

SECOND ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DARTMOOR STEERING GROUP

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The first annual report was submitted to the Secretaries of State for Defence and for the Environment in September 1979 and covered the first 4 meetings of the Group. Since then we have held 3 meetings: the fifth at County Hall, Exeter on 18 September 1979; the sixth at HQ Cdo Forces RM, Plymouth on 4 December 1979; and the seventh at County Hall, Exeter on 24 March 1980. A statement has been issued to the Press after each meeting.

2. Our supporting Working Party have held 4 meetings and we are grateful to them for their continued assistance. The GOC SWDIST provided the Chairman for the first two years until July 1980 when, in accordance with their constitution, the Dartmoor National Park Officer took over as Chairman.

II. PUBLIC ACCESS

3. We are unable to report any further increases in public access during this period.

4. The Working Party have considered the possibility of allowing access to the Tavy Cleave when the existing small arms ranges on Willsworthy are in use. However, the military state that for safety reasons this is not possible whilst activities on these ranges remain as they are. The National Park have expressed concern that the fairly regular use of the ranges at weekends prohibits access to the Tavy Cleave at the times when the public most wish to go there. These ranges are open to the public for the whole of August, for all but one weekend each month, for all Public Holidays and many other days when firing is not programmed.

The future is in part dependent on the outstanding question of the electric ranges which the military need for their training. We expect that this is a matter which we will have to consider in the coming year.

5. The measures to increase visual surveillance which were being introduced to improve public safety and were mentioned in our last report have, with two exceptions, now been put into effect. The first exception is the provision of a lookout post on the Willsworthy Ranges which it has been agreed should await any reorganisation of the ranges. The second concerns the construction of a lookout post on Cut Hill about which the National Park Committee have maintained an objection; they believe that it would be better to conserve the landscape than increase access and accept that this would mean that on occasions the military would have to continue to close both Okehampton and Merrivale ranges when either one was being used. We have been informed that the MOD accept this position for the time being although it involves them in extra expense.

6. We have been informed that the National Park, having consulted all interested parties, will be taking action to curtail egress by civilian cars from the Ring Road to Hangingstone Hill.

III. ARTILLERY AND MORTAR FIRING

7. The artillery and mortar firing remains a matter of prime concern to the National Park; the curtailment of this reduces the potential for damage to ancient monuments, wildlife and the ecology of the Moor and this is of value to them even though access to the public may still have to be prohibited because of

small arms firing. The military have reminded us that, at our first meeting, they gave an assurance "that stringent conditions will be applied to ensure that the level of firing will be kept to the minimum necessary to meet the essential operational training requirements of the Commando Forces and other Units." In 1979, instead of using the ranges for the anticipated 72 days artillery and mortar firing, the Services in fact used them for only 16 days. We are informed that this under-usage was due not only to the fact that troops normally based in the SW were deployed to Northern Ireland, Belize, Hong Kong and Rhodesia but also to firing being transferred elsewhere whenever possible. The National Park pressed for all firing to be transferred elsewhere - at least as long as the Northern Ireland situation continues. The MOD representatives could not agree to this but they confirmed again the undertaking given at our first meeting. Whilst we welcome the reduction that has occurred in 1979, we recognise that this cannot be regarded as a regular benefit although we are informed by the military that the usage figures for 1980 are expected to be similar.

We are agreed that this matter will be kept under regular review and the National Park and Countryside Commission have made it clear that this is a matter to which they will wish to return.

IV. CONSERVATION

8. We are informed that a report on high moorland vegetation and breeding bird populations has been produced by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds for the National Park Authority and that a High Moorland Conservation group of scientists has met on three occasions but has not yet asked managers to join it as envisaged in Paragraph 10 of our last report.

9. As regards the survey of archaeological sites, we understand that there are not many sites to be added to the present scheduled ones, and that work on this is proceeding and should be completed by the end of the year. Consideration will then be given to the desirability of marking the archaeological sites.

10. As a result of the proposed move to an area around Cramber Tor for dry training (Paragraph 11 below refers), the military, at the request of the National Park, have agreed to give up digging rights in Gutter Tor and Legistor areas of Ringmoor North, thus saving two areas of known archaeological remains.

