

Covid-19 – access rights, the missed opportunity and the failures in visitor management

Description



View from Durisdeer Hill towards Elvanfoot

On Saturday, my partner and I drove 50 miles from Glasgow to go walking in the hills east of Durisdeer, off the A702 south of Abington. The decision to ignore the Scottish Government's guidance to stay local and to go south was quite deliberate. I knew there would be far fewer people in the countryside than in Glasgow's open spaces. I also reckoned there would be less traffic and far less hassle trying to find somewhere to park in Dumfries and the Borders than further north.



I was right about the parking, we saw just one blocked off layby by a village. There were plenty of places to pull safely off the road. We did so about 400m from the nearest house in order to avoid causing any unnecessary worry. Ours was the only car we saw parked in the glen all day. It's only about 10km in length. A very safe place to go



View along the Roman Rd at the top of the pass between Well Hill and Durisdeer Hill

We went through three gates in six hours. I must confess, being a soap and water person, I had forgotten to buy hand sanitiser before going out. I'll be better prepared next time but the scientific evidence suggests coronaviruses last for only a very short time in the sun.



Walking up the Scaw'd Law we heard several gunshots. Despite binoculars we couldn't see where the shooting was coming from. We saw a couple of Ladder Traps and it's possible it was keepers shooting crows under the General License. I was concerned it might be raptors because the Leadhills Estate ([see here](#)) just to the north is a persecution hotspot. In the event we saw three hen harriers, four buzzards and a kestrel as well as mountain hare and lots of voles.



View south beyond Wedder Law to the Lake District

We also saw just two people all day, close to the summit of Scaw'd Law. They got to within 50m of us. There were no conceivable issues about how to keep apart from them, there was so much space.



Looking over to Comb Law from Hirstane Rig. We disturbed a buzzard perched on a peat hag

Much of Scotland is like this. As a country we are so lucky, we have hundreds of square miles of open space, some wild, some less wild, but all safe places for people to go in a pandemic. There has never been any justification for stopping people from going out to walk in our open spaces since the start of the corona crisis, and there certainly isn't now. But still the Scottish Government and the countryside establishment urge us to "stay local".



Native woodland planting along the Potrail Water. There were some good places to camp along the

As I keep repeating, there is a missed opportunity here for outdoor recreation and the rural economy. There is no reason why self-catering accommodation ([see here for sample of such accommodation around Leadhills](#)), where households could stay self-contained and could avoid using local shops if asked, shouldn't re-open again. That, and allowing people to leave their homes overnight to go wild camping or campervanning, would help people take full advantage of our countryside again instead of burning up fuel on day visits.

The contrast between the Borders and Glasgow

On Friday evening, the day the Restriction Regulations were relaxed, I went for my usual run in and around Pollok Park. As well as usual walkers, cyclists and runners, there were significantly more

people enjoying sitting in the large grassy fields than I had seen to date, all well spaced. Perhaps it was the sunny evening, but making making it legal once again for people to sit outdoors would appear to have encouraged more people to go out. A positive development for people's mental well-being.

It was, however, the first time since the Coronavirus lockdown that I have felt remotely uneasy in Pollok Park. Groups, mainly of young people, had congregated in a field by the river opposite Pollok House and many were clearly enjoying paddling or jumping into the river in the heat. Few, however, were observing physical distancing and in the excitement some were not stepping aside when passing by others on the path. There was no sign of the police on the one occasion I have observed to date where their presence could have made a difference.

It's too easy to judge. The groups could have been people who worked together in workplaces deemed "essential", where there has been little physical distancing and some may have had the virus. We are in a strange situation where health staff, who are in close contact with colleagues on a daily basis at work, still commit a criminal offence if they meet each other in their homes. Doctors in relationships, living apart, a not uncommon occurrence, are still not supposed to see each other even if one of them has had the virus.

It's also easy to overstate the risks. Most Covid-19 outbreaks, though until we have an effective contact tracing system we can't be certain of this, now appear to be circulating among health and social care staff and others working in high risk places like distribution depots. If the young people hadn't been working, the chances are none of them had the virus. Moreover, even if one of them had, there is relatively little likelihood of them spreading it by being closer than 2m contact outdoors. I was still, however, concerned but I don't believe we should not be curtailing the civil liberties of the 90% of the population who are maintaining physical distancing as a matter of course.

We need to find other ways to encourage everyone to do the right thing. The police are one way but better is the influence of other people doing the right thing. On Sunday, I was re-assured that "group discipline", if you can call it that, appeared to have been restored and that Stay Apart continues to be the social norm.

The Scottish Government's advice to Stay Local and the closure of visitor hotspots

What Pollok Park illustrates in miniature is that while we need some management of visitor hotspots (encouraging the people in the field to spread out) we could allow other places – like almost everywhere in the Borders – to go unmanaged, if people were helped to disperse.

As more people have dared to leave their homes, this has increased the pressure on open spaces in settlements. That situation will get worse as the golf courses re-open. Many people in urban settlements the last few weeks have been exercising their rights of access on golf courses – I have a friend who during the lockdown has been exploring most of Glasgow's finest. As the golf balls begin to fly again – a good thing – the ability to walk over golf course is going to become more difficult. That means, if people follow the Scottish Government's advice to stay local, there will be more people will be confined into less space.

Unfortunately, instead of helping people to disperse, the Scottish Government's message of Stay Local

and its endorsement of the continued closure of visitor facilities ([see here](#)), backed by almost all the countryside agencies, is concentrating people and creating problems rather than solving them.

As an example from the weekend, the continued closure of car parks around the cities may have deterred some people from visiting the countryside. However, it's also forced those who have decided, quite rationally, to escape crowded settlements to park on road verges. This increases the chances of road traffic accidents, one of the very reasons used to justify the calls for people to stay away from the countryside (because of the demand accidents place on the NHS). Readers over the weekend reported to Parkswatch 30 cars parked along the A83 by the Cobbler, where Argyll and Bute have failed to re-open the car park, and similar problems along the coast in east Lothian. It appears our public authorities would far prefer the public to be crowded into places like Portobello beach rather than spread out in the countryside

Moreover, the continued closure of toilets, which I will cover in another post, will potentially create another public health disaster. By all accounts some of the beaches in England are now quite disgusting because of the continued closure of toilets. The same will be happening in parts of Scotland.

We need our Public Authorities to start helping visitors and stop seeing the answer to every potential problem, as epitomised by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park, as being to ban people and shut facilities. The facilities in the LLTNP, which should have been the first to re-open in Scotland, will on their past record be the last to do so.

Meantime, people should use their common sense. Whatever the risks of going for a walk in the city or from your village, if you can negotiate the blocked off car parks you are almost certainly far safer if you venture out into the countryside.

Category

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Tags

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