

Mountain biking on the Forest

A review of issues and opinions

Summary

This paper analyses the issues surrounding mountain biking on the Forest, an activity currently restricted to statutory bridleways but which the Board has undertaken to review in the light of representation from local bikers. While the impact of biking on the Forest from the conservation viewpoint may, at best, be no worse than walking and riding (the main forms of recreation), it would nonetheless be an additional factor. Financially, biking could provide a new income stream to the Board if a workable, enforceable permit system can be found. The greatest area of contention concerns the perceived impact of bikers, and of large numbers of them, on the Forest's special character as a wilderness for quiet and safe recreation. The paper concludes with a recommendation that the ban on biking be continued.

Introduction and recent chronology

Since the introduction of bye-laws in 1975 under the 1974 Ashdown Forest Act, biking on the Forest (or specifically the use of "any wheeled vehicle" [bye-law 2]) has been prohibited although the Board has the power to authorise it. The Board upheld the prohibition in 2005. The only biking access is on the ca 3.5 km of statutory bridleways, the main stretches of which connect the A26 with Kings Standing and the Beaconsfield Road, Chelwood Gate, with the A22.

During stakeholder consultation in 2007, the issue of biking on the Forest was raised at the meeting in Crowborough and in 2008 biking reappeared on the Board's agenda as follows.

Board meeting, 10 March 2008: "It was agreed that a paper be drafted consisting of previous Board discussions on mountain biking to be presented and discussed at both Conservation and RPA Committee meetings at some time in the not too distant future."

Conservation Committee meeting, 31 March 2008: "It was agreed that there was no reason for the Conservation Committee to change its current position on mountain biking on the Forest as there was concern that rather than substituting a pressure it would be an additional one."

RPA Committee meeting, 14 April 2008: "it was agreed to adhere to the present policy whereby mountain biking is not permitted on the Forest."

Board meeting, 9 June 2008: "The Clerk also reported that the ban on mountain biking had been upheld after discussions at both the RPA and Conservation Committee (minute 7.1/08) and that a member of the mountain biking community would be making a presentation to the next RPA meeting."

RPA Committee meeting, 14 July 2008: this presentation took place. No decision was taken but the minutes record that the Chairman said that "that the Standing Orders needed to be checked to find out when the issue could be revisited."

RPA Committee meeting, 20 October 2008: "The Chairman reported that he, and the Clerk, had been in correspondence with Duncan Thomson asking for more information regarding the impact of mountain bikes on the Forest. He went on to say that the Committee had undertaken to do further research on the issue and to listen and be responsive."

16 December 2008: three bikers did a further presentation to the RPA Chairman, the Clerk and the Conservation Officer.

On 20 July 2008 local bikers, members of the Ashdown Cycling Campaign, organised The Big Push (see http://www.ashdowncc.org/Images/Big_push/Big_push.jpg) at Kings Standing to promote the

opening of the Forest to biking. Some 50 people were present, not all of whom had bikes. During the latter part of 2008 local parish councils began to submit their views and feedback was also received as a result of a feature in the autumn/winter edition of *Asbdown Forest Life*.

Issues

Biking falls within the remits of all three Board committees. Broadly speaking the issues under each are as follows:

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|----|--------------|--|
| A) | Conservation | i) impact on the ground
ii) impact on vegetation
iii) impact on fauna, especially birds |
| B) | FGP | i) new income
ii) new expenditure |
| C) | RPA | i) appropriateness on the Forest
ii) impact on other Forest users
iii) biking routes
iv) biker numbers and control
v) biker 'behaviour'
vi) the views of others |

These issues are considered now in turn.

A) i) impact on the ground

Comparative studies on impact (largely from North America and Australia) are summarised on the website of the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA; www.imba.com/resources/science/impact). They are few and focused on formal trails and tracks. They generally agree that, among horses, bikes and walkers, the first has the greatest impact and that "no scientific studies show that mountain bikers cause more wear to trails than other users".

Whatever their actual impact, which is likely to be site-specific and number-dependant, bikes would nonetheless provide an additional load to that of current users of the Forest.

It should be noted that a key difference of the Forest from the above study sites (and from UK sites such as the New Forest, Bedgebury, and Coed y Brenin) is that its rides are informal, unsurfaced and managed only by mowing and through repairs to impacts caused by horses, machinery and/or heavy rain.

