**National Trust Press Release**

***Images available – see link in notes section***

**UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 00.01HRS THURSDAY 17 DECEMBER 2020**

**Walkers urged to stick to paths, reducing damage to landscapes and wildlife, as social distancing increases erosion**

* **Higher visitor numbers and social distancing causing fresh erosion at beauty spots**
* **Wet winter weather likely to make damage worse and affect habitats**
* **Advice is to wear appropriate footwear, stick to the original path and either walk in single file or step off and back on the path in the same place when passing others**
* **Additional funds will be needed to repair cumulative effect of damage to paths**

The National Trust is asking walkers and countryside lovers for help in protecting landscapes and nature after signs that the cumulative effects of winter weather, increased visitor numbers, and social distancing is starting to cause fresh erosion and widening of footpaths at hot spots across England.

In a year which has seen thousands more people benefit from spending time in nature, ranger teams and volunteers are encouraging a change in behaviour to head off the risk of lasting damage.

And, with England’s new tiering system and the upcoming Christmas holiday period likely to attract more people to get out and about in the countryside, the conservation charity is asking people to help minimise the effects of any further erosion.

Some of the routes most susceptible to widening are in the Lake District, where paths have been repaired by Fix the Fells[1] for the past 20 years.

The partnership which includes the National Trust, raises £500,000[2] each year to go towards fixing and maintaining 400 miles of paths across the UNESCO world heritage site[3].

In 2000, scarring caused by countryside users plagued the landscape, in some instances measured 30 metres wide and four metres deep[4].

Programme Manager Joanne Backshall warns at the current erosion rate, this could happen again, but some simple steps could go a long way to prevent it.

She says: “We are absolute advocates of the benefits that spending time in nature can bring, so it’s wonderful to see so many people enjoying the great outdoors this year. It is also fantastic to have witnessed so many people putting safety first as they step aside to allow a safe, social distance for fellow walkers. What people might not realise however, is that stepping off, and then continuing to walk off the path, is starting to erode the landscape at a rapid rate.

“Ensuring everyone’s safety is our top priority and we’re asking everyone to adhere to government guidelines around social distancing. Our top advice for walkers when encountering others is to walk single file. If you need to step aside to let others pass at a safe distance, please stop, wait and then return to the path before continuing your walk.”

Excessive erosion to popular walking routes doesn’t just leave a visual impact on the landscape it also affects wildlife. Joanne continued: “Once vegetation is lost through erosion, soil and stone can quickly wash off the hillside. This general loss of habitat and degradation can affect species like the mountain ringlet butterfly which feeds on acid grassland, or ring ouzels. It can also affect other rare mountain plants already at risk and living at the very edge of their range.

“Degradation also has a harmful impact on the rivers and lakes below. Sediment washed off the hillside can cover the gravel in rivers and lakes used by fish to lay their eggs, reducing their breeding habitat. Sediment will also impact insect numbers, which in turn will attract less birds and affect plant numbers.”

It’s not just the Lake District that is seeing an increase in wear and tear.

Rangers at Leigh Woods, a 65 hectare (120 acre) National Nature Reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) on the outskirts of Bristol, are currently trying to mitigate further damage to pathways which have increased from two to 10-12 metres in width in the worst places, due to people trying to avoid the muddiest sections.

Coastal footpaths at Dunwich Heath in Suffolk, paths at Morden Hall Park in south London and parkland at Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire have also been affected.

Gareth Jones, Lead Ranger at 1,538 hectares (3,800 acre) Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire, said: “One of our most popular walking routes is around the lake. As people have tried to create more space for social distancing, it has almost doubled in width in some places. This is damaging the grass and vegetation, which is not good from a conservation and land management point of view.

“Some people have sought quieter routes and left official pathways altogether. This can disturb the wildlife as well as erode the soil across the fragile heathland habitats of Clumber Park.

“There are around 100km of paths throughout the park and keeping them maintained is an ongoing process. Over the past three or four years we have spent between £20,000 to £30,000 annually on resurfacing paths in the park and making them accessible, and now with the added impact of social distancing, it will take us a while to get the paths back to their normal standard.”

The charity, which has already had its finances stretched due to the coronavirus pandemic, anticipates that it will need to raise extra money to repair pathways damaged over the past six months alone, as well as fundraising for on-going maintenance and repairs.

Rob Rhodes, Head of Countryside Management at the National Trust says: “We want to do everything we can to encourage more people to get outdoors and to be active and to engage with nature.

“A rare positive of the coronavirus pandemic is how we’ve witnessed thousands more people get out and about as and when government restrictions allow to enjoy the countryside.

“Many of our sites are currently seeing three times the usual number of visitors they would get on a busy summer’s day.

