

## Covid 19, outdoor recreation and our National Parks

### Description



I was pleased to have this letter published in the Herald today. Its got nothing to do with National Parks but everything to do with what's happening in them, as this post will explain. Until our governments set up contact tracing and testing like South Korea and China have done, there will be no end to the health, social and economic crisis whether in our National Parks, Scotland, the wider UK or the world. Before moving on to National Parks, however, I want to outline the science that underpins

what I have to say..

## The science about how COVID-19 transmits and how this can be stopped

If you have not already done so, I would urge you to read the open letter from Professor Allyson Pollock urging the Scottish Government to set up Public Health contact tracing teams ([see here](#)) and the article, the hammer and the dance ([see here](#)) which shows how South Korea managed to stop the spread of Covid 19 without lockdown, in large part through contact tracing. While we now need some form of lockdown in the UK, the point is that contact tracing is what we need to do if we are to get out of the crisis.

If you want to avoid reading all the science, Dr Bruce Aylward, the senior adviser to the World Health Organization (WHO), summarised the issues succinctly in an interview with Time Magazine ([see here](#)):

*“If we do the testing of every single case, rapid isolation of the cases, you should be able to keep cases down low. If you simply rely on the big shut down measures without finding every case, then every time you take the brakes off, it could come back in waves. So that future frankly, may be determined by us and our response as much as the virus.”*

*What you want to do now is use that time well to get the testing in place, to get the systems in place, so that you can actually manage the individual level cases that are going to be fundamental to stopping this.”*

There are hundreds of others of Public Health experts saying the same. The message couldn't be clearer, but our public health professionals are being ignored and sidelined while our governments do nothing.

Its worse than that, however. Until February Public Health in England WAS taking the contact tracing approach:

# What is contact tracing and how are we using it to tackle novel coronavirus?

So far in the UK we've seen a small number of novel coronavirus cases. At the moment we undertake contact tracing to prevent the infection spreading further. Contact tracing is a fundamental part of outbreak control that's used by public health professionals around the world.

If a person tests positive for novel coronavirus, we speak to the patient to identify anyone who has had close contact with them during the time they are considered to be infectious and go all out to find these people as soon as possible. Once we have made contact with them we can then give them the advice they need. If they are in groups considered to be a higher risk, we make sure that we follow up with them on a daily basis to see how they are. If they become unwell we are then able to assess them quickly and take appropriate action.

When we identify a UK case linked to another country or territory, we'll notify the public health authorities there so that they can investigate potential contacts and take steps to prevent further cases. Equally, if any public health authorities in other parts of the world are investigating an outbreak and find a link to the UK, they'll notify us, either directly or through the World Health Organization. We've blogged in the past about how we successfully used contact tracing to [follow up after a case of a different type of coronavirus called MERS-CoV](#).

[\(see here for full blog\)](#)

However, as the virus spread, fed by a complete failure by our governments to control air travel, instead of increasing the resources available to public health, the UK government abandoned contact tracing completely and any attempt to suppress the virus. They used a new doctrine, that of “herd immunity”, to justify the decision. This was entirely driven by a desire to avoid costs, rather than science, and the Scottish Government unfortunately followed the UK government’s. Then, when both governments realised the scale of the disaster they had helped create, they both did a partial U-turn and have imposed a lockdown. That is now creating as many problems as it will address and there will be no solution to the crisis until public health is put back in charge of suppressing the virus.

One more bit of science from the Public Health England blog, which everyone who is worried about the risk of catching Covid 19 in the outdoors needs to read :

*“When we talk about “close contact” it’s important to point out that we’re not looking for people the person may have passed on the street or in a shop, as the risk in these situations is very low. A close contact involves either face to face contact or spending more than 15 minutes within 2 metres of an infected person.”*

## **Government attempts to shut-down enjoyment of the countryside are completely irrational**

The science tells us that the risk of catching Coronavirus while outdoors is extremely low, as long as people avoid meeting in crowds (like football matches, the women’s demonstrations in Spain etc). In fact walking in the countryside is one of the safest things you can do. Yet this is now being branded by government as irresponsible. .

