, especially families arriving very late asking for a plot as they had abandoned their “official Park site plot” due to similar activities...”

So a system designed to improve access to the “park” has instead succeeded in enabling free use for party / rave sites to the detriment of people’s peaceful enjoyment.”

I could not have put it better. The problem always was and still is policing. The byelaws have solved nothing. What the LLTNPA need to do is ditch the whole permit system (except for where facilities are provided where it could be used as a campsite booking system) and concentrate on working with the police to develop a rapid response where problems occur. This would benefit both local people – rural policing has been slashed – and responsible campers.

The future of Forest Drive as a camping destination



An attempt to create a camping place in the heather in Zone C

After promising Scottish Ministers 300 new camping places in the camping management zones and because they wanted to stop all camping along many loch shores, the LLTNPA persuaded FCS to provide a large number of camping places at Forest Drive. This was to meet targets. Most were totally unsuitable – as Ross MacBeath has described on several occasions – and a number of these zones have been removed from the Park booking system. Other unsuitable areas remain.



Marker post for Zone M, on the edge of Forest Drive.

The Rangers to their credit, just like at Loch Chon, have been doing a good job helping people move to more suitable areas of which there are about half a dozen on Forest Drive. Unfortunately, due to the ban on camping elsewhere in the National Park this is concentrating use.



Some basic management measures like blocking off vehicle access to good camping areas and providing adjacent parking would really help reduce impacts

The lack of basic infrastructure has then made the impact of this increase in use far worse than it need have been.

The fundamental problem at Forest Drive is that the LLTNPA has wanted it to provide over 60 camping places when in reality it can probably support half that number on a regular basis (excluding the new proposed campsite at Loch Achray). Managers have forced staff to “create” camping places in wooded and boggy zones where no-one in their right mind would want to camp. The sensible course of action now would be to abandon promoting the rest of these unsuitable places and allow the few people who might want to go there to do so under access rights.



The only suitable place for camping in Zone C is very boggy and only likely ever to be used by people

The LLTNPA should then focus on creating facilities to support camping at the places which are good for pitching tents which are almost all down on the lochshores on flat turfy areas. There are only half a dozen such places and it would be easy, for example, for the LLTNPA to install portaloos (as they do in English National Parks) in all these areas for next year. That and a few rubbish disposal points would justify the Park collecting a small charge from people camping here.



New campervan places on Forest Drive



Who would want to stay here overnight?

The LLTNPA is now promoting Forest Drive as a destination for campervans. I think this results from criticisms of the failure of the LLTNPA to provide for campervans and the impossibility of enforcing the byelaws against campervanners because of people's right to sleep overnight in vehicles on roads. What's happening at Forest Drive – a large increase in the number of campervan places – can be seen as a desperate attempt to provide evidence to the Government that byelaws are still needed in relation to campervans. Byelaws aren't needed and the attempt to create new campervan permit places without any consideration of whether they might be good places to stay is just repeating past mistakes.



Zone E – its far better for campervans than for tents

However, the nature of Forest Drive, means that in some places it provides a very good campervan experience as shown by the photo above. Hard flat ground which is poor for tents is just what campervans need. Add in the view and Zone E, and a few other places on Forest Drive, are potentially great places to stop off overnight.

What the LLTNPA and FCS need to do is engage with campervan interests and work out what are the good places to stay at Forest Drive. I believe they should then only sell permits for these good areas and if campervanners want to stop off in other grotty forest laybys for free they should just be allowed to do so. If the LLTNPA/FCS added a chemical disposal point and drinking water provision at the existing toilet block or at the new campsite on the way out of Forest Drive small charges for staying in

the campervan permit areas would be justified

The way forward at Forest Drive

While what has been happening at Forest Drive epitomises what is wrong with the camping byelaws and the Park's failure to provide proper infrastructure, it does also suggest alternative solutions which would help people to enjoy staying out overnight in the countryside, whether in a tent or campervan. Its about time the LLTNPA and FCS engaged properly with recreational interests to develop an alternative plan for Forest Drive instead of their managers trying to drive through top down solutions which don't work in pursuit of meaningless targets.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

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Author

nickkempe

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