

Management Options for Mountain Biking on the Aldershot Military Lands – A Position Paper

Trail Action Group (TAG)

July 2013

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What is TAG?

TAG (Trail Action Group) was formed in 2011 by local mountain bikers as a result of negative publicity surrounding mountain biking on MoD land with the aim of ensuring continued access to such a valuable local resource for the local community. It was formed to provide the military and other stakeholders with a central contact point for mountain biking in the area.

The group's intention is to promote a Code of Conduct for cyclists using military land within the Aldershot Military Lands. This includes clear reference to the local byelaws relating to cycling, the importance of the prime function of the land for essential military training along with recommended do's and don'ts for encounters with training exercises and promoting responsible riding.

The committee includes members of the largest mountain bike groups and clubs in the area including BoB (Berks on Bikes), Pork Pies and the Tunnel Hill Trolls – these groups represent many hundreds of mountain bikers. Members also have strong links into CTC (the national cycling charity), the racing community (Gorrick) and local bike shops.

The committee has built relationships with DIO, the Training Area Marshall, Landmarc, local wildlife trusts and councils to understand and respond to the needs of other interested groups concerned with the land.

What does TAG do and what have we achieved?

For the past two years TAG has worked to promote the sustainable use of the Aldershot military lands by the mountain biking community. In addition to general publicity via our website (www.trailactiongroup.co.uk) and Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/trailactiongroup>) we have undertaken the following activities:

- Promoted the TAG Code of Conduct via posters on the lands
- Conducted a land use survey (see Appendix A)
- When requested by LandMarc permanently closed existing trails that were causing erosion issues on Caesars Camp by 'dead hedging'
- Notified authorities of fires and motorbike use
- Conducted low impact trail maintenance to alleviate erosion with agreement of the military authorities
- Provided volunteers on Hampshire Conservation Volunteer litter pick days
- Attempted to engage with DIO through multiple routes
- Conducted walk arounds with local counsellors and counsel employees explaining the recreational use of the lands
- Met with representatives of Surrey and Hampshire Wildlife trusts and explained mountain bike use of the land
- Attended conservation meetings and presented suggested ways forward
- Acted as liaison to local groups, clubs and shops to alert them to the disruption caused by night riding etc.

What would TAG like to do?

There's no escaping the fact – the Aldershot Military lands are an extremely valuable resource for recreational users, not least the mountain biking community (see Appendix A). The lands have been used for many years and many of the country's leading mountain bikers have cut their riding teeth in these areas – for example Ben Thomas, currently ranked 54th in the World, Steve James (World Under 23 Cyclocross rider) or Craig Bowles (UK and European 24hr solo champion). TAG strongly believes that there needs to be an effective interface between the riding community and the MoD, so that the views and wishes of the riders can be heard by the MoD, and conversely so the MoD's needs can be transferred to the riders. We need to find a way to work together to provide this interface, to provide proper information and expectations of appropriate behaviour to users, and to educate riders properly about when and where military areas can be used and, equally, when they cannot.

In addition, TAG believes that if we were allowed to conduct low impact maintenance on existing trails in the area, then we can avoid problems related to erosion, and make the areas safer for all users.

What TAG are not...

TAG does not organise any events or races and is not a club. Any representation at events or races is to promote awareness of the issues relating to mountain biking on MoD land.

TAG does not promote or publicise riding in such a way as to increase the level of riding on the land.

The effort by TAG in the last two and a half years has failed to achieve an effective interface with the military.

The management options available

TAG believes that a sensible pre-requisite step before pursuing any more detailed management option impact assessment is to conduct a thorough investigation into the quantifiable impact of mountain biking on the military use of the land. This will ensure that any subsequent cost / benefit analysis is based on data rather than anecdotal information.

Option Summary	Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Proactive Management <i>Introduce access controls through red flags / online posting of harbour areas that are in use</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduces number of riders riding into harbour areas (especially at night) Increased awareness of potential for conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcing harbour areas in advance could be perceived as a security risk Maintaining online list of harbour areas involves a management overhead Some riders will ignore restrictions Requires publicising to local riders
<p>Status quo <i>Continue with the as-is approach of minimal intervention</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal cost Recreational access is assured No management overhead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem may get worse Unauthorised trails will spring up
<p>Recognise the existing trails <i>Designate certain 'natural' trails as mountain biking routes and conduct light touch maintenance in multiple areas</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limits MTB'ers to known trails that are clearly visible to military users Riders will stick to them if they're maintained Minimises erosion / environmental impact by routing away from bird nesting areas Unlikely to have the 'pull' factor of a purpose built trail Easy for volunteers to maintain or re-route as required Landmarc/Army know where they are and can close off sections when training is being conducted in an area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May cause a small increase in riders but can be mitigated by not providing 'way-marking' of the trails
<p>Create a purpose built mountain bike trail <i>Create a 'Swinley Forest' type trail and restrict mountain biking to this trail</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Erosion proof / weather proof MTB'ers will stick to them in the area they are in Keeps MTB'ers segregated from all other users 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extremely Expensive Parking likely to be a significant issue Will act as a pull factor to many riders including less experience MTB'ers Management overhead is large Will require formal regular inspection and possibly specialist insurance
<p>Define a MTB area <i>Restrict mountain biking to a specific area or areas</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keeps MTB'ers segregated from all other users Army knows where most MTB'ers are likely to be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likely to be ignored by many especially if all areas do not have a designated area Requires extensive publicity resulting in a significant pull factor
<p>Grub up trails <i>Render the existing trails beyond use</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removes mountain bikers from non-fire roads for a time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Removes recreational opportunities from ever-increasing local communities Riders will 'fix' trails (resulting in a whack a mole situation) Difficult to police with large overhead for little impact on problem

