

Press Release

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The New Theft of the Countryside

New laws providing rights of access to the countryside are failing to work because people are too frightened to take advantage of them, says Marion Shoard, the outdoor author, campaigner and lecturer.

Miss Shoard has just been awarded the Golden Eagle award of the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild for lifetime achievement in outdoor writing. Her books, *A Right to Roam*, *This Land is Our Land* and *The Theft of the Countryside*, were seen as paving the way for new legislation in both Scotland and south of the border opening up much of the countryside formerly shut away behind 'Trespassers will be Prosecuted' signs.

However, in her acceptance speech Miss Shoard said a new campaign was now needed - this time not against landowners' fences but against new shutters that have closed people's minds against the very idea of roaming freely in the countryside.

Statistics show that walking in the countryside is declining just as the opportunities to do so increase. Miss Shoard says the following factors are at work:

Changing childhood

"Once children developed an instinctive relationship with the outside world by freely exploring it. They climbed trees, swam in rivers, camped out, made fires and roamed freely.

"Now such behaviour is unthinkable. Shepherded by parents, children proceed cautiously on bicycles in the artificial environments of country parks, their crash helmets an ever-present reminder of the dangers they are constantly warned might threaten their safety. Even activities like playing with conkers are now automatically linked with danger.

"Fifty years ago, children would come out of school and disappear until it got dark, messing about somewhere doing all sorts of things. Now, their lives are far more organised and supervised, and this changes their attitude to the countryside. Ferried around by car, children today get used to treating the countryside as a background, rather than a theatre for self-exploration."

Fearful adulthood

"The incarceration of our children has consequences which go on into adulthood. Now, many adult women are afraid to walk alone in the countryside, although their chances of being robbed or attacked there are probably lower than they were in the in the past. Should they embark on a country walk, some women and men expect a controlled, box-ticking experience perhaps on a group walk with a guide or, kitted out in expensive outdoor clothing and clutching a Walks Guide, following instructions around a circuit."

Health fanaticism

"The current preoccupation with health and exercise also encourages this revision of attitudes to the outdoors. Jogging and speed-walking can involve the countryside, but their purpose is not engagement with it but the development of physical fitness and well-honed muscles. Passage through the countryside along a predetermined route is often portrayed as a personal challenge. Cycling is frequently no longer about an exploration of the outdoors, but about extreme exertion."

Landowner attitudes

"Many private landowners continue to discourage people from entering their land, as they have in the past. But owners who might be expected to behave more in the public interest often behave in much the same way. Conservation bodies such as the National Trust sometimes prefer to keep the public out of large areas which they control.

"Often this is justified by often dubious claims that wildlife would be threatened by disturbance. However, it sometimes appears that the organizations involved just wish to avoid the management issues they believe that public access would raise. Visitors end up being directed towards organised experiences in specially demarcated areas, often decked out with features like nature trails provided with numbered observation points and hides. Using such facilities is fundamentally different from that of discovering for yourself what life in the wild is really all about. The trend towards the provision of such managed experiences further entrenches the idea that free roaming isn't something that ordinary people should expect to do in the countryside."

Entertainment fads

"There are a couple of other factors in play. Electronic entertainment has encouraged people to seek instant gratification. They want contact with wildlife to be as immediate as it is in television documentaries and therefore are happy to turn up at a visitor centre and watch goshawks at nest via a televised link."

The car culture

"In particular the overwhelming use of cars invites people to visit only spots where car parking is available. This is generally at a 'honey pot' location where landowners or the authorities have decided they can conveniently be contained."

Marion Shoard:

Writer | Broadcaster | Lecturer
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Miss Shoard concluded:

"The fences that stop people taking full advantage of the spiritual and psychological benefits that only enjoyment of the countryside can bring are now no longer being put up only by landowners. They are also being erected within the minds of the people themselves. This is the new theft of the countryside. If we are to recover the spiritual benefits the countryside has offered our predecessors since they were documented by Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Laurie Lee and Dylan Thomas, we must rid our minds of these new shackles."

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Note for Editors:

The Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild's award ceremony will take place at the Trearddur Bay Hotel, Trearddur Bay, Anglesey at 20.00 hours on Saturday, 7th November.

Further information about Marion Shoard's activities can be found on her website, at www.marionshoard.co.uk.

Miss Shoard can be contacted on 07743 534 443 and by email, at marionshoard@tiscali.co.uk. She can also be phoned at the Trearddur Bay Hotel, tel: 01407 860301, on 7th and 8th November.