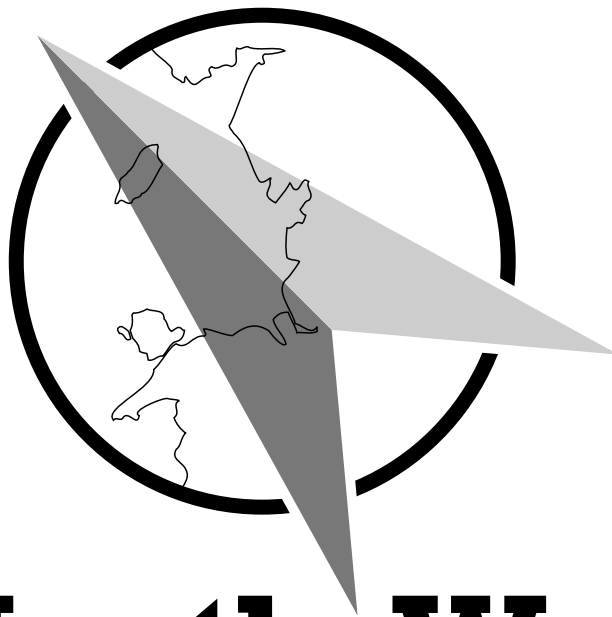


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# Recreational users of Lake District bridleways: conflict or camaraderie?

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## Abstract

In recent years the use of upland British bridleways has increased. It has been suggested that conflicts exist between the 'new' user group of mountain bikers and more 'traditional' users, and that the presence of mountain bikers denudes the sense of wilderness for which many traditional users visit upland areas. This study investigates the extent and type of conflict between different users on upland bridleways in the Lake District. Through semi-structured interviews it is found that rather than 'getting away from everything', the presence of like minded 'outdoor' people is an important element of many peoples' enjoyment of upland bridleways, and that this camaraderie can overcome user group differences.

## Keywords

Lake District, mountain biking, user groups, conflict, qualitative approaches.

## Introduction

It has been assumed that the rapid growth in the use of the British countryside for outdoor recreational pursuits over the last 20 years has produced conflict between different users (CPRE 1994, House of Commons Environment Committee 1995, Rodgers 1993). In particular, since the introduction of the mountain bike to the UK in 1983 and the rapid rise in its popularity, widespread concern has developed over perceived conflicts and tensions on upland byways and bridleways between these relatively 'new' users, and more 'traditional' users of walkers, fell-runners and climbers (Ruff and Mellors 1993). The Lake District National Park (LDNP) is an area where such tensions have allegedly become acute (Rodgers 1993) with the local press claiming that "the use of such bikes on mountainsides and fells is incompatible with more appropriate, natural activities such as walking, fell-running and rock-climbing, all of them well-established in the area" (CPRE 1994, 14). Official reports on the social and environmental impacts of countryside leisure activities have emphasised the need to produce independent

analyses of conflict to enable provision of integrated management plans (CPRE 1994, House of Commons Environment Committee 1995).

## Perceived problems of walker – mountain biker conflicts in National Parks

"Cultural conflicts are just as real as, and sometimes more important than, the physical problems – indeed they are often the root cause of the various tensions and dissatisfactions that are redefined as threats to the environment."

(House of Commons Environment Committee 1995, xiv)

Academic studies have suggested that perceived conflict stems from commonly held perceptions of the countryside which in turn suggest to many managers and rural landowners that mountain bikes are "not an acceptable form of countryside recreation" (Ruff and Mellors 1993, 105 and see McNaghten 1995, Ramthun 1995, Ruff and Mellors 1993, Watson *et al.* 1991). Tensions could arise from perceived ownership of upland countryside areas with walkers regarding them as 'their recreation area' (Ruff and Mellors 1993) and bikers feeling

guilty for pedalling in 'the domain of the recreational walker' (Palmer 1994); the disturbance caused by the noise and bright colours of a group of mountain bikers being viewed as inappropriate for the idyllic rural surroundings (Watson *et al.* 1991); jealousy on the behalf of some walkers who believe that the mountain bike allows enjoyment of the countryside in relative ease, without requiring the same dedication or fitness (Ruff and Mellors 1993); or blame being assigned to mountain bikers for extensive soil erosion problems (Haynes 1998, Ruff and Mellors 1993). Yet, these studies have suggested that, counter to the view in the press and management literature, *actual* evidence of conflicts between the actual users is limited. However, the Lake District Special Planning Board report on 'Mountain Biking in the Lake District' found evidence of conflict based on its questionnaire survey of people using mountain bike hire outlets and mountain bikers on 12 bridleways throughout the LDNP, although it contained only limited information on the extent or causes of conflicts between walkers and bikers (Rodgers 1993, 2).