<p>Remove access <i>Fence off all military lands</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Removes all users from land other than the Army 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Huge expense • Very negative impact on local community • Likely to be opposed by most stakeholders, elected representatives and the wider community
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What next?

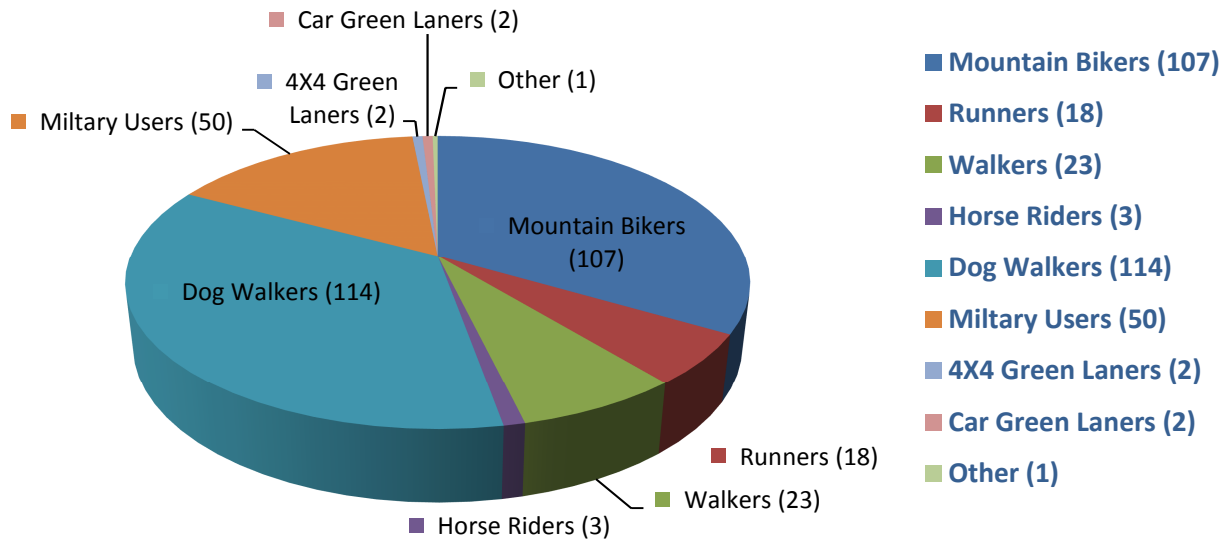
TAG would welcome an opportunity to meet with representatives of the military to explore management options and work towards sustainable mountain bike access to the Aldershot Military Lands. Please contact our Chair, Ewan Panter (info@trailactiongroup.co.uk).

Appendix A – Tunnel Hill land use

TAG conducted a user survey of the Tunnel Hill military lands on a rainy May 7th in 2012. Full results and methodology is provided below.

Results

Landuse Survey May Bankholiday 2012



Survey Methodology

- The survey was conducted on the first bank holiday in May to assess the impact of use of the land on a non-working day and therefore likely to be more heavily used.
- Tunnel hill was chosen for the survey as it is relatively self-contained within easy reach of local villages and is popular with recreational users.
- Volunteers were stationed at the six main entrances to Tunnel Hill from 9:00 until 15:00.
- The bank holiday weather was cool, cloudy and showery.
- Bike riders were all considered mountain bikers as they were riding off road.
- A group of walkers with a dog were counted as one dog walker and x walkers with reference to the number of dogs being walked. The number of pedestrians entering the land is therefore the total of walkers plus dog walkers and runners – double counting has been avoided.
- The military users arrived in one group in uniform and were clearly on exercise.
- It should be noted that the Green Laners were using Old Guildford Road which is a designated BOAT (Byeway Open to All Traffic).
- For completeness, “Other” was a lone bagpiper whose family did not appreciate his talent.

Appendix B – What areas are ridden by mountain bikers?

The Aldershot Military Lands represent a unique recreational opportunity in a highly populated area surrounding the military training areas on all sides

TAG principally represents those mountain bikers that use the following areas (in no particular order):

- Tunnel Hill
- Frith Hill
- Ash Ranges
- Old Windmill Hill / Porridgepot Hill
- Hawley Common
- Caesar's Camp / Rushmoor Arena area between Aldershot, Fleet and Farnham
- Minley Wood
- Pyestock Hill / Velmead Woods
- Borossa Common / Olddean Common / Paschal wood
- Yateley Heath
- QinetiQ vehicle test track area