

Managing dogs in the wood

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THE KENNEL CLUB



Forestry Commission
England

At Crufts dog show in March 2005, the Forestry Commission signed a concordat with the Kennel Club, committing each organisation to work together to improve people's health and well-being through dog ownership, whilst respecting the forest environment and the needs of other users.

As one of the most visible and frequent, year-round activities in the natural environment, dog walking plays a major role in conserving our woods as living, accessible places. The challenge for us as land managers rests on developing a balanced approach that supports the benefits dogs bring to society, as much as it addresses negative impacts caused by their owners.

This guidance note is designed to help site-based staff turn these principles into action on the ground. Whilst written for the forest environment, much of this guidance is equally applicable to the wider countryside and open spaces around towns.

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Dogs for life: a people issue

Probably more than any other issue in the natural environment, the UK's 6 million dogs can provoke passionate feelings and intense debate by all those touched by their presence.

A lack of understanding or sensitivity by even a small number of dog owners can seem like a big issue at a local level; in wider society this has traditionally led to negative and restrictive management interventions.

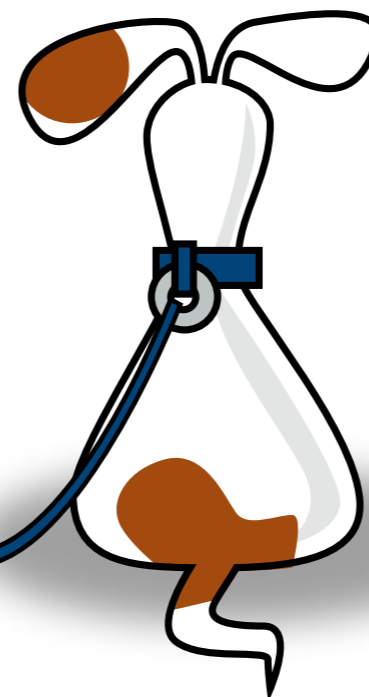
Despite this, dogs remain an enduring part of our society due to the many tangible ways they enhance people's everyday lives, often at a very deep emotional level. This fact explains the passions aroused about dogs, and in turn provides the key to much more effective and balanced management approaches. In short, dogs are - in reality - a people management issue.

Dogs contribute towards a healthier, more inclusive society by:

- Encouraging more active lifestyles and reducing stress through taking regular walks, even on the dullest of days.
- Making people feel more confident and less conspicuous when out for a walk.
- Acting as an icebreaker for contact with others.
- Helping children develop better social skills.
- Preventing loneliness and isolation for older people.
- Reducing their owners' blood pressure and doctors visits.
- Giving independence to over 5,000 people with disabilities such as mobility and visual impairments, deafness and epilepsy.

Dog facts

- Around 15 million people are involved in the care and exercise of the nation's 6 million dogs.
- Between 30% and 60% of visitors to Forestry Commission sites have dogs with them.
- From sales of their food alone, dogs are worth around £1 billion to the UK economy.
- There are over 170 breeds of dog, the top five being: Labrador, Cocker Spaniel, English Springer Spaniel, German Shepherd (Alsatian) and Staffordshire Bull Terrier.
- Over 2 million dogs can be uniquely identified by a microchip at the base of their neck, or from a tattoo in their right ear.
- There are over 1,000 Kennel Club Good Citizen training clubs across the UK, helping over 80,000 owners to have happy, healthy and sociable pets.
- The largest breeds of dog live to about 10 years old; the smallest dogs can live to up 20 years - the record is 29 years!
- Hidden and potentially fatal dangers for dogs include: car antifreeze, chocolate, slug pellets, firelighters, sweetcorn cobs, blue/green algae, raisins and grapes.



Dog walkers: who are they?

The reasons why individual people have dogs are unique; reliable assumptions about visitors' behaviours or needs cannot be made from their background, age, type of dog, time of visit or disability.

Dog-owning visitors will therefore include people who are:

- From all socio-economic backgrounds, although dog ownership is highest amongst C2DE groups.
- Parents - dog ownership is higher for those professionals and skilled people with families.
- Seeking the companionship of other dog walkers.
- Avoiding other people if they own dogs that are recovering from injury, being trained or have behavioural issues.
- First-time visitors stopping off after a long car journey.
- Daily visitors living nearby without access to a car.
- Needing access before dawn and after dusk in winter.
- Very active people involved in dog sports.
- More sedentary people whose only exercise is dog walking.