This study concerns the causes of conflict in the upland bridleways of the LDNP. The aim was to elucidate impressions of the enjoyment experience people gain from their recreation, and of any factors which disturb this enjoyment. We adopted a wholly qualitative approach based on interviews with users on the bridleways in which users were not asked directly to mention conflicts or tensions. Geographers have long recognised the limitations of survey-based research for issues such as environmental perception (R. Burgess 1988, 1991, Cook and Crang 1995, O'Riordan 1973). Qualitative methods offer an alternative and effective alternative (Eyles and Smith 1988, Valentine 1997) in that they access the realm of meaning and understanding in a way which standardised survey techniques cannot, and, as Kempton (1991) asserts, can be particularly useful when understanding "science policy issues" such as the conflict reported in the LDNP.

### **The Lake District study**

*The study area: upland bridleways of Kentmere, Keswick and High Street*

The Lake District National Park covers an area of 2,292 km<sup>2</sup> of upland fells in Cumbria, and attracts over 10 million visitors a year, many of whom at

some stage make use of the 3,544 km of rights of way (LDNP 1997a). A questionnaire survey of nearly 4,000 people leaving the park in 1994 found that 22% of visitors had undertaken an outdoor activity (LDNP 1997b), a figure which will have increased with the continued rise in the popularity of active recreational activities. The bridleway network consists of ancient roads and trackways (Hindle 1984) and more recently designated tracks, e.g. the Forestry Enterprise tracks in Grizedale Forest. We have concentrated solely on the upland bridleways of Kentmere, High Street and Keswick, long-established walking areas which have more recently gained popularity for mountain biking (Ashcroft 1991, Hyde 1994) and may be expected to be a focus for social conflicts (Ruff and Mellors 1993, Watson *et al.* 1991). Furthermore, this area is outside the Lake District mountain biking centre in Grizedale Forest: we were interested in areas where people had chosen to cycle in preference to the overtly managed area. Our findings are specific to upland areas in which there is the potential for most conflict.

### *Qualitative interviews as an aid to management decision-making*

Qualitative interview techniques are well established in social science research, but have been underused in the solution of rural environmental problems and in the countryside management decision-making process (J. Burgess 1994, J. Burgess *et al.* 1988). Given that countryside management deals with users' concerns, it is surprising that qualitative analyses have not been incorporated into management planning.

Semi-structured interviews were employed through which the researcher engages the respondent in a 'managed' conversation (R. Burgess 1991, Pile 1991). Data collection was conducted both by the authors and a group of ten second year undergraduate geography students from the universities of Salford and Leeds. The opinions and experiences of 35 walkers and 20 mountain bikers were canvassed in interviews which lasted from 10 minutes to 30 minutes. The qualitative approach was flexible in that the schedule could be tailored to the interviewee. The group of respondents chosen reflected the characteristics of users of the bridleways in terms of age, gender, and user group.

The main themes of the 'managed' conver-

sations were the influences on an individual's enjoyment of their recreational experience and any factors which may hinder this enjoyment. Structure was provided to conversations by the interview schedule provided to all interviewers (Figure 1) which lists a number of topics that each interview aimed to cover, as well as a series of prompts to sustain the conversation. The topics and schedule were not presented in the interviews as a series of fixed questions and in many instances there was not time, or conversational scope, to cover all topics (R. Burgess 1988, 1991, Valentine 1997). In many cases the interest of interviewees led to other aspects of their recreational experience being discussed in the informal and flexible manner which such interviews facilitate.

Using students as interviewers presented a number of challenges. All the undergraduate assistants were Level 2 students, preparing to undertake their own dissertation research on topics related to our research interests, and had all expressed interest in learning more about qualitative research. Although some of those from Leeds had already undertaken a Qualitative Approaches course, all students were trained for the specific research. A handout outlining the key tenets of qualitative techniques was distributed, a discussion session with the students on the technique was

conducted, and pilot interviews were carried out with members of the public. We accompanied the students, to ensure that they were conducting the interviews appropriately, and also to rectify any problems they were encountering.

