

Daily Telegraph

I love 'greenlaning' too – but it's time to banish destructive 4x4s from our national parks

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The Lake District is one of the finest corners of our green and pleasant land, but are we enjoying it to the point of destruction? Credit: Wenn.com /JFL/ZJOG

She was 20, I was 19, and it was every bit as messy and destructive as these things tend to be. She was going out with a friend of mine and the morning after a party, before anyone else was up, we slipped outside and tore off across a marshy track accompanied by Dido's award-winning 2003 album, 'Life for Rent'. Some thirty seconds of *White Flag* later the going got oozy but, slipping her into low-ratio, we squelched on through the mire.

Being a typical Suzuki Jimny owner, who believed fanatically in the 'go-anywhere ability' of my little Japanese companion, I plugged on kamikaze-like until we were marvelously stuck. A tractor, a winch and a furious farmer later I was out, but I've never been quite the same since.

Something nascent within me had been ignited and every boggy patch, rocky track or steep incline I've encountered since have made me want to get behind the wheel and conquer. At a dull Christmas party last week, I divulged these urges to a Land Rover-owning friend who smiled and cooed nostalgically that he too used to like a bit of 'greenlaning'.

For the unfamiliar, the term refers to utilising the nation's unsurfaced public byways for a good old tear up in a car, a truck or if you're really wild, a motorbike. My pal told me that

down his way there was a bit of track that became so popular, it eventually had to be closed to everyone, including walkers and horse riders, due to safety concerns over cavernous ruts created by motor vehicles. And there in, I'm afraid, lies the problem; thundering through bucolic Britain is doubtless a red-blooded hoot but it's not a particularly ethical one.

In the heart of Beatrix Potter country, in the Lake District National park, tensions between greenlaners and the local community have become so fraught that some residents have moved out. In April last year, Glen and Dorothy Wilkinson, sheep farmers who lived near Coniston, declared that a road through their yard had been "absolutely wrecked" by 4X4 users, making it impossible for them to carry on with their jobs. I can only imagine that if dear Dorothy pitched up at a greenlaner's place of work and started tearing up the carpet and chipping away at the staircase, there might be a bit of bother. Whatever happened to the respect we once had for those who keep the nation fed?

Sadly, the concerns don't end there. A quick detour into greenlaner cyberspace reveals that when it comes to off road scramble motorcycle users, "typically, the average rider will be doing 40-45 mph". The consequence of one of these high-velocity bikers rounding a corner and meeting a gaggle of toddlers in the midst of a teddy bear picnic is unthinkable. It is perhaps no surprise that a petition launched in 2017 urging the Chief Executive of the National Park Authority to ban greenlaning has amassed over 350,000 signatures. What is astounding, however, is that on Monday, the Authority announced that rather than siding with the signatories, it had elected to allow the motorists to roar on.

If you're the sort of person who likes a laugh, do take a moment to read up on some arguments extolling the ethics of greenlaning. My favourite one, as argued by Alan Kind, a spokesman for the Land Access Recreation Association, is that erosion is really the fault of tractor drivers. Spending much of my time on a small Dumfriesshire sheep farm, I'm well aware that tractors are big beasts. The rather obvious point, however, is that they actually need to be there and don't just descend en masse to tackle the spiciest obstacles.

Another card in the greenlaner's hand is that it's a way for people with disabilities to enjoy the countryside. The trouble with this one is that while a 4x4 might enable a couple of people to cross hill and dale, their journey ends up making tracks impassible for the much smaller off-road mobility scooters that could otherwise make use of those same tracks.

More than that, however, the very idea that you can actually enjoy the countryside while ensconced in a metal cocoon seems to be born out of a very modern malady: the separation of man from nature. The richness of the Lakes is about flora and fauna – sedge, snipe and hen harriers – and other wonders that you might see on foot but that will flee or be passed unnoticed in a vehicle. I know the thrill of being behind the wheel with the traction control light flashing on the dashboard, but it's insipid compared to stepping out with earth beneath your feet, rain on your cheeks, and a fishing rod under your arm.