A) ii) impact on vegetation

The IMBA website states that "No scientific studies indicate that bicycling causes more degradation of plants than hiking". One study quoted (Thurston and Reader 2001), however, concluded (*inter alia*) that "impacts on vegetation and soil increased with biking and hiking activity". **In short, biking would increase impact by its very existence; that its effect may be greater or lesser than that of walking (hiking) is immaterial.**

Again, the distinctiveness of Forest rides must be highlighted: on the whole they are grass- or heather-covered, in contrast to what is stated on the IMBA website that "Trails are places primarily devoid of vegetation".

A) iii) impact on fauna

In a summary of the IMBA website studies, focusing on disturbance to large mammals (rather than the birds that are likely to be of greatest concern on the Forest), it is concluded that “this group of studies at least suggests that the impacts of bicycling on wildlife are generally similar to the effects of hiking.”

Overall it seems reasonable to agree with the IMBA assessment that “mountain biking ... does impact the environment” but that it is “no more damaging than other forms of recreation, including hiking”.

It is equally reasonable to assume, therefore, that any biking on the Forest would still be an incremental impact. A key point made by Vandeman (2004; <http://home.pacbell.net/mjvande/scb7>), in a literature review that covered (and was critical of) the IMBA summary above, is that bikers tend to travel further than walkers (hikers); on Dorset heaths the difference is twofold (http://www.keystone-group.co.uk/heathlands/presentations/Durwyn_Lilley_Footprint_Ecology.pdf). **Even if, therefore, bikes caused no more impact per mile (as concluded by the IMBA studies), their overall impact must be greater by virtue of greater distances travelled. It would also mean greater intrusion into remoter parts of the Forest that are furthest from car parks.**

There do not appear to be any UK studies on any of the above three impacts, let alone of any on heaths.

B) i) new income

Were bikers to be licenced, their annual payment fee could be a new source of revenue for the Forest: e.g. 100 bikers @, say, £25.00/year would produce £2,500. NB. The annual fee for riding is £88.00.

B ii) new expenditure

Biking would incur costs for the Forest in office time (e.g. producing and issuing the licences) and in ride management and licence checking (policing) in the field by Rangers.

The balance sheet is difficult to gauge: clearly the Board has a strong interest in new income streams but the scale of added expenditure is unknown. Also unknown is whether bikers would actually purchase a licence. The only comparative experience on the Forest is with local horse riders, a certain proportion of whom still ride without a permit. Even if bikers are no ‘worse’ than local riders who know full well that they need a permit yet continue to ride without one, such behaviour does not bode well for a biking community that could come from much further afield and neither knows the local rules nor has an interest in the Forest. **In short, the risk of any licencing system is that it might not work because of the ease of its abuse. In contrast to horses that can relatively easily be tracked back to a local stable or horsebox (whose registration number can then be taken), mountain bikes can go to and from more or less anywhere.**

C) i) appropriateness on the Forest

Whether biking is an appropriate activity on the Forest is clearly, in part, a subjective matter but no less important as such than the results of the (ostensibly objective) scientific studies referred to above.

Bikers maintain that the ban on biking is an historical consequence, namely that at the time of the 1974 Act it did simply did not exist as an activity in the UK. Riding on the other hand did and so came to be authorised to those with a written permit. Bikers maintain that bikes are no more intrusive on the countryside than horses, indeed are less so.

Others maintain that bikes are intrusive and inappropriate as machines (albeit quiet ones) in a countryside setting and that they are a threat to the ambiance of ‘naturalness’ and ‘the wild’ that they feel are the Forest’s most attractive features. Another attractive feature mentioned about the Forest is the very fact that it is bike-free, unlike for example another gem of the Sussex landscape, the South Downs.

The appropriateness of biking on the Forest is, for all its intangible subjectivity, possibly the most difficult issue.

C) ii) impact on other Forest users

Between user groups sharing any resource there is bound to be a potential for conflict. So it is on the Forest where there is a constant, but generally low level, stream of accounts of riders, walkers and dog walkers clashing with each other, one such incident last year even leading to a court case. As a further user group bikers would also likely become involved. Key to the potential for conflict is discussed in C v) below.

Bikers maintain that on a nearby biking route, the Forest Way, there is no conflict with other users. Another view is that walkers leave the Forest Way, to go onto adjacent paths, precisely to avoid the number of bikers. Again, see C v) below.

C) iii) biking routes

The most used bridleway is that between the A26 and Kings Standing but data on numbers are not available.

