

The corona crisis – the lessons of foot and mouth and a beacon of hope in the countryside “lockdown”

Description



A beacon of hope – hand sanitiser, generously left, on a gate on a farm a few miles from Aviemore. More than a keep out sign. Photo Credit anonymous.

[NB this post has been updated. I have been informed that the LLTNPA has not closed the gates to all its carparks but instead police tape has in some cases been placed across them]

The Foot and Mouth Crisis

We have been here before, although the corona crisis is far more serious.

I well remember the start of the Foot and Mouth crisis in 2001. I turned up to the International Winter Climbing meet in Glenmore Lodge midway through the week, unable to climb as I had broken my shoulder and wrist in a 500ft fall a few weeks earlier (and no, I never called mountain rescue). I was greeted with the news that those present had agreed that all climbing and hill-going should end with immediate effect to try and help stop Foot and Mouth spreading. Some well-intentioned person made the proposal, no-one dared question it and rationality got thrown out the window. There were no sheep or cattle around the Northern Corries in the Cairngorms or many of the other places where people were climbing.....

The countryside went into immediate lockdown. No-one dared go out climbing or hill walking because of social opprobrium that would have ensued. There was a real risk that any visitors' car would get tanned. Although this lasted for just a few weeks, there were terrible consequences for the rural economy which relied on tourism to a far greater extent than any politician had appreciated. After lots of behind the scenes negotiation, the National Trust for Scotland eventually agreed to raise its head above the parapet and to "re-open" a few limited "safe" areas. The winter had been cold and icy and, with my bones healed, I set off with a friend to Glen Coe to celebrate. We were the only people there. The NTS had put up maps showing "forbidden" areas at all their car parks and there were troughs with disinfectant to wash your boots. These were to become a feature of the wider countryside for months afterwards. The only permitted way to access the climbs on Bidein nam Bian and the Three Sisters was via a narrow strip across to the bridge heading up to Coire an Lochain. The permitted access strip was blocked by sheep, the only place in the whole of Glen Coe that we could see any.

We used our common sense, skirted around the sheep by walking through the area marked out of bounds and then enjoyed a wonderful ribbon of ice up under Ossian's Cave and round onto the top of Aonach Dubh. While life was good again for us, it took months for others to dare to venture out into the countryside again.

While the Foot and Mouth panic had terrible consequences for the rural economy, it transformed the political response to the access debate. As President of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland I had been involved in negotiating the agreement which eventually formed the basis of our access legislation. That agreement with the landowners had, however, then re-written by the civil servants, who introduced a host of qualifications that could have made access in Scotland worse, not better. It was thanks to Foot and Mouth that all that changed. The newly elected Members of the Scottish Parliament saw what an economic disaster Foot and Mouth had been for the countryside and insisted that the initial recommendations of the National Access Forum were enshrined in legislation.

The Coronavirus crisis and the importance of access to the countryside

The threat from the coronavirus is, of course, far greater than Foot and Mouth but in the world panic that is sweeping all before it, ALL the lessons from Foot and Mouth are being forgotten and the countryside in Scotland is being locked down. This is not rational and affects people living in rural areas as much as those living in urban areas.

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Photo by Great Glen Way. Photo credit anonymous.

Being out of doors is the safest place people could be in terms of either catching or transmitting the COVID 19 because there is lots of space to observe social distancing and few hard surfaces on which viruses can be transmitted by hand.

Our governments are not acknowledging one simple fact, being outdoors is generally far safer than being stuck in our homes. The place where someone is living is one of the primary locations where COVID 19, like other respiratory viruses, are transmitted. This is because people are living in close

proximity and there are so many hard surfaces. China recognised this which is why when they tracked a case of COVID 19 they immediately removed that person from the home ([see here](#)). That was met with outrage but, without measures that address this issue, the COVID 19 crisis in the West is likely to last for months. Its not difficult to understand why: person working in “essential service” goes home to family not knowing they are infected; after seven days pass on to first child; after 20 days second child infected; after 30 days partner, who is working in essential services, infected. You only need one member of the family to be asymptomatic for the family to come out of self-isolation and spread the virus back into the community. It doesn't take much to see why this crisis will go on and on for months without testing and contact tracing ([see here](#)).

To get out of the crisis we need a plan based on where its safe for people to be and who can safely go out. The countryside has a key role to play in this, as an area where it is safe to be, whether if you are working (which I will consider in a further post) or going out for your own physical and mental health.

The response of our National Parks and SNH to the corona crisis

Unfortunately, what has been happening is a re-run of Foot and Mouth, with a minority of people living in the countryside, backed by certain politicians, leading the charge for a total lockdown. The Scottish Government and our Public Authorities have stood by and let this happen. I understand, for example, that the Cairngorms National Park Authority is awaiting guidance from the Scottish Government before its access officers take any action against paths and car parks that have been unlawfully blocked (actions that effectively only affect local people living in rural areas given the legal measures that have made it illegal to travel longer distances).

Its worse than this, however, two of public authorities who have specific statutory duties to protect access rights have led the actions which have been shutting down the countryside and are making exercise of access rights, even for physical exercise, so difficult:

CORONAVIRUS/COVID-19

Due to the COVID19 pandemic, all our public sites, including our offices, NNR visitor centres, overnight car parks are closed and our staff are working from home. We are still contactable and will provide a continued quality service wherever we can.


Below is some information to help you with questions you may have. There is also a key contact you need to get touch with any queries.

