

Environment Aims, Introduction and Responsibilities

Aims:

- To provide guidance on good practice regarding minimising the environmental impact of orienteering.
- To provide a framework for event planning that will help to minimise rejection of events on environmental grounds, and reduce the time load of such applications.
- To encourage a greater level of involvement by orienteers in the areas in which we run.
- To establish an environmental audit system for orienteering events that will assist in establishing that orienteering is a low-impact sport, and that orienteers take the protection of the environment seriously.

Introduction:

Competing for the forest

Prior to man's intervention, these islands were largely covered in trees. That forest was the outcome of natural succession and evolution, and fostered a wide variety of life forms, each contributing to diverse ecosystems in which no single species had control. The situation is very different now: one species, ours, has wiped out almost all that 'ancient' forest, and impacts upon almost every bit of land and water from Lands End to John O'Groats and from Derry to the tip of Kent. Much of the land is covered with buildings, roads and farmland whereas we orienteers need open land, preferably forest, for our sport.

Good orienteering areas are not abundant in the UK, and where they exist are often under extreme pressure from competing human interests, including development (houses, roads, industry, leisure), exploitation (forestry, quarrying, oil, country sports) and leisure activities (tourism, bird watching, walking, climbing, orienteering, cycling, hang gliding, shooting, off-road motoring, motor cycling and so on).

Protecting the land through management

The realisation of the impact of our activities, and the will to conserve what is left, has resulted in legislation designed to change the balance between exploitation and conservation, acknowledging that human activities need to be limited in order to preserve the environment upon which they depend. This should be very much in orienteering's long-term interest, as one result is that natural areas have a greater degree of protection from development than ever before, and new forests are being planted rather than old ones destroyed. In addition, it is recognised that active outdoor sports and leisure activities are to the benefit of society as a whole, so the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CroW) and parallel legislation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, are intended to improve access to the countryside.

It is also part of the role of National Park Authorities, the Forest Commission and conservation bodies (such as Natural England) to foster and improve accessibility to such areas. Achieving a balance between access on the one hand, and conservation of the natural resources on the other, requires management, and an enhanced degree of control. The most sensitive environmental areas can be classed, simultaneously, as:

- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's, or ASSI's in Northern Ireland),
- National Nature Reserves (also Local Nature Reserves)
- Special Areas of Conservation (SAC, an EU designation covering habitats)
- Special Protection Areas (SPA, an EU designation covering birds).

Some of these areas are also excellent for orienteering and have been used for events over many years, however, their site designation can restrict our opportunities, but there are good reasons for such protection. For instance, many of the lowland heaths are prime candidates for sand and gravel extraction or property development, and prior to the 1981 Environment Act would have been rapidly encroached upon notwithstanding their unique nature.

In addition, there are areas that are owned or managed by bodies like the Wildlife Trusts, or the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Woodland Trust and others. These may not have statutory protection, but where the organisation is focused on conservation of the natural resource, access will inevitably take second place.

The outcome for orienteers is that we have little choice but to take a positive view of the new 'managed' regime, and make the best of it, realising that we are only one of many activities wanting to use the same space. Inevitably, that will entail more forward planning and research into areas to be used for orienteering, and a willingness to work with other interested parties in optimising opportunities for pursuing our sport. However, the partnerships that can come out of this are capable of enriching all of our lives whilst conserving the best of our countryside and wildlife.

Rights and responsibilities:

As all orienteering events are organised activities, we must always apply for permission to the relevant bodies or owners of land for access. Where there are environmental concerns, such as a protected area, a rare habitat or species, or fragile land, the land owner has a responsibility for conservation, and if a proposed 'operation' (such as an orienteering event) could cause damage, he or she must also approach the relevant conservation bodies concerning its advisability.

In the case of SSSI's, Natural England has a LEGAL DUTY to protect the area from damage and criminal prosecution can result when an activity has not been sanctioned. However, where permission to run an orienteering event is sought early, and those applying are reasonably well-informed, a way can usually be found to go ahead with events, albeit with some modifications.

We may regard orienteering as a low-impact sport, but that may not be the view of non-orienteers who's cooperation we will only enlist by being sympathetic to their concerns and interests. We may feel that it is our right to orienteer, but is it not an equivalent right of others to be able to sit quietly and observe any wildlife, or just enjoy the peace, or alternatively, to run four-wheel drive vehicle events in the same area?

If we believe that we are far less damaging than the latter, and will not jeopardise the former, then **we have to play our full part** in order to persuade others that it is, in fact, the case. These guidelines are intended to act as a framework to building that high level of credibility.