Bikers have proposed a variety of options for opening up the Forest: a) a circular route that builds on the current bridleways; b) the designation of more bridleways (thus negating the need for policing); or c) selecting a certain number of routes whose surface might be particularly suitable. They maintain that bikers would not seek to go off-path, e.g. through heath.

Problems with these options are (respectively): a) one route is likely to satisfy very few bikers; b) the Board has no power to designate bridleways and anyway such designation would open up more of the Forest to horse riders with the attendant risk of loss of permit revenue; and c) there would be great temptation to try other routes and the scheme would be impossible to police. **It is possible that the introduction of any of these options would inevitably lead in time to a demand for yet more access.**

C iv) biker numbers and control

For obvious reasons, there are no data on the number of bikers on the Forest (and none was collected in visitor surveys in 2004 and 2009) although a continuous background level is reported, mainly round St Johns and Forest Row (including over the golf courses). Occasional reports may come from anywhere on the Forest, such as a group of 20 on either side of the A275 in December 2008, or of night-time bikers visible through their very bright lights. A group of four bikers was seen several times in the Wych Cross area on Wednesday evenings from April – June 2008 (admission of guilt could be seen on <http://www.bikeradar.com/mtb/forums/viewtopic> until at least 26 May 2008).

On Dorset and Thames Basin heaths, biking comprises 2 and 6%, respectively, of the purpose of visits; in the New Forest the figure is also 6% (http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/nf_report_revised_final_version.pdf). Since the 2008 visitor survey estimated at least 1.35 million visitors/year to the Forest (and it was possibly a large underestimate), proportional numbers of bikers to the Forest would equate to 13,500 – 40,500 biking visits/year.

How many bikers would in fact visit the Forest is unknown, bikers maintaining, but without evidence, that large numbers would not be a problem, i.e. would not occur. The fact that there is a biking ban is presumably widely understood and one reason why the level of (illicit) biking is what it is now. The greatest concern is the extent to which the removal of the ban would usher in a flood of bikers onto the Forest, irrespective of whether a licensing system is introduced. Policing would become impossible, whatever the route options introduced (see C iv) above), since physical access to the Forest would be easy - via any road, any car park, any track or path, and from any distance, in stark contrast to the case for horse riders.

Bikers maintain that biking could be self-policing, drawing on examples from the Forest of Dean and Swinley Forest (Bracknell) although the websites of these locations make no mention of this. They also, however, give no indication as to how self-policing could or would work on the Forest. However successfully Forest staff maintain a 'lid' on biking, it is at least backed by the current ban. **It is currently very difficult to see how any control on numbers could be exerted if the ban on biking was removed.**

C v) biker 'behaviour'

The bikers keen to open the Forest maintain that what they want is 'recreational cycling', i.e. they are not speeding thrill-seekers hurtling downhill and taking flight as they go. They seek not mountains but gentle gradients and are keen to involve their children.

Experience of staff and the public is that those biking on the Forest hitherto are not 'recreational cyclists', in other words the 'demand' is for other types of biking. By Priory Road, Cackle Street, Tompsetts Bank, St Johns and Chelwood Vachery, for example, bikers (only teenagers have been seen so far) have built 'jumps and bumps' which have been removed by staff. Those bikers seen or stopped elsewhere on the Forest by staff are men in their 20s, 30s and 40s. Their reaction to being stopped is perhaps typical of people who have been 'caught': always defensive, sometimes abusive, like horse riders found without permits. If biking was permitted, such behaviour might be expected to alter.

Even the website of Crowborough Mountain Bikers (<http://www.daysofspeed.com/journal.htm>), who count these bikers among their members, seems to call into question the very nature they claim to have. It records the following for 1 February 2009: "The best downhill of the day being the bridleway between Kings Standing and the A26, this is the first time in ages that there was no mud so you could *blast* down without the concern of the front wheel sinking in." [my italics.] This suggests speed, not sedate recreation.

It is the speed of bikers that features in people's adverse reactions to them on sites such as the South Downs and Forest Way: other users may, in short, be afraid or angered. **However much speed may be denied as a goal for biking on the Forest, no evidence has been found from elsewhere that suggests it will not occur.**

C) vi) views of others (individuals)

Views have been expressed both for and against biking on the Forest. To a large extent they reflect the issues that have been discussed above but they are given here for completeness.