The positionality of the researcher is critical to the qualitative research process (McDowell 1991, Schoenberger 1991, Stroh 1998). The students were aged 19-21, white and were a mix of men and women. The student interviewers were made aware of issues pertaining to presentation when talking to members of the public, and were asked to note any effect they felt this had on the interviews themselves. To be assured reliability of data, the authors debriefed the students to gauge their experience of and commitment to the project whilst conducting the research, to consolidate the findings of the research, and to accommodate any issues of positionality into the data analysis. This session demonstrated the depth of understanding the students had achieved and suggested that whilst they were aware of the specific social interaction caused by their age and status, it was felt that they were able to overcome difficulties and relate to most users' opinions.

A challenge of the work was conducting interviews in the field, as opposed to the convenience offered by the more usual interview setting of

*Figure 1: Interview structure provided to all interviewers.*

- ◆ How the people 'use' the countryside:  
Here we are interested in whether they are walkers/hikers or mountain bikers, or both, of course. Try phrasing the question as 'What do you do when you're here?', or similar. This topic can be 'followed-up' by asking them about uses they don't explicitly mention – e.g. biking or climbing.
- ◆ Their views on other users:  
If this isn't covered above, you can then ask them for their opinions on climbers and bikers, etc. Introduce the topic of environmental damage if they haven't mentioned it already. If appropriate, follow up any examples of conflict they've mentioned.
- ◆ Views on management schemes:  
You should have talked about environmental damage/impact, so now start to ask about how to manage the impact. You can ask whether they have noticed any management schemes, and then go on to whether there are other schemes which may work.
- ◆ Opinions on National Parks:  
This links to the questions of management – do National Parks 'work'; do they provide appropriate amenities; try to think about asking people whether they know how National Parks are managed.

an office or living room. Normally, a key stage in qualitative data analysis is the full or partial transcription of a tape-recorded interview (Fielding 1993, Pile 1991). In the context of conducting interviews on a mountain path, tape-recording was not feasible. The advantages of data produced from the qualitative 'field-based' technique, using active note-taking both during and after the interviews, outweigh the potential disadvantage of not being able to tape the interviews, we would argue, and allow the vital wider incorporation of public opinion in countryside management.

Qualitative data are neither representative nor inferential in statistical terms, meaning that the relationships found in the wilderness area under study may differ greatly to those found in other locations (e.g. urban country parks, Forestry Commission trails such as in Grizedale Forest). Rather, importance is placed on the depth of the information gathered, and is thus particularly suited to issues of perception, conflict and interpretation, all of which were important to this study.

### **The extent of conflict: interpreting the natural**

In contrast to what others have found (CPRE 1994, Rodgers 1993), our data suggest that there is limited conflict between countryside users in the Lake District. Only a minority experienced conflict, although most acknowledged the potential for conflict, or mentioned press coverage of it. Those who perceived conflict rarely spoke of a walker-mountain biker conflict. Rather, the conflicts were articulated in more abstract terms between a different 'them' – park managers – and 'us' and between conceptions of *nature* and the *natural*. These findings led us to analyse data in terms of insiders and outsiders in the countryside, and to consider the findings in terms of various communities involved in the perceived conflicts, i.e. managers, user groups, and the local people.

A couple in their early twenties had "no problem with mountain bikers" feeling that "as long as they respect the countryside, we feel it's OK." Such sentiments were not only aimed at mountain bikers. There was widespread concern that management measures were respectful of nature in terms of what 'feels' natural and also what appears natural. Another couple suggested that the paving of paths on Helvellyn was "unnatural but a compromise was

necessary." These conceptions of nature and the natural are fundamentally cultural: "individual societies have contrasting views of 'nature', and of what is 'natural'" (Redclift and Woodgate 1994, 55). It follows that there are cultural constructions of what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable management. Like the House of Commons Environment Committee report (1995), evidence suggests that these issues of 'cultural conflicts', and thus what is considered 'natural', are as important as the "physical problems" (p. xiv) themselves. The aesthetics of obvious ('unnatural') management were raised regularly as a cause of dislike, particularly in areas which were paved and cobbled for the sake of the environment, such as erosion prevention schemes in Langdale (Davies *et al.* 1996). The cobbles were clearly noticed because they stand out from the surrounding 'natural' area. A Spanish woman was impressed by the level of management compared to Spain, in particular by "the gates, the signs, and the managed footpaths". She was impressed that "we bothered to manage it." However, this also highlights the *obvious* nature of the management regime: it is clear that it has been managed, and the majority of users we interviewed were not so impressed.