The hypocrisy and muddled thinking is nicely illustrated by the contrast between the state’s response to Prince Charles fleeing to Balmoral in the Cairngorms National Park and the police footage yesterday branding people who were walking in the Peak District National Park as irresponsible.

Its just last week that Kate Forbes, Scottish Government Minister for Finance ([see here](#)) and Fergus Ewing, Minister for the Rural Economy ([see here](#)), branded people going to the Highlands in campervans as totally irresponsible and were telling people with second homes not to go there because of the strain on health services. I look forward to Fergus Ewing being “furious” with Prince Charles for being so irresponsible, but he won’t because now, because, according to the First Minister:

“Obviously there are people who have homes in Scotland.”

“People will choose to go to their homes.”

No mention here of Prince Charles breaching the ban on non-essential travel which is being enforced against everyone else.

Contrast how the Royal Family is being treated – and how they got a Covid 19 test in the heart of rural Aberdeenshire – with the state clampdown on other people going to National Parks, not to stay there and potentially take away resources from local people as Prince Charles has done, but just to get out for a walk. The drone footage from Derbyshire Police ([see here](#)) branding walkers as irresponsible was pure propaganda but was shown all over the BBC last night

The facts are those people walking in the Peak were not creating a risk to anyone, and the risks of anyone passing on coronavirus even in the car parks was completely and utterly minimal. Even if two people open their car doors at the same time, and their paths cross, the risk of passing on Covid 19 or any other virus is infinitesimal. What Public Health England said about how the virus is passed on is based on thousands of pieces of research. Yet all that is being ignored. .:

The police are now going to stop people going to the Lake District National Park ([see here](#)), while in the Cairngorms, second home for Prince Charles:

### Advice for Visitors

**You are not to travel to the National Park unnecessarily.** Recreation outside is still very important for our physical and mental health, particularly at this stressful time, so people should continue to go outdoors. Please follow the advice issued by Government and spend time in the outdoors close to your home. Do not be travelling elsewhere.

Access rights do not include motor vehicles, there is no legal right to park beside a road overnight. **do not park overnight anywhere in a camper van or mobile home** anywhere in the National Park.

Until further notice we ask that you **do not wild camp** in the National Park.

**Essential travel does not include visits to second homes,** camp sites, caravan sites or similar for isolation purposes or holidays. People should remain in their primary residence.

Advice issued today by the Cairngorms National Park Authority. Legally this is not quite correct. The ban is for vehicles to stop off by the roadside though arguably with the travel ban they might now only apply for essential reasons. If, however, you only owned a campervan and were driving up to the Highlands south of England to care for an elderly relative who could not cope without you – e.g because of a COVID-19 infection locally – it should still be quite legal to stop off.

The contradictions in National Parks telling visitors to keep away is illustrated by this latest advice by the Cairngorms National Park Authority. The CNPA are completely right to say recreation outside is

vital for physical and mental health – more than ever before now that people are banned from meeting in indoor spaces – yet the state in effect is now trying to enforce a ban on outside recreation and forcing people to take exercise in close proximity to each other.

The senseless consequences are demonstrated by what is happening in Glasgow. I live by Queen's Park and in the last few days it's been really busy, with everyone trying to get out and take a bit of exercise. This is a great thing – I have never seen so many runners, walkers and cyclists – but it's almost impossible for people to observe the 2m social distancing rule all the time. The science tells us that this probably doesn't matter in terms of spreading Covid 19, as the risks of passing it when passing by are so low, but one can see what will happen. The media – just as they did last weekend – will show videos/photos of crowded outdoor areas – the politicians will state this is irresponsible and then will try to lock everyone in their homes as has happened in parts of Italy. I disagree with the government's claims that any contact with people is dangerous – the science says passing by or keeping a good distance is almost entirely safe – but given the government's line, it would make far more sense to allow people into the countryside to places where they can disperse rather than corralling people who live in cities into a few public parks..