Below is a list of views by protagonists in support of the case:

- their liking for the countryside, coupled with frustration that they cannot enjoy the Forest;
- the unavailability of the largest local area (i.e. the Forest) for biking, in contrast to areas managed by other large landowners (e.g. Forestry Commission);
- their sense of responsibility (demographically represented by middle class males in their 40s);
- they have a share in the Forest as local tax payers;
- the Forest is underutilized and its tracks are an underused resource;

- the development of economic and business opportunities;
- government policies extolling health benefits of biking for transport and recreation;
- promotion of cycling by ESCC and WDC;
- the paucity of rideable bridleways in East Sussex, and especially in the local area due to excessive path damage;
- increasing the number of designated bridleways on the Forest would remove the need for policing and licencing and give walkers the option to avoid bikers;
- biking routes could be selected that are least used by walkers, have resilient surfaces and avoid sensitive areas;
- cycling erosion is no worse than that of foot or hoof;
- there is no conflict on local bridleway such as the Forest Way and Cuckoo Trail;
- routes could be maintained with the help of bikers;
- 'hard core' bikers want mountains, not gentle slopes as on the Forest;
- a safe passage to avoid locally dangerous roads, including for children;
- the greater popularity of off-road cycling than of horse riding;
- lack of evidence of damage (erosion) to paths and forest 'ecology', and the difficulty of biking off-path and into e.g. heather;
- love to be able to cycle responsibly around Forest bridleways, doing minimal damage to paths and with scope for safe travel for children;
- biking is a quiet and peaceful activity, less intimidating and visible than a large horse;
- biking would encourage more people to use cycles rather than cars for local journeys;
- the permit system used for riding should be applied to biking;
- cycling could be easily introduced in a controlled way;
- the ban discriminates against those disabled people for whom cycling is possible, but walking not;
- responsible use of bicycles needs present no threat;
- everyone should have the pleasure of experiencing this beautiful place as long as they behave without prejudice to others;
- the control of numbers would be limited through a licencing system and policing could be in conjunction with local bikers;
- in favour of the effort being managed to the benefit of the widest possible audience;
- jump building would not occur since this is done by a community of bikers different from that wanting to use the Forest.

ii) Below is a list of the reasons given by antagonists of the case, in the same subject order as those of the protagonists above:

- creating more bridleways would result in droves of bikers coming to the Forest;
- the current bridleways are scarcely used by bikers;
- there are already plenty of options in this area for cyclists;
- an increasingly special feature of the Forest is its inaccessibility for biking, in contrast to e.g. Bewl Water where walkers are harassed by bikers who are often aggressive;
- the idea that bikers want a gentle 'pootle' across the Forest is disingenuous – they want speed and terrain;
- the lack of biking means that Forest walks are relaxing and peaceful;
- biking would spoil the Forest's tranquillity;
- the tranquillity of the Ashdown Forest would be spoilt forever as a haven for wildlife and a place of quiet enjoyment for walkers with or without their dogs;
- biking would impair the pleasure and safety of Forest users, especially elderly ones;

- bikes would ruin the Forest's character as a place of outstanding natural beauty and rural character;
- 'opening' of the Forest suggests that access for biking is more important than the preservation of the landscape, protection of wildlife and the desire to walk quietly without danger;
- valuable resources would be diverted from the management of the Forest, into marking out, and policing the routes and perhaps rescuing those in trouble;
- trial routes are easy to grant but difficult to take away without a fight;
- fear of bikers at speed face to face with small children and family dog – as happens at Leith Hill, Friston Forest and in the hills round Woldingham;
- biking would spoil the character of the place;
- the Forest is one of the few natural habitats for those at one with nature; please stop and think before taking that away;
- the whole of the Forest is a sensitive area and encouraging bikes to go to sites less used by walkers, and therefore less disturbed, is contrary to the spirit of conservation;
- while there would be cyclists who would respect the rights of walkers, how would control be levied on those who are unruly?;
- the Forest is a tranquil haven that would be spoiled by thousands of off-road cyclists;
- allowing mountain biking on the Forest would be another nail in its coffin, the Forest would be overrun and it would be impossible to reconcile the opposing needs of walkers and riders with those of mountain bikers;
- biking would be detrimental to other users' peaceful enjoyment and hazardous to walkers, riders and runners alike;
- soil of Forest paths is not suitable for bikes;
- there is intuitive evidence that a linear track encourages erosion by channelling water;
- it is likely that invertebrates have adapted to micro-habitats created by walking or standing animals but not necessarily the linear features created by bikes;
- even if impact of bike erosion is low, the distances covered make the impact significant;
- any biking impact would be cumulative to that of other users;
- mountain biking under some form of restriction would be as difficult to enforce as walking dogs on a lead or to heel;
- lack of evidence that biking could in practice be controlled;
- vast numbers of mountain bikers all over the Forest can only be damaging from a conservation standpoint;
- jump building already occurs.

