

Ban 4x4 off-roading in Lake District, campaigners say

Locals say motor traffic in national park threatens world heritage status

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Campaigners say bikes and 4x4s are damaging the Lake District national park, a world heritage site. Photograph: Alamy

A patch of land in the [Lake District](#) once owned by Beatrix Potter and described by Alfred Wainwright as “the loveliest in Lakeland” is being ruined by 4x4 drivers who are threatening the world heritage site status of the national park, according to campaigners.

They say cars and motorbikes have devastated farm tracks, churning up soil and exposing the bedrock beneath, leaving them impassable to farm traffic.

The problem is acute in a one-mile square of land just north of Coniston Water. World Heritage Watch (WHW), a global non-governmental organisation that advises [Unesco](#), passed a resolution to try to protect the site because it said the world heritage status of the Lake District as a whole was being “violated”.

At the 5th International Civil Society Forum on World Heritage, in Bahrain in June, the minutes of which were recently made public, delegates were told that the “harmonious beauty of the landscape” must be protected.

WHW asked Unesco to make the Lake District’s continued inscription as a world heritage site dependent on the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) acting to prevent further damage caused by the vehicles.

“The disturbance and destruction unquestionably caused by 4x4 vehicles is certainly not in conformity with the values which the Lake District stands for: serenity, harmony, tranquility, nature conservation and traditional rural ways of life,” said the WHW chairman, Stephan Dömpke.

“The purpose of world heritage site status is the protection and conservation of sites for which an outstanding universal value (OUV) has been defined.”

Dömpke said if action was not taken to preserve the OUV in the Lake District, Unesco could choose to revoke the inscription, awarded in July last year.

The move came after almost 7,000 people signed a petition organised by the campaign group Save the Lake District calling for the national park authority to impose a traffic regulation order closing green lanes to motor vehicles.

Christine Muir, whose family have owned a cottage in the area since the 1950s, said: “We saw a huge increase in bikes and 4x4s a few years ago. Some of us have lived here all our lives, and for the sheep farmers among us this land is our livelihood. Others just love walking in this area between Coniston and Little Langdale, described by Wainwright as ‘scenically one of the loveliest in Lakeland’.

“But today your walks are likely to be spoiled by convoys of 4x4s and groups of noisy trail bikes. Tracks have become impassable for farm vehicles, horse riders and off-road wheelchairs.”

The complaint focuses on two tracks near High Tilberthwaite farm, which Potter bought in 1929 and was later acquired by the National Trust.

On its website, the campaign group notes an increase in 4x4s in the area from 90 a month in 2008 to an estimated 400 per month in 2017, noting that the routes for these vehicles cut through two National Trust farms: High Tilberthwaite and High Oxenfell.

In April two hill farmers, Glen and Dorothy Wilkinson, left their Tilberthwaite farm because of the damage caused to an unsealed track that runs through the land.



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Little Langdale was described by Wainwright as ‘scenically one of the loveliest in Lakeland’.
Photograph: trevoreanthy/GuardianWitness

At the time, Wilkinson said 4x4s passed through the farm on a daily basis, and the park authority should be closing such roads to recreational off-roaders. “They have absolutely wrecked the road,” he said. “They have made it impossible for us to carry on with our jobs.”

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Nick Fieldhouse, whose off-roading company Kankku regularly sent clients through the Wilkinsons' farm, argued that 4x4 users had just as much right to use the Lake District as anybody else, and said world heritage status made them more mindful of respecting the landscape. "Unesco knew about the 4x4s when they awarded the inscription," he said.

However, Lord Clark of Windermere, who was chair of the Lake District Partnership during the world heritage bid, criticised the park authority's [lack of action](#).

"We have all heard about the farmer at Tilberthwaite leaving his farm," he said. "They ought to be banning 4x4 off-roading. Sadly though it is all part of the culture at the moment, where the authority encourage [commercial activity](#)."

"The world heritage site status was granted because of the landscape. It is the duty of the LDPNA to protect that and work for the benefit of the people who live here."

Mark Eccles, head of management at the park authority, has previously said there were no plans to restrict the traffic. He said off-roading was legal and there was no breach of the world heritage rules. On his LinkedIn page, Eccles describes himself as a motorbike enthusiast.

A spokesperson for the park authority said they recognised that some of the roads needed repairs. The work is due to be carried out in the autumn.

Unesco has now contacted the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which said it was "working with the Lake District National Park Authority to ensure the continued protection of the world heritage site".