Extract from SNH website

SNH, which has for the last few years been promoting the benefits of green health ([see here](#)), has closed all its facilities that support this. Its worth repeating here that public toilets and car parks were

two of the facilities which were exempt from closure under the draconian Coronavirus Health Protection Restriction Regulations Scotland 2020 which, I repeat, were passed without any scrutiny by the Scottish Parliament 12 days ago.

Even worse, was the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority. It closed its car parks and toilets BEFORE the Scottish Government tried to stop people going out of doors.

 All National Park visitor facilities and buildings are now closed in light of [COVID-19/Coronavirus](#). Please see this time.

The LLTNPA could and should have been setting an example of how people from the Glasgow conurbation could be supported to enjoy the countryside round about. Instead, however, I thought they had suddenly found a justification for all the money they had spent installing gates across their car parks. Instead, however, while some gates have been closed in other cases the car parks have been closed off with police tape. Actions like these, however, have stopped people from places like Callander, which is within the National Park, from driving out to places like Loch Venachar (five miles away) to go for a walk.

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The gate to one of the car parks operated by the LLTNPA at Loch Venachar. This car park is adjacent to a luxury house built by the previous Convener of the LLTNPA, Linda McKay, who appears to have been a driving force behind the camping byelaws ([see here](#)). Through FOIs I established it cost over £1000 to have been installed in case of flooding and to help prevent roads becoming overcrowded. I am not clear as to why this car park has had its gate shut or been closed off with police tape.

It seems to me now clearer than ever that those in charge of a public authority which has a statutory duty to promote public enjoyment to the countryside would prefer not to have the bother of assisting anyone to come to the countryside. One might have hoped that in a time of crisis, helping people get out for their physical and mental health would have become more important, not less.

Pityoulish – a beacon of hope and an example of what should be done

The sanitisers at Pityoulish (top photo) are exactly the sort of thing that SNH and our National Park Authorities should have been doing, enabling people to get out safely instead of placing barriers in their path. I don't think anyone knows what the risks of transmitting the virus via the handles on gates is – it will depend on the volume of people and factors such as how sunny it is – but, let's accept for the moment that there is a risk that needs to be addressed. Well, Pityoulish has provided a solution. Brilliant!

And so it is for all the other so-called unsolvable problems that people are claiming at present justify banning people, whether living in rural or urban areas, from going out into the countryside. There are always solutions! Examples include: management of visitor numbers in order to help people observe social distancing in visitor hotspots; increasing the frequency that toilets are cleaned; covering up signs that were designed to be touched. Every potential problem has a solution, given the will. And if people are worried about the efficacy of any solution, the answer is let's get public health and environmental health involved, instead of letting them be sidelined by our governments (extraordinarily Environmental Health have not been asked so far to help address the crisis).

Meantime, the experience of the Foot and Mouth crisis was that it was far more difficult to re-open the countryside than close it down. Farmers who found the time to block off car parks and access routes in the middle of that crisis, were suddenly too busy to remove them when the crisis was ended. Other sectors of the rural economy then paid for that while the farmers received compensation payments. The unlawful blockages in the countryside are now so extensive that they will be very difficult to remove even if the Scottish Government saw commonsense and said it wanted people to start visiting the countryside again. I believe that Access Authorities will need to be given extra powers to remove the obstructions, without following the current bureaucratic processes. (For a discussion of how the LLTNPA has dealt with unlawful signs and the barriers facing staff ([see here](#))). Otherwise, Scotland's reputation as having world class access rights is likely to lie in tatters and the tourism industry may take years to recover.

Pityoulish is therefore doubly important because it shows that not all landowners respond to crises by trying to keep people out. There is, I believe, a deep instinct at play here that is encapsulated in the phrase "an Englishman's home is his castle". In a crisis, the land becomes part of the fortifications around the castle, it helps keep people out and keep perceived danger at bay. This instinct for self-preservation is also what leads to very rich people in the US and elsewhere to buy their own bunkers where they could hunker down for years in case of a nuclear meltdown. As soon as this crisis started, gun sales in the USA went up. Not all of us believe we are in it together. In these circumstances, landowners who do act in the wider public interest need to be praised to the heavens.

The number of such landowners, compared to those who try to shut their land down, is likely to be crucial to the future of tourism in our National Parks and the wider countryside in the medium-term. A wise Councillor in Inverness recently cautioned the social media trolls who were hunting every last "visitor" out of the Highlands, warning people to be careful of what they wished for. This crisis is a lot more serious than Foot and Mouth and therefore the consequences of the messages being given out are even more important. Visitors and potential visitors won't forget how people in the countryside responded to the crisis. Accepting that health services in some parts of the Highlands could have been put under serious strain, it makes a real difference how people were asked to leave.

I don't think the people trying to close the countryside down completely in Scotland represent the

majority of those living there (and not least because lots of people from rural areas have been contacting me about my posts). One of the problems, however, that others face in speaking out against attempts to close the countryside is that our Public Authorities who should be supporting them and showing the way, have abdicated all responsibility. They have simply become part of our over-centralised government in Scotland. Once the inevitable parliamentary inquiry into the mis-management of the coronacrisis is instigated, a part of the inquiry should look at why SNH, the Cairngorms National Park Authority and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority never incorporated any of the lessons of the Foot and Mouth Crisis into how they responded to Covid 19.

Category

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Tags

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