

Covid-19, access and the abuse of language

Description



Sign at gate on track from Corriechoille to the Lairig Leacach 21st July

[Update: I had a phone call from Jahama Estates on 5th August to say all three signs referred to in this post and subsequent update have now been removed. I thanked them for this though my view remains the signs should never have been erected]

I have just come back from a week in Lochaber, on the northern edges of what should have been Scotland's third National Park. The hills we walked and ran over were mostly entirely deserted and, unlike popular places further south, there was a merciful absence of signs. We did, though, come across this sign on the way to the Grey Corries. It was put up by Jahama Highland Estates ([see here](#)), which now owns a large chunk of the Highlands.

Someone clearly went to a great deal of trouble designing and erecting the sign which appears bespoke to the place – there are not many tracks they own which walkers are allowed to drive up. Jahama has not until now, as far as I am aware, been anti-access. Indeed it allowed people to drive up past this gate to park below the forest, shortening the long walk in.

The Covid-19 crisis has, however, shifted the basis of the debate about access and other civil liberties and introduced large elements of irrationality. That thinking, illustrated by this sign, needs to be challenged and eradicated:

Although access rights were not repealed by the Coronavirus Act, access to the countryside was for weeks reduced by government to a matter of “physical exercise”. Recreation, as covered by access rights, is a much wider term

The word “essential” was hijacked by the “don’t go into the countryside” propagandists. Was Brian Kellett, the conscientious objector who worked in the forestry at Torlundy just a few miles from here, doing something “essential” when he pioneered so many new routes on Ben Nevis in 1943 and 1944? When some people in mountain rescue teams started questioning whether going to the hills was “essential” they were setting a very dangerous precedent. We need to defend the liberty to do things that don’t harm others even if, as with Kellett, they might end with death.

There is no basis to the claim that had anyone driven up this track they would have risked harm to Jahama’s staff (most of whom were presumably furloughed as working in the outdoors like walking was also deemed non-essential) or the local community. Who in any case is Jahama’s local community? What about the people of Scotland being “the local community”? With lockdown lifted we saw three people in an eight hour day.

The sign, however, is still there just like all those anti-access signs after the Foot and Mouth Crisis. If you see such signs, please report them to your local access authority. Unfortunately, I have heard some access officers are being forbidden from making site visits on the basis that these are “non-essential”. The abuse of language goes far deeper than the issue of signage, it has implications for the very basis of our access rights.

Covid-19 is very dangerous but not in the great outdoors and we need to defend the right to travel to the countryside should there be a second wave of Covid-19.

Update

A few hours after writing this I was contacted by Jahama Highland Estate stating that while they believed the sign was appropriate during lockdown it *“should have been taken down when the Covid 19 phases and the access guidance changed, as we all started to move out of lockdown”*. They also stated: *“We would like to apologise unreservedly for any misunderstanding in relation to visitors wishing to take responsible access to Jahama Highland Estate”* and they would ask staff to remove the signs as soon as possible. I have written back to them thanking them for this.

They attached a copy of their new vision document and I have extracted the section on recreation:



Recreation

We are the geographic heart of the Outdoor Capital of the UK. With our own in-hand opportunities in addition to our tenants operating iconic outdoor recreation facilities including a ski centre, internationally-acclaimed mountain bike tracks, world-famous rock climbing and mountaineering routes – to name but a few – JHE is unrivalled in the provision of outdoor recreation.

- JHE includes the North Face of Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in the UK.
- The UCI Downhill Mountain Bike World Cup has taken place on Aonach Mor, part of JHE, since 2002.
- We will improve our partnership working and collaboration with local access management groups and our landowning neighbours.
- Our deer stalking takes place in a challenging and aesthetically stunning environment, with plans being formulated to improve publicity and offer a unique immersive game, deer and salmonid hunting experience.
- On the famous “Road to the Isles”, there is major untapped potential in retaining visitors travelling en route to other parts of the Highlands and Islands: we should, and can, do much more.

And a few hours later I received the following from a reader which I have also now reported to Jahama



Sign near Glenshero Lodge

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Sign at Garva Bridge

I was clearly wrong about the sign being bespoke to the Grey Corries. Please, if you see signs, take photos and report them. It does make a difference.

Category

1. National Parks

Tags

1. access rights
2. Covid-19
3. Scottish Government

Date Created

July 26, 2020

Author

nickkempe

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