

Health and Safety and grazing cattle on public sites Extracts from Nibblers online discussion group May 2006

Dear all,

The GAP Office has received the following enquiry - can anyone help / has anyone experienced a similar situation? Many thanks.

I would like to know if anyone on the discussion forum can me help me with a potentially difficult case. This is because English Longhorn cattle have recently been introduced to a SSSI heathland restoration area but have had to be taken off again due to reports of cattle intimidation of humans and dogs. The same cattle were put on this site for the first time last season and no problems were reported. The site is a public site with around 250,000 visitors annually. Unfortunately the recent intimidation incidents have provoked a health and safety argument against keeping cattle on this site. Obviously, countering the health and safety argument is quite difficult when you have several huge cows with very long horns ambling around the heathland full of people who are not familiar with livestock.

Consequently, it would be very helpful to hear from any site manager with experience of grazing very public sites with cattle in order to gain a better understanding of your ways of working, Public confidence building, best practice and risk assessment procedures which could then be adopted by the managers of the site I am currently dealing with.

Any help would be much appreciated.

Dear all,

I have found that there can be a ringleader - an animal that influences the rest of the herd and often a farmer will know which animal this is. To counter this to some extent, we have included a clause in the licence relating to the grazier identifying and removing such an animal (which I think is the norm anyway). I have found the ringleader issue to be more to do with escaping than intimidating but it wouldn't surprise me if the intimidating behaviour of one rubs off onto another. Or is it just a couple of animals that are guilty? (and so can be removed).

We have prepared a 'recreation impact assessment' which includes people's fears and concerns etc and we've identified amelioration measures (such as events, signage, advice, leaflets with maps at entrances) which will be implemented as far as reasonably practicable. A copy can be made available, though it's in its first stages as we hope to have our local advisory group feed into this as they are recreation users - the cattle haven't gone on yet. This doesn't deal with the issue of the cattle being intimidating of course, but shows that we have been through the thought process of considering people's experience of the site with cattle on, and their concerns are identified and addressed.

I have been in dialogue with an HSE officer (Tony Mitchell) and he is actually working on revising the guidelines relating to cattle grazing on public land. I am sure that once that is done, it'll help. I would hope GAP were included as a consultee (I didn't ask but shall do).

Having said all this, we are about to put some cattle on a SSSI heathland site too, after about 50 years of no grazing so this subject is of particular interest as it is one of the main things that the locals (and I) are concerned about (quite understandably).

Annabelle Kennedy (Reserves Manager, Sheffield Wildlife Trust)

I had a similar problem caused by one steer. It lead to an OTM payment and a replacement.

Firstly, you should make sure you have a thorough risk assessment for grazing a public site, this should identify such issues and the procedures you will follow in the event of an incident. And make sure you review it for each reported incident and keep the notes. This will help you identify any trends thus making it easier understand and manage any potential problem.

With respect to Risk Assessment, look at your numbers. How many visitors do you have and how many reported incidents and what is the severity of the incidents. Your RA should also include your mitigation - leaflets, guided walks, signs etc...

Check whether the reports coming from a range of people or do you have an anti out there. Also, is the problem a perceived rather than actual, are the report coming from people who are frightened of cattle.

It is a shame that the animals have been taken off. It would have been useful to spend a few hours, or better still days, observing the behaviour of the animals and the visitors. (it may sound like a lot of time but worth it in the long run) This can help identify troublemakers (cattle) that need to be removed. This approach would show positive management (you are on top of the situation) and would help build confidence with your visitors. It is also an opportunity to talk to visitors and explain what you are doing and why and talk to people about the cattle.

Get as much info about any incidents as possible - this will allow you to assess whether the problem is partly perceived. If you think that a visitor is nervous of cattle, offer to meet them on site and walk through the cattle with them, this will allow you to explain about the grazing and how to respond to the cattle - this is important as you have suggested that your visitors are unfamiliar with the animals.

If the cows are misbehaving, I agree with the earlier comments, it is probably one or two baddies. Find out who they are and get rid of them.

Why Longhorns, could you try something less intimidating.

If it is an anti whipping up a bit of gossip to get rid of your cattle then good luck.

Mark

Mark Cleaver
Keeper
Burnham Beeches Office

We also had problems with cattle on a very public site, popular with dog walkers. An incident involving a dog off the lead and a cow with an 8-month old calf is still rumbling on with the solicitors.

