

Dartmoor Steering Group



Eighteenth Annual Report

of the
Dartmoor Steering Group
to the

Secretaries of State for Defence and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

December 2004

DARTMOOR STEERING GROUP
EIGHTEENTH ANNUAL REPORT
Covering the Period January 2003 to December 2004

Introduction and Chairmanship

1 The Dartmoor Steering Group (DSG) was established in 1978 following the recommendations of Baroness Sharp's Inquiry into the Military Use of Dartmoor in 1975. Its terms of reference, and current membership, together with those of the Dartmoor Working Party (DWP), which provides officer support to the DSG, are attached at Annex 1. As required by the terms of reference, an annual report is submitted jointly to the Secretaries of State for Defence, and for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The periodicity of the annual report has varied pragmatically in relation to the business discharged.

2 Since the last report was submitted, the DSG has met twice under the Chairmanship of Mr Jim Woollcombe CBE, the independent Chairman. The DSG continues to be fully supported by the DWP under the rotating Chairmanship of the Joint Secretaries.

3 The submission of this Report coincides with the retirement of Mr Jim Woollcombe after four years as the Chairman of the DSG. As co-signatories to this Report the Joint Secretaries wish to put on record their mutual appreciation of the manner in which the Chairman has discharged his duties. Mr Woollcombe's firm independence, good humour, efficiency and effectiveness at meetings has ensured that a sound, practical and friendly working relationship continues to prevail amongst all parties on the DSG.

Conservation

4 The DSG has formally endorsed the Environmental Management System (EMS) for the Dartmoor Training Area (DTA). The EMS represents a significant step forward in establishing the environmental protection effort required to maintain the high quality landscape, and natural and historic environment, in which the armed forces train on Dartmoor. The EMS Manual identifies current controls, remaining training impacts, and measures required to mitigate them, and provides for measurement, review and independent audit. The DSG will maintain an overview of the effectiveness of the EMS, and its co-ordination with the activities of other environmental agencies on Dartmoor.

5 Army Training Estate, South West (ATE SW) and Defence Estates (DE) have worked hard to ensure that military training impacts on commoners are minimised, and that positive support is provided wherever possible for the conservation management of the commons. Much of the land within the DTA is common land entered into Defra's Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme (ESA). The Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) has brokered an agreement amongst the statutory agencies working on Dartmoor of a vision for the future of Dartmoor Moorland, consistent with the objectives of the ESA, and the aspirations of ecologists, archaeologists and landscape interests. ATE SW and DE co-operation with this work has been productive and helpful. In practical terms assistance has been provided with fire control, vegetation management, environmental monitoring, and through sympathetic training area management including arrangements for the distribution of grazing stock.

6 In response to concerns about the visual appearance of Portaloos, a new design of a smaller portable unit is being developed which it is hoped will ameliorate the impacts of Portaloos in sensitive locations across the DTA.

7 On Ministry of Defence (MoD) freehold land at Willsworthy, the Willsworthy Conservation Group continues to engage voluntary specialist support, and to set exemplary standards for habitat management, species recording, and environmentally sound land management within the National Park.

Access and Recreation

8 In order to improve access to Cut Hill and Fur Tor agreement has been reached between MOD and DNPA, in consultation with English Nature to move the boundary between Okehampton and Merrivale Ranges. This change had been initially proposed by the Ramblers Association and, following its endorsement by the DSG, awaits completion of a military byelaw amendment before ground instigation.

9 A DTA website (dartmoor-ranges.co.uk) has been established, the main purpose of which is to inform the public of range firing times. Visits to the site have exceeded 22,000 and the site is a recognised success. The earlier issue of firing notices is under active consideration, to make available more advanced information for recreational users and event organisers.

10 A new Information Centre has been established within Okehampton Camp. It was used successfully throughout a weekend of Heritage Open Days in September 2004, which attracted over one thousand visitors to the camp. The Centre will be of educational value to both formal and informal groups of Camp visitors, as well as playing a role in environmental briefings for military units training on the ranges.

