

Statement given to the New Forest Consultative Panel – 3 Sept 2015

By Deputy Surveyor, Forestry Commission

Commercial Fungi Picking in the New Forest

We are seeing a very real concern in the community about those who selfishly exploit fungi in the wild for commercial gain. It is the indiscriminate wholesale clearance of fungi that people find disrespectful of this special place. And, critically, it deprives many others of the enjoyment of the autumn spectacle of fungi.

There is conflicting opinion as to whether picking has a detrimental impact on the fungi. There is not yet a nationally agreed scientific view to guide our approach.

But I do believe there is widespread agreement that harvesting fungi on an unreasonable scale for commercial gain is just morally inappropriate. We should not tolerate commercial exploitation of a resource that is there for the wider shared enjoyment of the public.

Some have lobbied for a total ban on picking. To enforce a ban consistently 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with the personnel at our disposal, across an area as large as the New Forest, is just unrealistic. Unfortunately we know that a ban will simply impact on the responsible and drive those with selfish intent into even greater subterfuge.

When I consider the reality of enforcement I turn to the experience of the staff who deal with anti-social activity on the Forest every day and night – our Keepers and Rangers. I trust their instincts and experience to find the best way forward that is both practical and realistic.

So what can we do? If our immediate aim is to tackle commercial exploitation this season I want to use the most effective deterrent we can deploy now and get an impact quickly.

Some have suggested that a prosecution under the byelaws or the Theft Act may send a clear message. The construction of these legal regulations is not

always as clear cut as one might think and, after taking advice from the Police, gathering sufficient and unambiguous evidence is not impossible but will be very challenging and demanding of time. Even if a prosecution was successful the timescales to achieve a conclusion and then broadcast it as a deterrent to others would take too long. We need a more timely, direct and harder-hitting deterrent.

In my view the prosecution of pickers fails to deter the true beneficiaries of most of the commercial exploitation – we need to hurt the people who pay the pickers, sell or buy the harvest and reap the greatest reward. These are the “pushers” of the fungi exploitation world.

We need to achieve a message of intolerance much faster and deeper into that marketing chain. The way to do this successfully is to intercept and confiscate the harvest before it reaches the true beneficiaries – cutting the supply and eliminating the commercial reward.

We will do this by taking records of vehicles and photograph individuals suspected of commercial picking and build a picture of activity and identify any patterns. When suspect vehicles are observed we will broadcast alerts amongst our staff to allow us to monitor movements. We will aim to co-ordinate staff to those locations to intercept pickers and their hoards.

Clearly, our ability to be anywhere at any time is clearly limited, but we will use the experience of our staff to target areas where we know activity has occurred in previous years combined with observations we gather this year.

We will put out clear and consistent messages that commercial picking is not tolerated. We will do this through an updated fungi picking code shown as notices at key locations around the Forest.

When we find a vehicle that we suspect is involved with commercial picking we will place a notice on the windscreen explaining that we suspect them of breaching the Theft Act and that their vehicle details have been recorded.

We believe a combination of recording details of people and vehicles, confiscating hoards and threats of prosecution will send a very rapid message to those who seek to reap the benefit.

I have discussed our options with my Keepers and drawn on their considerable expertise. I want to be very clear that the welfare of FC staff is paramount. We put our staff through training for dealing with conflict situations and they will use their experience and intuition to handle interceptions very carefully.

I see this approach being applied for this season. We will review the outcomes of this approach at the end of the season and consider how we might react next year.

I believe this approach is both achievable and realistic with the resources at our disposal but I also want your help. You can report sightings of suspected commercial picking to our office. I have to be clear that we may not be able to respond to every report but the information will feed into a growing log of incidents that will provide a clearer picture on the true scale of the activity and inform our future approach.

I want to thank the National Park Authority staff and Police for their advice and support in considering our approach.

Bruce Rothnie