The outcome was to remove that particular animal and to only graze the site with young cattle (8 months to 2 years; older animals can be more of a problem and cows will protect their calves) of an exceptionally placid polled breed (Murray Grey), combined with always doing extensive signing before the cattle go on site each year, explaining what they are and why they are there, attending user group meetings (and taking the flack!) And most importantly only grazing one area at a time, identifying alternative areas where people can walk if they don't wish to walk among the cattle (only possible if you have more than one grazing compartment, of course)

I am attaching our grazing policy, which may help.

Cathy

The only help I can suggest is that to identify a specific risk.

Here we graze cows and calves that are interested in our dogs. The worst risk is that a cow chases a dog which takes refuge behind its owner who then gets knocked down by the irate mum. This happened to my wife. If all dogs are kept on leads I doubt if that would happen but calves do think that labradors are new found friends and so run up which gets their dams very excited as they undoubtedly think the dogs are wolves. If all dogs are on leads that must help. In America they paint the horns of Jersey cattle with dayglo paint but that is to stop them being shot as deer. I suggest you check the cows for aggressive tendencies and then cull all offenders and after that the public would have no case. If they incite the cows with their dogs then that is their liability.

Somewhere there may be a list of the perceived risk of bulls breeds as beef bulls running with cows are usually deemed okay in fields with footpaths. How are you going to graze the coarse grazing without cattle - answer you cannot and so you need these cattle to maintain the amenity, which is why the public are there in the first place. If you have chapter and verse of the complaints then that must be a help as to the risk, and if you have responded by removing offending cows that should be a defence. I was once asked to move a footpath as a walker was frightened of the bull in one field !

Ask for all complaints to be sent in in writing quoting the time date and description of the cow, if dogs were present and names and addresses of witnesses so you can get an idea if the complaint is frivolous. Dehorned cattle are just as aggressive as horned cattle and red deer hummels are quickly eliminated as they are often killers in case that is suggested. I assume it is impractical to let the cattle out at night and confine them during the day when the public are in evidence.

RM

It does seem a shame that grazing is having to be stopped due to incidents with the public, but I agree with Mark about the choice of animals. These issues are often perceived problems rather than real; to many people any large cow with horns is obviously a vicious bull about to charge them, and I'm afraid compromises are occasionally needed between the ideal animals for the job and their perceived or real threat to the public.

We are using Dexters here on the Lizard to graze the heathlands, partly because they are decidedly unintimidating, even rather cuddly to the average townie. Next door they are using Highlands, which despite their placid nature, don't half scare the visitors.

I've also found that introducing the cattle to my slightly crazy dog from an early age generally gets the cattle used to visitors' dogs, and there are definite advantages in keeping the cattle outside all year (we can do this down here quite easily) as our tenants' cattle which are housed all winter do tend to go a bit wild once released in spring. Most issues seem to occur at this time of year.

Anyway, I hope you sort something out

Justin Whitehouse

I am developing access across a conservation/biodiversity farm which has a small herd of Shetland Cattle grazing Flanders Moss NNR - a lowland raised bog near Stirling in Scotland. This access is associated with a new Centre for meetings, training and workshops. I have had no issues with visitors so far - the cattle are pretty popular and are of course integral to the conservation management practices and so of interest to visiting groups (not real public access - though all open land in Scotland has access of course). Shetland Cattle are good natured and as these outwinter, are rarely handled they seem to mind their own business. However, I would be very interested to see your Grazing Policy - the attachment 'had been removed' from my email - not quite sure why! I think I should have a policy in place to cover any eventuality.

You might be interested to see the activities at West Moss-side – it featured last year as the venue for the first Scottish GAP handling and lookering training course. Since then I have done a major renovation and building job on the steading and hay loft. It is due to be finished in the next couple of weeks - but the website is STILL under construction – but keep an eye on it www.westmosside.com

Kate Sankey

i've personally had two occasions when longhorns with calves have become very frisky when i have been walking dogs in fields (once someone elses, once my own), so can understand joe public concerns. Are these cattle cows and calves, support annabelles thoughts on the matriarch of the group, and how much pre-grazing consultation and effort was there with public? I know jenny phelps in cotswolds for example does a large amount of work with locals before any managemnt commences, (especially reintroducing grazing), including walking dog walker groups around once cattle are on. Its difficult i know, as the same animals can react very differently to different dogs, i suppose its all to do with body language and behaviour of dog (people?) and the cattle themselves (how used to dogs are they and what state of mind are they in.are they protective of their young etc)

annabelle yes gap would be very interested in what sounds like typically excellent work you are carrying out up there...perhaps you could give me a call?

regards jim