As with people who do not desire contact with dogs for personal or cultural reasons, dog owners cannot be assumed to want frequent or uninvited interactions with other dogs either. Active management of sites providing informed choice can minimise such conflict.



Motivations and beliefs

Understanding the values, beliefs and motivations behind what dog walkers do and where they go, is central to developing effective management that meets their needs and reduces conflict.

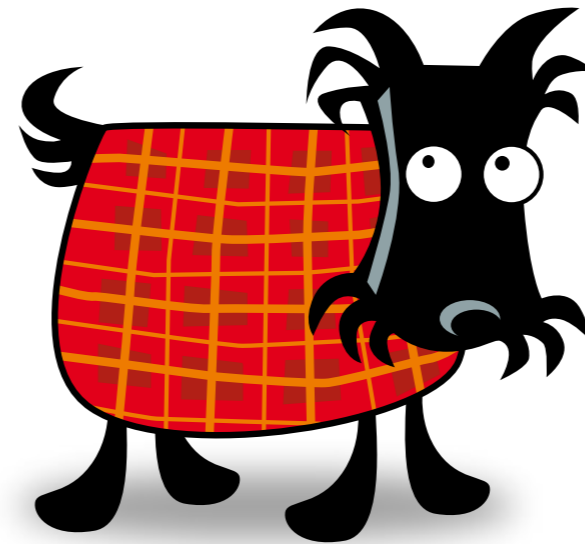
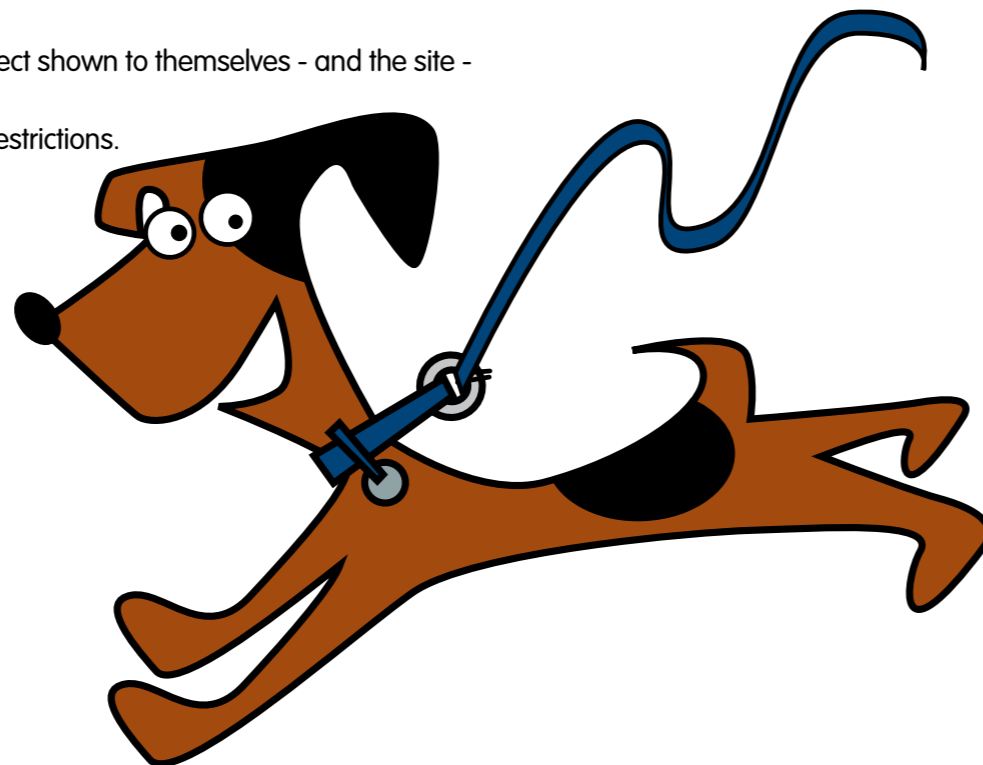
Where owners take their dogs and how they allow them to behave, is influenced by many factors including:

Personal factors:

- A primary concern towards their dog's safety and well-being.
- Their personal reasons for owning a dog and taking it for a walk.
- Experiences, restrictions and facilities at other nearby places.
- Their understanding and confidence in training their dog to be obedient.
- Being on a lead can make some dogs more aggressive or vulnerable to attack.
- A lack of understanding about how others may see their dog, and impacts of unwelcome interaction or other undesired behaviour.
- The time available for interacting with their dog.

