

PERSPECTIVES OF COUNTRYSIDE PARK PROFESSIONALS ON OUTDOOR ACCESS MANAGEMENT IN SCOTLAND

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BACKGROUND

Outdoor access provides a myriad of individual, socioeconomic and environmental benefits. However, these benefits are not distributed equally. In Scotland, demographic factors including affluence, health, age and ethnicity influence participation in outdoor recreation (Stuart & Eccleston, 2020).

The Scottish Government have a number of policies which aim to promote inclusive outdoor access to help deliver the multi-faceted benefits it provides. For example:

- Scotland has inclusive access rights which enable responsible public access to most land so long as the 'Scottish Outdoor Access Code' is followed.
- 'Increase the number of visits to the outdoors' is included as a progress indicator in Scotland's National Performance Framework (Scottish Government, 2019).
- They are exploring enshrining the 'right to a healthy environment' in their new statutory human rights framework (Scottish Government, 2021).
- NatureScot, Scotland's government funded nature agency, includes promoting equal outdoor access opportunities in their key priorities.

Outdoor access has been increasing gradually over the last 10 years (Stewart & Eccleston, 2020). This rose to unprecedented levels during the COVID-19 lockdown and has sustained in many areas (Stewart & Eccleston, 2022). While this is positive in supporting the realisation of the benefits of outdoor access, the increased visitor pressure has also presented several challenges for countryside management.

In this project, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand and document the perspectives of professionals involved in the management of two popular parks in Scotland's central belt which have experienced significant visitor pressure in recent years. The interviews focussed on the perceived barriers to and impacts of increasing visitor access as well as potential solutions for sustainable and inclusive management.