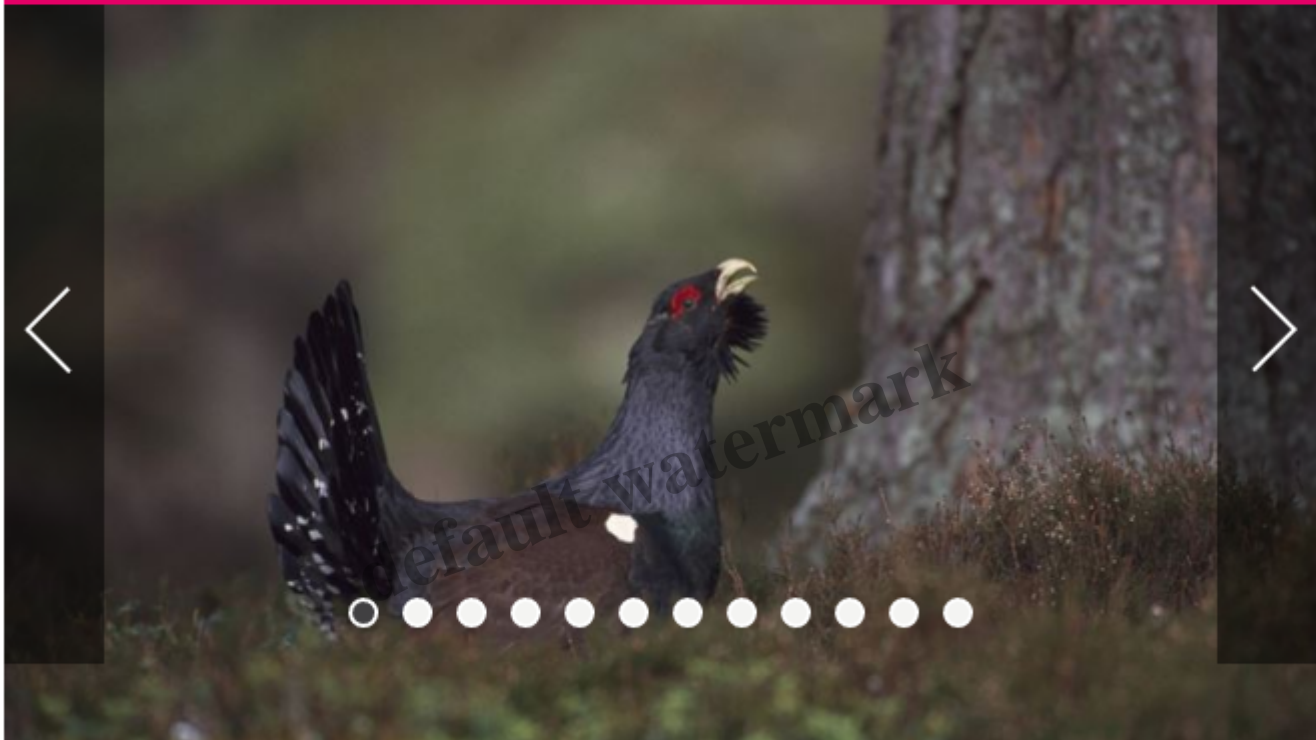
Unfortunately, in the panic, non-governmental organisations are adding to the panic with senseless restrictions. One example from our National Parks is the RSPB which first closed their car parks, but have now unlawfully declared ALL their land closed.

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# Loch Garten, Abernethy



Following the latest clear instructions from the Government for us all to remain at home, we are clo further notice. Please see our COVID19 updates page to stay up to date with developments at RSPB



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There may be a ban on travel, but access rights have NOT been suspended. The RSPB is effectively now trying to ban all people who live near their nature reserves from visiting them. Besides Abernethy, examples in our two National Parks include Inversnaid and the Loch Lomond Nature Reserve. This does NOTHING to help prevent the spread of COVID 19 and might just increase risks of transmission by herding local residents of the National Park into smaller areas (though the risk of this happening in rural areas is even smaller than in the towns because of the much smaller population).