Site based factors:

- Pre-visit and arrival information about the site.
- Availability of travel by private car or public transport.
- Perceptions of personal safety.
- Perceived degree of welcome, care and respect shown to themselves - and the site - by land managers and other users.
- Ease of complying with credible requests or restrictions.
- Conflicting, unclear or unexplained requests or information.
- Availability of convenient, alternative locations for activities.



Engaging with dog walkers

Local issues will have a great influence on the most effective management approach. It is vital to engage with dog walkers to both understand current behaviours and needs, and provide reassurance that any changes are not motivated from an "anti-dog" perspective.


Developing positive, open rapport is the first step in avoiding conflict and encouraging mutual respect; perceptions need to be managed just as much as more tangible issues. This can be achieved through:

- Encouraging staff to go out with their dogs to make contacts.
- On-site canine notice boards, offering positive messages about useful services and facilities alongside any restrictive messages.
- Being seen to understand and acknowledge the benefits of dog ownership, and undertaking work that is helpful to dog owners.
- On-site doggie "pit-stops" with petfood samples.
- Canine activity trails that promote fun, healthy exercise for dogs and owners, and develop better off-lead control.
- 'Dog-days' with competitions, stalls & services.
- Hosting dog-training events, classes and sports.
- Ensuring dog owners can access other events, guided walks, etc.

Contacting dog clubs and organisations can be helpful, although they may not always have detailed local knowledge or represent the full range of dog-owning site users.

Using a positive aspect of a dog's appearance or behaviour is an excellent icebreaker: "what a well groomed dog!". Conversely requests to change behaviour are best directed at the owner, and for the dog's benefit: "Your dog will be safer if you..."

When approaching a dog walker, always do so from the side so you can be seen, and avoid initial direct eye contact with the dog. Stroking a dog and kneeling down helps build rapport, but always ask first; dogs may be wary due to negative past experiences with other people. Carry a few dog biscuits and poo bags too!



Design Principles

Car parking and canine facilities

The time between dog owners arriving and dispersing into the forest is one of the most likely times for conflict. Dogs can see their owner's cars as territory to defend; they will be excited, keen to play and relieve themselves. The potential for conflict can be reduced by promoting some car parks that are attractive and well-suited to dog walkers; this also provides informed choice for non-dog owners.

Dog owners will particularly welcome and use areas that provide:

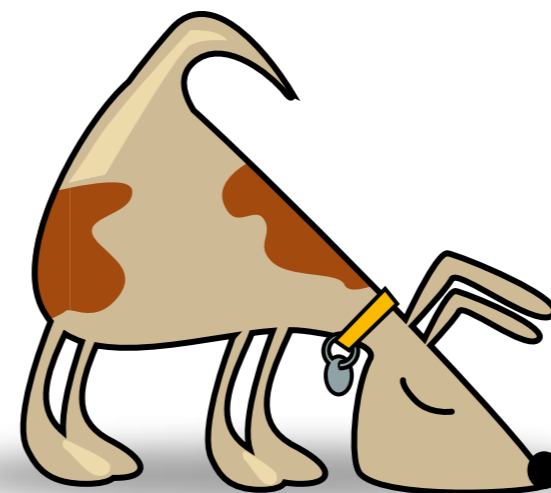
- Direct access to where they want to walk without crossing roads.
- Sufficient shaded parking areas on hot days, without being unduly dark, isolated, or vulnerable for car theft.
- Off-lead areas and separation from traffic, horses, livestock and children's play zones.
- Safe streams and pools for paddling & swimming.
- A 'dog wash' using a tap with a short hose and hard-standing.
- Disposal facilities for poo if required to 'pick up', or an adjacent area of rough ground where just 'flick it off the path' applies.
- Relevant 'dog-friendly' information on access plus special events, lost dogs, animal charities' events, local vets and suppliers.

Signs and information

Within an integrated management approach, signs, leaflets and other written information have a clear role; provided in isolation, they will have a limited effect and can be unsightly and counterproductive.