C) vi) views of others (organisations)

Buxted Parish Council

"We discussed this issue at the December Parish Council meeting and this is what was said.

We need to understand the issues and learn from what others have done in similar type/terrain – e.g. the South Downs, Friston Forest, AbbotsWood and numerous others further a field – e.g. the Lake District. Will you do a study to find out the possible impacts, the pros and cons, as well as ways in which introducing bikes could be managed, if this decision were to be taken, to mitigate against concerns/potential damage to the forest?

With regard to the concern that 'big groups' of bikers may cause concern and angst amongst walkers and others, guidelines (that already exist) should be clear for forest bikers in the dos and don't of off-road biking. Clubs by and large are or at least should be responsible, as we would hope horse riders and dog walkers are on the forest now. There will always be a minority of people and groups who spoil things for everyone else but this is no reason to say don't introduce bikes to the Forest. In this

respect, can you do a risk analysis based on others experiences as in the above point about doing an impact study?

Perhaps dedicate a certain part of the Forest to biking although this might lead to extensive wear and tear and the need to move areas of use from time to time – as is already the case with horses. What would the costs be and would this be feasible financially and re. other resources needed to do this work?

Bike riders could pay a yearly fee for a badge as horse riders do, to help cover costs – price commensurate with the perceived damage they are likely to cause or with need for monitoring/management/repair resources – see need for risk assessment above.”

Crowborough Town Council

“Crowborough Town Council considered this issue at its last meeting and it was generally felt that it was a good idea to set aside an area for cycles to use the Ashdown Forest.

During the discussion it was noted that there are currently bridleways but that horse-riders have to have a permit but felt this would probably not be appropriate for cyclists. However, it was felt by ensuring only part of the Forest is available for cyclists then it would be easier to monitor the situation and then review it after a period of time.”

Danehill Parish Council

“At its meeting on 30th October 2008 the Danehill Parish Council stated it was not in favour of mountain bikes being ridden in the Forest.”

Forest Row Parish Council

“The following were the responses from those councillors that replied: 6 against, 2 in favour, 2 in favour but with controls.”

Hartfield Parish Council

“The proposal was made that provision should be made for biking on the forest and a vote was taken. Five voted for. Six voted against (two absent Councillors had, prior to the meeting, indicated that they would be against the proposal). The majority were therefore against the proposal.

Arguments in favour:

- The Ashdown Forest is for everybody to enjoy, including cyclists.
- Promoting healthy lifestyle.
- Could be on designated routes which could be well marked with the correct byelaws
- Could be allowed for a trial period.
- Forest is large enough for people to find peace and quite within a short distance even when it is crowded.
- An area could be designated for a certain period of time i.e. weekend.
- Cyclists would not necessarily upset anyone any more than dogs/horses.

Arguments against:

- Felt it would attract cyclists from everywhere through advertisements in cycling magazines and therefore increase use of cars, thereby increasing carbon footprint.
- Increase of tourists, and the use of cars.
- Tranquility would be spoilt.
- Huge facility for cyclists at Deers Leap Park, costing only £2 per day. This includes 240 acres of dedicated mountain bike tracks for all abilities.
- If trial period/designated routes were granted, would be hard to remove.

- Once bikers start using the forest they will keep returning.
- Designated areas would be hard to police and those who would go off route could cause distress.
- Already a problem, horseriders with out permits are not policed.
- Some bikers are abusive towards walkers with dogs and horse riders along Forest Way as they believe it is their right and others shouldn't be there.
- Cyclists would probably visit forest during the weekends when there are many families with small children and elderly people there.
- Forest Way is now a cycle path and is no longer a good route for walkers, particularly during summer and school holidays.
- Increase in discarded rubbish.
- Disruption to birds and animals.
- Incompatible with Conservators conservation aims.
- There are already two statutory bridleways on the Forest.”

West Hoathly Parish Council

“We discussed this at our December Parish Council meeting. There was no collective views on this.”

Withyham Parish Council

“Withyham Parish Council discussed the question of the introduction of mountain biking on Ashdown Forest at their last meeting and have asked me to convey their following comments:

Whilst the council appreciates the value of biking as a healthy activity and would normally support its promotion, it is felt that the introduction of biking on Ashdown Forest other than on the existing public bridleways would be detrimental to the character of this unique environment in terms of the effect on the flora and fauna. It is also felt that existing users of the Forest ie walkers and horse riders would not welcome the introduction of mountain bikes. In other areas such as Broadwater Warren and on the Forest Way cyclists have generated complaints from walkers and riders with whom they do not appear compatible.