11 The DSG has maintained an overview of the implementation of the *Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000* on Dartmoor, and its implications for access on the ranges. As currently envisaged the depiction of land subject to closure under military byelaws on OS maps will not show these areas as open access land, even though they are available for access for much of the year (see appendix 2). The DSG expressed concern at the message this may send to walkers. Military involvement in the DNPA's communications strategy covering all aspects of the new rights within the National Park, will help to mitigate any negative perceptions arising. Further co-operation is assured on the need to harmonise byelaws across all common land, new access land, and access agreement land as the new CROW Act provisions come into force.

12 Ten Tors continues to take place each year, and remains a highly successful and popular challenge event for young people of all abilities. Over the last two years, discussion has taken place concerning the timing of the event in May, and its impact on the bird nesting and lambing seasons. The Duchy of Cornwall as the principal land owner has carried out a consultation with representative interests to gauge the case and pressure for change. Whilst the DSG envisages recommendation to further improve current environmental safeguards surrounding the organisation and conduct of the event, it is not expected that a case for radical change has been made, nor that such change would be practical for either organisers or participants.

Management and Training

13 The DNPA has renewed its consent for the use of land at Cramber Tor for dry military training for a period of ten years from 2003. A review in the light of monitoring outcomes, and any changed needs of the Armed Forces, is required in 2008. The consent is subject to conditions, largely concomitant with the principles and practice in the EMS Manual which applies to all land within the DTA.

14 The representative of Landmarc has been welcomed as an observer on the DSG. During the period of this Annual Report Landmarc Support Services has taken over a variety of estate management responsibilities under contract as a strategic partner with ATE SW. The DSG has been assured that conservation is high on Landmarc's priorities, and that Landmarc values local staff and people in the delivery of its contract. The DSG will monitor concerns expressed by DNPA that commercial pressures may diminish military contributions to national park purposes, including the socio-economic benefits of military training to local communities.

15 In July 2003 a major exercise involving BV206 low ground pressure tracked vehicles caused significant visual impact across Northern Dartmoor. Public concern was expressed at the visual impact of tracks created across open moorland, and the damage to moorland vegetation within the north Dartmoor SSSI. The DSG proved an able Forum for reviewing this damage, and ascertaining lessons learnt for the future. Ecologists from Defra, DNPA and English Nature, in conjunction with MoD, have monitored recovery over the ensuing months. Ecological damage has been found to be limited and recovering well, whilst the landscape impact of some of the track, and the potential for that to become permanent as access channels for stock and people, is a lingering concern. The situation will remain under review, but the DSG has accepted military assurance that the lessons from the exercise will help avoid any repeat of the impact experienced on this occasion.

16 Elsewhere the incidence of complaints has remained low, and related to the use of Portaloos on open moorland, litter, low flying aircraft and helicopters, and congestion in public parking spaces at Gutter Tor on south west Dartmoor, a key access point for military dry and adventurous training activities. The DSG endorsed the reported responses of the DWP to all of these complaints, which in relation to the extent of military activity on Dartmoor continue to reflect very favourably on the standards and discipline exercised by the Armed Forces.

17 The DSG annually endorses range utilisation statistics for Okehampton, Merrivale, and Willsworthy. These are reproduced for 2003 at Annex 2.

Public Relations

18 At the Chairman's instigation, the constitution and terms of reference of the DSG have been made more fully known in the public arena. Some wild allegations about military training within the National Park, emanating from local amenity organisations, were challenged and found to be unsubstantiated. The DSG has encouraged a number of other positive initiatives to enhance understanding amongst the public of the needs and nature of military training on Dartmoor.

19 As required by the *Freedom of Information Act*, a Publication Scheme for the DSG has been sent to, and approved by, the Public Information Commissioner.

Conclusion

20 All parties continue to regard the DSG as an essential and effective liaison body, well placed to reconcile competing interests, and to foster a positive agenda for the delivery of access and environmental benefits on Dartmoor without compromising the needs of military training.

21 In the view of the DSG over the period of this report the MOD has satisfactorily fulfilled its duty on Dartmoor to have regard for the purposes of National Parks as set out in S.62 of the *Environment Act 1995*.

Jim Woollcombe
Chairman

Lt Col James Porter
Comd ATE SW

Joint Secretaries

Dr N Atkinson
Chief Executive (NPO) DNPA