Written information will be most effective when it:

- Integrates with other management approaches.
- Understands and engages with the motivations and beliefs outlined above - particularly the dog's safety and well-being.
- Is welcoming and makes requests in a positive matter.
- Explicitly states the behaviour requested, and precisely when and where this is - and is not - required.
- Explains the reasons for any restrictions or requests, with a contact name and telephone number.
- Provides alternatives and other options for activities or behaviours that are not desirable at a particular place or time.
- Is provided at the appropriate time: pre-arrival, trailhead, on trail.
- Gives dog owners some personal choice in how to comply.
- Is removed once it is not needed - for example, signs erected for harvesting operations or sensitive times for wildlife.
- Has been piloted and its interpretation checked with dog owners.

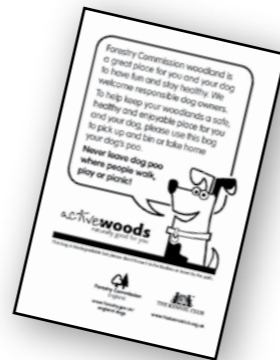


Fouling

Whilst fouling should not dominate site managers' interactions with dog owners, it is a frequent and legitimate concern needing a considered management approach. Whilst contracting eye diseases is rare (around 100 cases in the UK per year), dog poo's inherent unpleasantness warrants action to support the general public, and the many considerate dog owners who will often support action against irresponsible peers.

Local circumstances will dictate the best approach; key issues are:

- Site managers need to actively agree a local policy, if this is to be clearly communicated to dog owners.
- Consulting with dogs owners at an early stage; this can give you valuable insight into what happens and why.
- 'Flick it off the path' may be the best option away from intensively used areas, playgrounds etc., through reducing maintenance costs and landfill of a biodegradable product.
- Where different rules apply (e.g. 'pick up' or 'flick it off the path'), the boundaries and reasons must be clearly explained.
- Waste bins need to be clearly marked if they are for poo - owners will see different rules in other areas.
- If mixed in with general litter, bagged poo need not be classed as special waste.
- Poo bins can be encased in wood to reduce their visual impact.
- Bins need to be placed where most needed, not just where they are easiest to empty. Placement can also be used to attract dog walkers towards certain areas.
- Promoting the benefits of regular worming for owners' dogs.
- In 'pick up' areas, consider making poo bags available in dispensers and visitor centres, etc. - they can be overprinted too.



Disturbance to wildlife and livestock

Research for English Nature shows threats from land management practices far outweigh the impact of public access (with or without dogs), and that "research has rarely tried, or been able, to distinguish the specific effects of dogs on wildlife" and "disturbance does not necessarily mean long-term impacts at a population level".

Disturbance can however occur from out of control dogs, as can legitimate welfare concerns about dogs chasing livestock; these interactions can be acute at certain times or places. Preventative or precautionary restrictions on dogs (e.g. 'on-lead' areas or bans in exceptional cases) will be most effective - and fall within the Kennel Club/Forestry Commission concordat - when they are:

- Balanced, explained and regularly reviewed.
- Tightly-focussed to address a specific, tangible problem.
- Preceded by genuine efforts to influence where dog owners go and what they do through good design and positive management.
- The minimum necessary restriction required in time or extent, based on an impartial assessment of the facts.
- Developed through engagement with dog walkers from the outset, not just during implementation.
- Seen as part of an overall package that both promotes the opportunities and minimises the impacts of dog ownership.
- Adhering to the principles of good signage above.

Access to services and facilities

Dog owners will want to use existing facilities such as shops, toilets and children's play areas where dogs may be excluded. Conflict can be avoided and positive rapport developed by accommodating their needs. Issues to consider are:

- Providing seating overlooking children's play areas, so parents with dogs can supervise play without entering the enclosure.
- Signed 'dog park' areas with metal rings outside shops, toilets and cafes are helpful. They should be overlooked for security and situated so dogs cannot get to doorways and other places where they could cause obstruction or conflict for other visitors.
- The need for secure, shaded car parking.
- Stocking canine merchandise in shops such as leads, toys, treats and poo bags. Place access information and leaflets nearby.
- Just a bowl or plastic container outside with fresh clean water is an easy way to send a compelling and welcoming message!

Dog stiles and latches

In theory these are helpful, providing the opening is not too small for large or less agile dogs. However, top priority is delivering least restrictive access for all humans by removing stiles and providing gaps or gates; doing so usually removes the need for a dog latch.

Legal remedies

Where positive engagement does not resolve severe issues caused by specific dog owners, formal legal action may be considered. Care is needed to ensure this will be effective and minimise bad publicity. Some legislation does not apply to FC land - eg Dog Control Orders under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005.





For additional information and guidance go to:
www.forestry.gov.uk/england-dogs



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