CASE STUDY SITES

MUGDOCK COUNTRY PARK

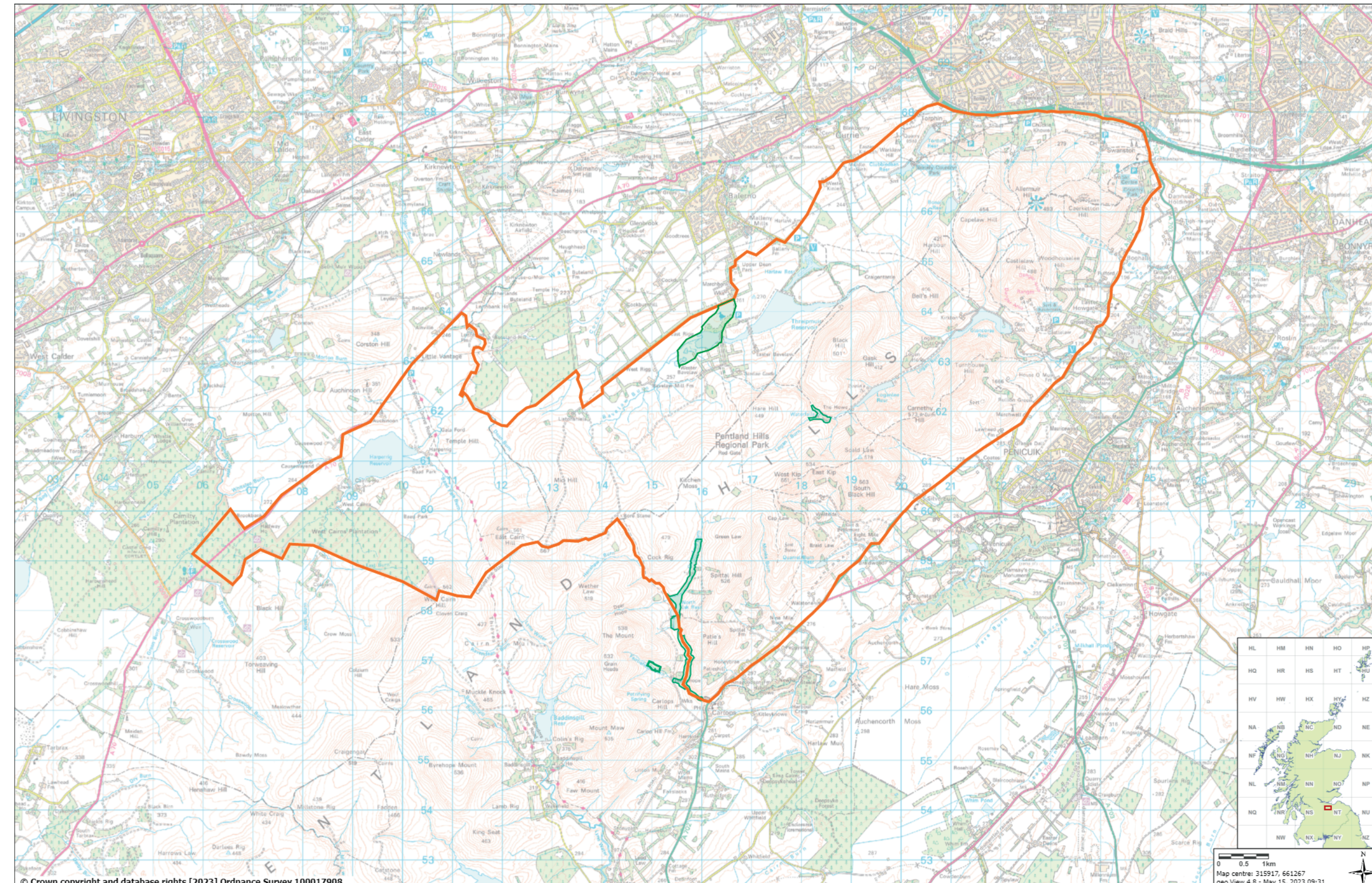


Area
> 260ha

Visitors per year
> 600,000

10 miles from Glasgow

PENTLAND HILLS REGIONAL PARK



Area
~ 10,000ha

Visitors per year
> 600,000

Adjacent to Edinburgh

Case Study Area Site of Special Scientific Interest

RESULTS

KEY THEMES	SUBTHEMES	
Barriers to Access	Poor transport Mobility issues Affordability Time pressures Cultural differences	Safety concerns Lack of awareness Lack of confidence Lack of exposure Lack of representation
Negative Impacts of Visitation	Increased visitor conflict Health and safety risks Ecological degradation Pollution	Agricultural impacts Infrastructure pressure Anti-social behaviour
Positive Impacts of Visitation	Improved health and wellbeing Improved nature connectedness Increased pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours	Promotes green skills Increased funding and revenue Increased sense of place and belonging
Management Challenges	Staff resources Funding Enforcement issues	Competing priorities Inefficient procurement processes
Management Solutions	Cultural change Behaviour change Education Outreach Infrastructure improvements	Information sharing Regulation Introducing charges Increasing staff resources

Table 1: Interview transcripts were subject to a systematic content analysis which resulted in the identification of 5 key themes, each containing numerous subthemes. These themes and subthemes were largely consistent across both case study sites.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Park ranger and warden services are under growing pressure due to increasing visitation combined with cuts to services.
- Ranger interactions with visitors is effective in promoting responsible behaviour, but current resources cannot keep pace with visitation rates.
- Constantly dealing with reactive visitor management issues can inhibit delivery of proactive engagement programmes which help reduce access barriers and support responsible behaviour.
- Management priorities can differ depending on staff roles, backgrounds and local pressures. For example:
 - Management professionals may focus more on visitor experience, nature conservation or revenue depending on their specific remit and professional background.
 - It is easier for sites with less funding pressures to prioritise nature conservation and inclusive visitation over revenue generation in management solutions.
- Care must be taken to ensure that potential management solutions do not create or exacerbate barriers to visitor access. For example:
 - Introducing parking charges could further disadvantage low income groups
 - Introducing too many permits, rules or restrictions could contribute social barriers by discouraging those less familiar or confident partaking in outdoor recreation.
- Perceptions that certain demographics cause most of the negative visitor impacts do not correlate with the lived experience of management professionals and could reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to existing access inequality and rural-urban division.
- Outdoor education, particularly around the 'Scottish Outdoor Access Code' should be embedded in all levels of education.
- Clearer interpretations of 'responsible access' would be beneficial, especially regarding relatively new and expanding activities such as commercial dog walking and overnight camper stays.
- Improving rural infrastructure including public transport links and affordable camping facilities could support positive behaviour change and alleviate pressures.
- Widespread cultural and behavioural change is required to increase responsible outdoor access without creating more barriers.

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