As a further illustration of how the state – and one now has to include organisations like the RSPB in that – is misdirecting its efforts, yesterday while I was running around Pollok Park in Glasgow, as I usually do when at home, a helicopter hovered overhead for about 20 minutes. I have never experienced that before. They were clearly monitoring people who had gone to the Park. I then came across two police vehicles parked by the River Cart. No less than six police officers were in a field on the opposite side of the river where there are no paths. Two lads, who appear to have been fishing, were surrounded by four police officers. I wish I had had a camera as the police were about a foot apart and observing NO social distancing rules. The other two officers were walking over side by side to talk to someone walking their dog. I suspect that person had gone into the field because they were

so fearful of meeting other people out for a walk. This is bonkers and a clear waste of resources that could be much better used elsewhere (for example forcing all supermarkets to put in place proper arrangements for social distancing). What it shows, however, is that all Outdoor Recreation, which is not exercise, is now banned.

Last week I received a letter from Butterfly Conservation about the coronavirus advising members who were isolating to “Take a break in nature and spend time outdoors butterfly spotting”. That was exactly the right advice, based on science, not panic. Greenspace plays an essential role in mental health but the person who keeps sane by going to sit on a park bench and feed the ducks now appears likely to be committing a criminal offence.

## **What needs to happen**

As I stated in my letter to the Herald, because of government failure to keep tracing people who had coronavirus, some type of lockdown was necessary to suppress the growth of the virus. While a better prepared government might have been able to allow households and individuals to continue to visit the countryside (for example it would have made much more sense to test Prince Charles and his entourage BEFORE they went to Balmoral, not afterwards) and avoided a near total collapse of the rural economy, we are where we are. In order for government to sort out what measures are important and what not, a short-term travel ban will buy time. However, if government were to use that time wisely, a travel ban would be needed for no more than a couple of weeks.

Meantime, we should not be accepting measures that go beyond the travel ban, like the RSPB’s unlawful attempt to close their land or the Cairngorms National Park’s call for people not to go wild camping. If someone from the fair city of Perth wants to load their backpack with 7 days food and set off into the Cairngorms for a week by foot, we should have the sense to let them do that. They are doing no harm. The state should not be wasting its resources preventing people from doing this or other recreational activities like fishing or birdwatching.

Instead of these stupid responses, what we need is clear messages from government about how the risks of catching or passing on coronavirus in the outdoors is tiny, as long as you observe the current guidance about not mixing with people outside your household, and that they want to get people back into the countryside as soon as possible. Until that is allowed, it is hard to see how any cafe or restaurant could re-open.

There is an opportunity here for the Scottish Government to take a radically different approach to the UK government. There is no reason, with the right preparations, why in a couple of weeks time they could not start to lift travel restrictions into the countryside.

As long as some commonsense rules were introduced – and public toilets re-opened and properly cleaned – there is no reason why people should be stopped from taking DAY visits into National Parks for enjoyment or exercise. It should be quite possible to guide people away from hotspots like Duck Bay, where there could be a risk of the virus spreading as on sunny days hundreds of people picnic there (as happened in England last weekend). The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority has a large ranger service which could be used to help disperse people away from such



hotspots. Problem averted! It just takes some will.

Managing overnight visits are a little more complicated, but campervans pose almost no risk, if self-sufficient – the problem is about the capacity of the NHS in the Highlands to cope in the event they did fall ill like Prince Charles. However, if the government put the resources into public health to enable proper testing and contact tracing, it would be possible to vet people wanting to stay in the Highlands before they went there (as should have happened with Prince Charles). That would make it easy for not just self-catering accommodations but hotels to also open again.

Such an approach would be infinitely preferable to the indefinite health crisis and the social and economic collapse that we are all facing as a result of the way the coronavirus is being mismanaged.

### **Category**

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. National Parks

### **Tags**

1. access rights
2. CNPA
3. LLTNPA
4. Scottish Government
5. Tourism
6. visitor management

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