“However, landscapes are more susceptible to damage at this time of year due to the colder and wetter weather, and we want to help people understand how each and every one of us can play a role in looking after these beautiful places.

“We recognise that people are getting fed up with having so many rules to follow, but if we can all play our part by looking after our paths, then we can ensure more people can enjoy them all the year round – and that they can remain open and accessible.”

For more information and to make a donation to the Fix the Fells project visit [www.fixthefells.co.uk](http://www.fixthefells.co.uk) or to donate to the National Trust’s latest Give Back to Nature appeal which includes conservation work like pathway maintenance, visit [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

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**Picture editor’s notes:**

Images to support this story can be found in the link below. They should be used only in conjunction with this story and credited as indicated.

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**Editor’s notes:**

[1] Fix the Fells is a partnership programme between the National Trust, the Lake District National Park, Natural England, Friends of the Lake District and the Lake District Foundation. The aim of the Fix the Fells partnership is to protect the spectacular Lake District landscape from erosion damage by repairing and maintaining upland paths.

‘Fix the Fells’ Rangers and Volunteers work every year to repair damage and create sustainable paths across the Lake District, to balance conservation with public access.

The core, heavier repair work is done each year from March to November. But volunteers keep working all the year round doing maintenance work and smaller projects during the winter months to include keeping drains clear to help with water run-off. If drains get blocked water can cause huge damage by washing away great swathes of topsoil and stone in heavier deluges.

[2] The partnership has a total annual budget of £800,000 with 45 per cent covered by grants including one from the European Regional Development Fund. This means £500,000 has to be raised each year through fund raising.

[3] There are approximately 3,100 km (1,926 miles) of pathways across the Lake District National Park. See: <https://www.lakedistrict.gov.uk/caringfor>

In some instances a section of pathway less than 500 metres in length can cost up to £40,000 to repair especially when helicopters are needed to lift and drop stone in to help repair some of the more remote pathways.

There are typically two periods each year when helicopters drop stone in for teams. However, due to Covid-19 only one was able to take place this year in July.

[4] Twenty years ago dramatic scarring affected the mountains near Keswick at Coledale.

**Case studies:**

**Clumber Park, Nottinghamshire**

Gareth Jones, Lead Ranger at Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire, said: “We have seen an increase in visitors during the lockdown periods and while we are pleased more people are enjoying the benefits of nature, there has been a negative impact on our pathways as people move off to social distance.

“A popular walking route at Clumber is around the lake. As people have tried to create more space for social distancing, it has almost doubled in width in some places. This is damaging the grass and vegetation, which is not good from a conservation and land management point of view. Where possible, we ask people to stay on the main path and while it may take a bit more time, we’d ask people to be patient and considerate of others and nature.

“We have just under 100 km of paths throughout the park and keeping them maintained is an ongoing process. Over the past three or four years we have spent between £20,000 to £30,000 annually on resurfacing paths in the park and making them accessible, and now with the added impact of social distancing, it will take us a while to get the paths back to their normal standard.

“Some people have sought quieter routes and left official pathways altogether. This can disturb the wildlife as well as erode the soil across the fragile heathland habitats of Clumber Park. During the summer we usually have livestock grazing in the fields for conservation reasons. However, this year because people were dispersing themselves, walking with dogs in new areas and often leaving gates open to avoid touching surfaces, we took the decision not to put the livestock in those fields. We even had a gate vandalised to make it stay open.

“At Clumber we are lucky to have the longest double avenue of lime trees in Europe. With the increase in visitors this year there has been more wear and tear to the area, especially with cars being parked on the grass underneath the trees. We are becoming increasingly concerned about compaction from vehicles and the damage to the tree roots so we would ask visitors to be mindful about where they are parking – and walking and cycling – to reduce the impact they are having on this fantastic natural resource.”

Over in the walled kitchen garden, Shirley Roberts, Senior Gardener at Clumber Park, is also keen for people to say on the paths. “It is really important that visitors to our walled garden keep on the official paths as we grow food which is used in our cafes and sold on our produce cart to help raise funds. The plants can easily be damaged if feet wander away from where they should be, which leaves us with less to use and sell. I know there’s a lot to think about at the moment but if people could take a moment or two more to think about the plants we’d really appreciate it.”

**Dunwich Heath, Suffolk**

Lloyd James, Ranger at Dunwich Heath says: “At Dunwich Heath on the Suffolk coast, the sandy soil has been eroded and the path has significantly widened in recent months, as more people move off designated paths to socially distance. This is particularly noticeable in an area of acid grassland adjacent to the cliff path, which visitors regularly use to explore the coastal site. In some areas, narrow paths of 50cm have now doubled in width.

