

Lake District heritage at risk as thrill-seekers ‘chew up’ idyllic trails

Land once owned by Beatrix Potter is being ruined by off-road vehicles, campaigners claim. Now a crucial decision looms on whether to ban them

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Little Langdale in the Lake District. Photograph: Gary Calton/The Observer

Richard Bowness’s heart beats through this landscape. His grandfather broke stones to construct many of the farm tracks, and with his “own bare hands” Bowness built many of the local cottages.

As we wind down one corner through the valleys just north of Coniston Water, he points to the upstairs window of a cottage: “I was conceived there, you know!”

Bowness’s knowledge of this part of the Lake District national park is encyclopaedic. His family have lived in these peaceful valleys for generations and many of them were born in the cottages dotted around the landscape, which became a world heritage site in 2017. But his home is under threat, he says. The tranquillity of the area has been [destroyed by off-road cars and motorbikes](#) which have devastated farm tracks, churning up soil and exposing the bedrock beneath, leaving them impassable to farm traffic.

The problem is particularly acute in the valleys surrounding the villages of Little Langdale, Tilberthwaite and Elterwater, and locals have been lobbying for a ban.

Next month a decision will be made whether or not to prohibit recreational off-road vehicles from dozens of farm tracks on this land – much of it once owned by Beatrix Potter and described by Alfred Wainwright as “the loveliest in Lakeland”.

Campaigners say a noticeable change came in 2006 when the [Lake District](#) National Park Authority (LDNPA) – which has been repeatedly criticised for its management of the area – in conjunction with the Motoring Organisations’ Land Access and Recreation Association (Lara), created a “hierarchy of trails” route.

These white and red signs usually seen on gates near narrow farm tracks were, on the face of it, a set of rules for recreational road users to obey. But in reality, locals say, they have advertised potential routes for thrill-seeking drivers.

Bowness, who is part of the Save the Lake District group, which has been lobbying the authority and Cumbria county council for a reduction in vehicles on local tracks, says “irreversible damage” is being done. More than 300,000 people have signed a petition supporting the ban.



One of the LDNPA’s ‘hierarchy of trails’ signs, which campaigners say have the effect of advertising trail routes to off-road drivers. Photograph: Gary Calton/The Observer

“There are the obvious frustrations of the noise, pollution and general disruption more cars bring on any road, but what we’re seeing here is absolute destruction. We get these posses of vehicles driving on tiny tracks, and all this silt and stone gets chewed up and washed into the local riverways and the tarn.

“People come here to enjoy this quiet haven but what they find when they come here is that they are sharing these beautiful paths with huge noisy 4x4s that are destroying our landscape,” he said.

At the foot of Lingmoor Fell, Chris Hickson and his partner Marian Hobart point out the tracks regularly used on adventure driving experiences, which cost upwards of £200 and promise the “ultimate in 4x4 off-road driving adventure against a simply epic backdrop”. Just four feet wide in some places, the tracks are perilously steep and at times descend into streams and riverways. There are scars on the landscape where drivers have either lost control or deliberately driven off track on to the banks.

Hickson and Hobart, who are “incomers” originally from Surrey, made the permanent move into their holiday home in Little Langdale last year and have become enthusiastic members of the campaign group. One of the main driving tracks runs behind their home.

“All common sense seems to have gone out of the window. There is a responsibility that comes with using these tracks. We need to consider what all these cars are doing to the environment,” said Hickson. “They are absolutely, without doubt, destroying our heritage,” added Hobart.

The main complaints are about two tracks near High Tilberthwaite farm, which Potter bought in 1929 and which was later acquired by the National Trust. Campaigners estimate there has been an increase in the number of 4x4s in the area from 90 a month in 2008 to 400 a month in 2017, noting that the routes cut through two National Trust farms: High Tilberthwaite and High Oxenfell.



Campaigner Richard Bowness on one of the unclassified roads used by 4x4 drivers.
Photograph: Gary Calton/The Observer
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Two hill farmers, Glen and Dorothy Wilkinson, [left their Tilberthwaite farm in April last year](#) because of the damage caused to an unsealed track that runs through the land, saying it had made it “impossible to carry on with our jobs”. Glen said 4x4s passed through the farm on a daily basis, and the park authority should be closing such roads to recreational off-roaders.

A report this year, by the body that advises Unesco on protecting world heritage sites, found that an increase in vehicles had damaged the “aesthetic and historic qualities” of the landscape. It criticised the national park authority for disregarding complaints and underplaying the damage being inflicted on the area.

It also alleged that undue weight had been given to the commercial benefits of allowing tourists trips in 4x4s to remote beauty spots. It also recommended that the park authority should “consider the banning of the use of 4x4 vehicles on green roads within the world heritage property. It is understood that there is already a tool in place in the form of a TRO [traffic regulation order] that is precisely tailored to this need.”

The report also pointed out that orders have already been used effectively in the Yorkshire Dales national park, which had imposed them on 13 routes to restrict the vehicles. Their pleas, however, seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Last week the authority published its own report, which appears to ignore those recommendations. Instead it says off-road traffic should continue and that no TRO should be imposed.

“Our recommendation is that the evidence supporting the grounds for prohibition through a TRO is not conclusive, and as we have not exhausted other management options to see whether any conflict is reconcilable, options other than making a TRO are more appropriate at present,” it said.

A decision on this recommendation is due to be made by the national park's rights of way committee on 8 October.