The council was not certain whether it was intended to provide linear routes or mountain biking "areas" for recreational use in which case these designated areas would need to be monitored and a degree of control exercised to prevent undue erosion etc.”

Conclusions

The duties of the Conservators under the 1974 Act to protect the Forest and manage it as an amenity require a balanced approach and, ultimately, an answer to the question: what level of recreational impact can the Forest sustain without compromising the very qualities and assets that make it so special? While, on the one hand, these may be relatively easy to quantify (e.g. the amount of heathland, the numbers of Dartford warblers) or to qualify (e.g. the liking for the Forest's open spaces), measuring how they are affected by numbers and types of visitors is very difficult.

In the case of biking, science does not provide any answer. Firstly, very few studies have been done on physical impacts on ground and vegetation or in terms of disturbance on wildlife. Those studies that have taken place are overseas (involving the use of formal trails) and conclude, often in comparison with other recreational uses, that biking impact simply occurs to some extent or other. Measuring the exact, but nonetheless always additional, impact of biking on the Forest is impossible to do without extensive research that would be costly and unaffordable to the Conservators.

If objective criteria enable no conclusion beyond biking impact being incremental to that of other users, what about subjective ones? Responses to the possibility of biking on the Forest have been emotive and centre on its impact on the character of the Forest: it would be another ‘nail in the

coffin' or contributor to its 'death by a thousand cuts'. The very integrity of the Forest, it is suggested, comes under threat. On the Malvern Hills mountain bikes elicit the second highest complaint after dog mess (Ian Rowat, Director; pers. comm., 06/11/08).

Bikers maintain that bikes are neither very damaging nor more intrusive than horses. On Ashdown they see no issue with the possible numbers of bikers coming to the Forest, nor with policing them, the routes they take and the licences they acquire. Forest staff in particular disagree profoundly. Bikers have provided no convincing answer to control. Some do not appear to recognise that the Forest is a very different place to Forestry Commission forests that host many biking trails and derive considerable income from them.

If bikers question why biking should not be allowed on the Forest, it is equally fair to ask why it should be. There are alternative venues locally: formal trails such as the Forest Way, the more challenging terrain of Deers Leap, racing in events at Pippingford and the bridleway network of the South Downs. It could therefore be argued that biking is well catered for and that the Conservators should focus efforts on providing the public with the unique recreational 'selling point' of the Forest in the South East, namely its free, safe, quiet access on foot over 10 square miles of protected countryside. As a number of authors point out for other sites, bikers are not banned on the Forest, merely biking. If bikers promote the health of benefits of biking, or biking as a means of enjoying the natural world and in safety, then the Conservators can equally do so for walking.

The pros and cons of allowing biking on the Forest require some detailed thinking and good local knowledge. Those aficionados who have been liaising with the Conservators over a number of years, providing information, making presentations, and even advising fellow bikers to keep off the Forest (see <http://www.ashdowncc.org/riding.html> - "NOT TO RIDE ON ASHDOWN FOREST FOR THE UNFORSEABLE [SIC] FUTURE"), have been convincing, thoughtful, passionate and appreciative of the Forest although the attempt to garner wider, national support for their cause through use of the web (e.g. <http://en-gb.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=12043864543&topic=4072> – this gives links to other websites, including a petition) may be counter-productive through involving people who do not know the Forest and its distinctive qualities. If their predictions about biking on the Forest were right, and if others' anecdotal descriptions of biking on other areas (and the Forest) were wrong, then a way forward might be some form of a trial period involving a licencing system. It seems entirely reasonable that the onus of effort to demonstrate that biking is a) not damaging, b) controllable in terms of numbers and c) is police-able in terms of behaviour should rest on those who propose it.

Recommendation

Given therefore

- the current level and importance of recreation on the Forest;
- its national and international significance for wildlife (the highest value in Europe);
- the uncertainties of the additional impact of biking and the extreme difficulty of control;
- the perceived negative affect of biking on the character of the Forest;
- the existing availability of suitable sites elsewhere and possibly of landowners seeking alternative sources of revenue; and
- a precautionary approach that focuses the Conservators on their duties to balance amenity and conservation

It is recommended that biking continue to be disallowed on the Forest.