“This area of heathland is particularly sensitive as it’s home to nesting skylarks. This ground-nesting bird has seen dramatic population declines in recent years, often the result of unsuccessful nesting seasons. The impact of increased footfall off the main path, meant rangers had to step in this year to protect the nests, installing additional signage and fencing to prevent further disturbance. Thankfully the extra measures worked, and the skylark chicks successfully fledged.

“Work is now required to undertake path surveys, before repair work is carried out.

“The soil on Dunwich Heath is low nutrient sandy soil, which is perfect for the acidic grasses and heath to thrive, but it’s easily damaged and takes a long time to recover. It only takes a few people to use a passing area before the vegetation is destroyed and becomes unrecoverable. The team have seen the number of passing places along the paths increase and widen this year, with this happening at multiple points, there becomes a reduction in the maturing dense vegetation which is a prime habitat for breeding dartford warblers, which have been known to nest within a metre of a path.

“These paths and passing areas also create steps/trips along the paths which also make them more hazardous for people to use. If the higher areas of path do not recover vegetation wise then we may have to rotavate some areas and grade them with tractors to make them level, however this will destroy any vegetation structure in the ground and probably make run off erosion worse.

“One thing we might be able to do is to create new paths next to the original ones, then seed and rest the old ones to try and get some vegetation growing back. But this will require a lot of work and various permissions to carry this work out.”

**Leigh Woods, outskirts of Bristol**

Visitor numbers to this popular woodland haven on the edge of the city continue to rise.  In April visitor numbers more than doubled compared to 2019 (70,000 vs 34,000), reaching a peak of 110,000 in May.  Visitor numbers remain high with 40,000 people recorded in just the first half of October.

The site is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and its grassland is rich in insects, attracting wildlife such as greater and lesser horseshoe bats.  Damage to the grasslands will have a negative impact on rare and nationally scarce plants and insects.

The property is planning to put in a £70,000 pathway made of limestone with geotextile underneath to protect the tree roots to try to mitigate lasting damage.

**Nymans, West Sussex**

Path edge erosion is becoming an issue at Nymans, particularly in the woodlands, which are 275 acres of the 600 acre estate.

Visitor numbers have increased by 300 per cent over the past few months.

Chloe Bradbrooke, lead ranger says: “We have 7.6 hectares of woodland walks to look after on the estate and this is steadily increasing as walkers create alternative cut throughs to avoid the muddy walkways.

“We are asking our visitors to please keep to the paths even when wet and muddy to help protect our wildflowers.

“Woodland wildflowers seek light so are often at their richest and densest beside the paths and tracks. These include bluebells, wild daffodils, wood anemones, lesser celandine, early purple orchids and snow drops. They cheerfully line our walks in spring and summer along with the accompanying bees, butterflies and birds that are attracted to them.

“In autumn and winter when they can’t be seen, and the paths are muddy underfoot it can be tempting to step up the banks or make a short cut to avoid puddles. But the pressure of many feet compacts the soil and crushes the bulbs. Woodland wildflowers all grow from bulbs, corms or rhizomes – they are particularly vulnerable to compaction because they need to grow early in the year before the canopy closes over, so need the energy stored from the year before in bulbs to provide that early energy boost and a head start.

“We have an annual programme to improve sections of pathways with sandstone and although unseen often you will find surprisingly firmer ground in the middle of a puddle than to the side, and with the right footwear you can ‘savour the squelch!’”

**Morden Hall Park, south London**

This popular 125 acre in south London has welcomed over 1.1 million visitors this year (430,000 in just one area of the park. (2017 is the next highest year for visitors since records began – in that same year – with 771,000 visitors).

Richard Newman, Ranger at Morden Hall Park says: “We have seen some of our pathways increase in width from two metres to six-to-eight metres over the course of the last nine months. And in some instances, new pathways – what we call ‘desire’ pathways have been created as cut throughs.

“However, this has had a limited effect on biodiversity here because most wildlife within a large radius of the path will move away or have adapted to the presence of people regularly walking through the park. We are quite lucky most of our interesting winter wildlife can be seen from a distance. When we are working in the meadows near the paths, the voles and mice are in abundance.

“The key damage though will be to the health of the soils through increased compaction which for some plants like trees will limit their ability for their roots to breathe potentially causing long term negative health implications.

“As the soil gets more compacted the water will just run off creating issues like topsoil depositing through the run-off into drains and potentially the paths get wider.

“It will take a long time for the verges to heal and you sometimes need to give nature a hand and we are now looking to invest in pathways to try to prevent our ‘natural’ walkways further widening.  We will then do some additional landscaping to help our lawns and path edges recover.”