The application of management resources was often questioned, leading us to conclude that there was a distinct them (manager) – us (users) binary. Management "can only do so much" we were told, and people need to be educated to "make them more aware, especially younger people". Yet this respondent concluded that "... most people respect the area. If it gets out of control, it will get to be a problem". Management is required, it was almost universally acknowledged, but there is perceived a need for appropriate and 'respectful' management, and a general concern that people and managers should not literally be "loving National Parks to death". There is a desire for management which could not be seen, thus maintaining the sense of wilderness for which people visit upland fells.

The main aim of the study was to assess the extent and causes of conflicts between the different users on LDNP bridleways. However, there was a lack of first-hand knowledge of these conflicts. Indeed, only two respondents discussed problems that they felt affected their recreational enjoyment. It is significant, we would suggest, that both these

respondents were walkers of some years who referred back to the more peaceful countryside enjoyment they experienced before mountain bikers shared bridleways with them. There was little evidence or discussion in the interviews of actual conflict, but when pressed, responses to questions on the perceived social conflicts focused on the management of the issue, and particularly on the erosion which some walkers claimed had increased "... since mountain biking has become fashionable". These findings concur with research in other areas such as Dartmoor (Haynes 1998). However, this view does not match the reality of the limited extent of mountain bike induced erosion at these upland sites, especially when compared to erosion caused by other human impacts of farming and acid pollution inputs (Evans 1997). We suggest that this attribution of blame arises from the ease with which the public can attribute responsibility for damage to a mechanical intrusion to the environment rather than the perceived 'naturalness' of walkers or horse-riders and/or less overtly visible changes in pollution levels or grazing intensities. The link between bikes and erosion is attractive to managers and users who blame mountain bikers for a denudation of (their perception of) the countryside, providing a clear example of the importance of exploring 'cultural conflicts' as much as physical and environmental conflict (House of Commons Environment Committee 1995).

Concern was expressed over the increasing number of users in the area. One recurring suggestion was to control the number of users of the National Park. There was a suggestion that "if everyone goes up the same peaks, then it needs to be controlled", but the same interviewee realised that one "can't restrict people" if only because the control approach would "take away local industry", suggesting a figure of 40% of local employment in the tourist industry. The LDNP was seen as a "victim of its own success ... it needs tourism for business, but [it] ruins the area". This suggests that the LDNP is being *actively* promoted to its detriment. This suggestion resonates with concern expressed that conflict is between users and management, with managers trying to balance the need to generate revenue with the social and environmental impacts of users. There was a view expressed that "people should pay a contribution towards the upkeep of

standards in the LDNP. If people want to keep countryside as it is now, they should be prepared to pay for it," but this was countered by others of the view that the "... world was created for all of us, permits would ruin this ...". Herein lies the public's equally split views on the dilemmas faced by National Park managers in achieving their dual aims (as detailed in the 1995 Environment Act) of firstly "conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the areas", and secondly "promoting opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of those areas by the public".

Using a qualitative approach we can identify that a number of people perceive conflict between users and managers, rather than the well-documented rift between walkers and mountain bikers. Users we interviewed are suggesting that some management has been inappropriate and "unnatural". A possible cause is that people feel disenfranchised and powerless to express their opinions, and this is of increasing concern with more widespread overt management techniques, such as those highlighted by the LDNP's guide on techniques to be used in the repair of eroded upland routes (Davies *et al.* 1996).<sup>1</sup>

The feeling of disenfranchisement may be exacerbated by the visible manifestations of power and ownership by the National Park management, such as through intensive management of bridleways and footpaths, which highlights the power and control managers can exert in this perceived wilderness environment. These findings resonate with notions of exclusion discussed at length by Sibley (1995). Although he suggests that nature is often construed as an 'Other' (p. 26), our findings dispute this. In our limited sample, people were suggesting that they wanted to get closer to (their version) of nature, and the imposition of management was the 'Other' in this context, arguably a manifestation of the control of space through the exercise of a particular expert knowledge, exclusionary to lay knowledges (Sibley 1995, 119-136).