V. TRANSFER OF MILITARY TRAINING - CRAMBER TOR

11. The last but one paragraph of the White Paper stated "the Ministry of Defence will immediately begin discussions with all concerned on the question of transfer of training from the National Trust land at Ringmoor to another part of the National Park". The Ministry of Defence favoured Cramber Tor; the National Park and the Countryside Commission immediately indicated strong objections to this area. Lady Sharp contemplated a search to find the least damaging alternative and the National Park said that this must be undertaken and asked that the National Trust should be a party to the discussions.

We asked the Working Party to examine possible sites, noting that the White Paper envisaged that these would be in "another part of the National Park".

12. We invited the National Trust to one of our meetings when it was made clear that the chances of their being prepared to allow the resumption of training on Ringmoor were very slim; the Countryside Commission subsequently pursued this with the National Trust who finally confirmed this view.

13. The Working Party subsequently reported to us on a number of sites but they concluded that the least damaging alternative to Ringmoor was an area on Cramber Tor. Attention then turned to the safeguards which should be adopted to minimise the effect of training. We recognised throughout the negotiations that there was an urgent need to find a replacement for Ringmoor as the Services had been without as extensive dry training facilities close to Plymouth since their use of the National Trust land on Ringmoor for the full range of dry training had ceased in December 1976; this was when the Leases from the National Trust ended and were not renewed on the old basis.

14. After lengthy negotiations a compromise proposal to use an area around Cramber Tor under closely specified conditions for a trial period of two years proved acceptable to both the Ministry of Defence and the Dartmoor National Park Authority. The proposal has not been accepted by the Countryside Commission but the Circular 7/77 consultation was not objected to by the National Park Authority. The landowners are agreeable to the use of the land but we understand legal difficulties have delayed the completion of licences to train.

VI. MILITARY STRUCTURES

15. We have discussed whether the remains of the Rippon Tor rifle range could be removed. We were informed by the Ministry of Defence that their use of this range ceased in 1977, when the lease expired, and that negotiations had taken place between them and the landowners but that agreement could not be reached on the reinstatement of the land under the terms of the lease. We were also informed that reinstatement would be costly and that the owner was against this being done because he did not see how such expenditure from public funds could be justified and that he had accepted the land in its current state. We accepted that the Ministry of Defence cannot act without the permission of the owner and that in the circumstances there is nothing they or our Group can do.

16. We have been informed that certain military structures, such as disused lookout huts and observation posts on the Okehampton Ranges, have already been removed and that action is in hand to remove others.

VII. CRITICISM OF THE STEERING GROUP

17. During the past year, conservation and other bodies have criticised us upon the grounds that we are ineffective and that we meet in private and these bodies do not know what we are doing. We recognise that these bodies have a genuine interest and concern in what is being achieved or done to protect the National Park; part of the answer is that such bodies are often not prepared to accept the conclusions in the White Paper. We said in our last Annual Report that "those who expect major reductions in military training as a result of our work are likely to be disappointed. Progress should instead be sought in the cumulative effect of a wide variety of minor improvements ..." This is still our view.

18. Nevertheless, since we first met, a number of developments have taken place which, when viewed from the standpoint of the conservation bodies, can be seen as a consolidation of or extension of the military presence on Dartmoor. The main examples are:

Acceptance of military training on Cramber Tor (in fact, a direct result of the White Paper).

The construction in very prominent places of lookout posts seen as most unwelcome intrusions (in fact, a direct consequence of safety requirements).

Acceptance of the construction of the small training compound and obstacle course in Okehampton Camp.

These developments were all processed by our consultative machinery.

19. Equally if viewed from the other side events could be interpreted as the National Park improving its position. Some examples are:

Lengthy discussions on the Services' proposals for the dry training area on Cramber Tor and the severe restrictions imposed on them.

Compromises on the detailed siting of lookout posts and acceptance by the Services of the National Park's objections to the lookout posts on Cut Hill despite the extra expense.

Acceptance by the Services of National Park objections to both siting and detailed construction of the small training compound at Okehampton.

Restrictions imposed by the Services to minimise artillery and mortar firing.

20. We shall review our method of working during the course of the coming year. As to holding our meetings in private, we consider that this is preferable because it encourages constructive discussion in place of sterile debate.

21. Our main handicap is that the scope for change whether from the Military or the National Park's standpoint within the limits of the White Paper is not in some major respects as great as some would wish to believe.

Peter Howard

Chairman

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Secretaries