An emerging motivation for conflict between users and managers from our data is a difference between age groups: the younger interviewees were more accommodating of other users within their age group, and in some cases acknowledged their age

as being a factor in their wish to accommodate other types of users. One interviewee commented, somewhat antagonistically, that they “were not old enough to become grumpy and stuck in their ways and slag off other users.” They were, though, “still young [and] open minded enough to enjoy it with others.” Thus, rather than type of use, the conflict may well be between different generations, and the managers may well be categorised as elders and, thus, be similarly denigrated. However, analysis would suggest that a key grouping is around the level of enthusiast, i.e. between the ill-equipped day tripper and the well equipped fell walker, with the latter more akin to the well equipped mountain biker found on upland fells. Furthermore, these groups appear to be sharing some form of inherent ‘outdoor purist’ sense of community and one of camaraderie between the different users within this outdoor purist group.

### **Implications for the management of upland bridleways**

Social conflicts between user groups in the areas studied are far less apparent than previously documented (CPRE 1994, House of Commons Environment Committee 1995, Rodgers 1993) suggesting that if management is geared toward acceptance and tolerance of user groups then conflict-free use of upland bridleways can be sustained. Previous approaches to collusion between user groups have been based on advisory guidelines such as the Off-Road Code of Conduct issued by the Mountain Bike Club, now distributed with all new bikes sold in the UK, and detailed in all mountain biking guidebooks. These schemes do, however, have shortcomings because not all users are aware of them (Rodgers 1993) and because they are untenable and vague in terms of how bridleways are used in practice. The chief example of this is the Off-Road Code’s demand to “always yield to horses and pedestrians” which needs elaboration of the procedures this should involve in practice (Ashcroft 1991, 8).

Unlike other countries, no integrated scheme has yet been developed involving mountain biking groups, walking groups, environmental groups and land managers in the UK. In the USA, mountain bikers are accommodated as equal partners in the USA Countryside Club of walkers and equestrians

(Palmer 1994). This has been achieved through the signing of a ‘Principles of Agreement and Action Plan’ between the International Mountain Bike Association and the Sierra Club – the most powerful walking group. Key tenets of this joint agreement include: accepting that mountain biking is a legitimate form of recreation on trails, including single track, when and where it is practised in an environmentally-sound and socially responsible manner; that there is a need to create joint projects to educate all non-motorised trail users; and that it is important to encourage communications between local mountain bike groups and Sierra Club entities.

We would suggest that such agreements between different user groups coupled with education schemes – based on clearly explaining how to use bridleways to minimise conflicts with clear pragmatic rules on matters such as basic courteousness and safe riding – would greatly reduce the threat of hostility and conflict between different users of British bridleways. Such schemes, when combined with the demonstrated camaraderie that exists between most users of upland bridleways, suggest that simple steps could enable conflict-free use of upland bridleways. On the basis of our evidence, the main stumbling block to continued conflict-free use appears to be the animosity of some walkers (CPRE 1994, Cycling Today 1994), some countryside managers (Ruff and Mellors 1993) and the reckless actions of brasher ‘rogue’ elements of mountain bike users and their specialist press who all help to perpetuate the myth of widespread conflict between countryside users. There is also a need to incorporate and value the lay knowledges of members of the public, particularly in these areas which are perceived as a national resource, despite their private ownership (cf. Sibley 1995).

The positive advances evident in our study – showing the shared respect accorded by many walkers and bikers – could also be reported more fully in the specialist mountain biking press to demonstrate the success of simple courteous behaviour. Mutual tolerance, respect and acknowledgement of the sense of camaraderie we found may prove the key to the threatened continued mountain bike access to vulnerable wilderness areas. Whilst myths of conflict are perpetuated there will remain pressure to reduce the access of mountain bikes to upland bridleways. On the evidence of our research

which shows that conflict on these bridleways remains minimal, we suggest that bans aimed at reducing mountain bike access remain largely

unnecessary and will reduce the enjoyment of many users, bikers and walkers alike.

## Notes

1 These issues also relate to those covered in the wider rural over-management literature.

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