

## The New 'Forest': a pony's perspective

Chloe Brighthouse

The New Forest National Park in Hampshire, England, is home to many species, including New Forest Ponies. However, the park is slowly losing its biodiversity as the New Forest eco-system is very delicately balanced so small changes have long lasting effects which are almost impossible to undo. This contribution will argue that the processes of tourism and commodification are generating new risks. Deploying an exploration of Beck's (1992) theory on 'risk society', and the uncertainty that the world now brings, this reflection will determine if and how these risks are causing the decline of the New Forest and the consequential effects on the ponies that live there.

The New Forest became a national park in 2005. There were two key aims that the National Park Authority put in place: to conserve and enhance the beauty of the park, but also encourage people to enjoy the environment (New Forest National Park Authority, 2018). Strategies were put in place to make the forest accessible for tourists, and, as it is fairly flat, to make it more accessible to people with walking difficulties than other national parks do.

Once a National Park, visitor numbers significantly increased and in 2017 there were an estimated 15.2 million visitor days and 1.4 million of these were new visitors (New Forest National Park Authority, 2018). People have been conditioned to think that taking time away from everyday life is necessary for physical and psychological health. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic the number of new visitors to the park were at a record high (Forestry Commission, 2021), which was related to the difficulty of going abroad,

but a sustained 'need' for people to get away from their regulated everyday life (Urry and Larsen, 2011).

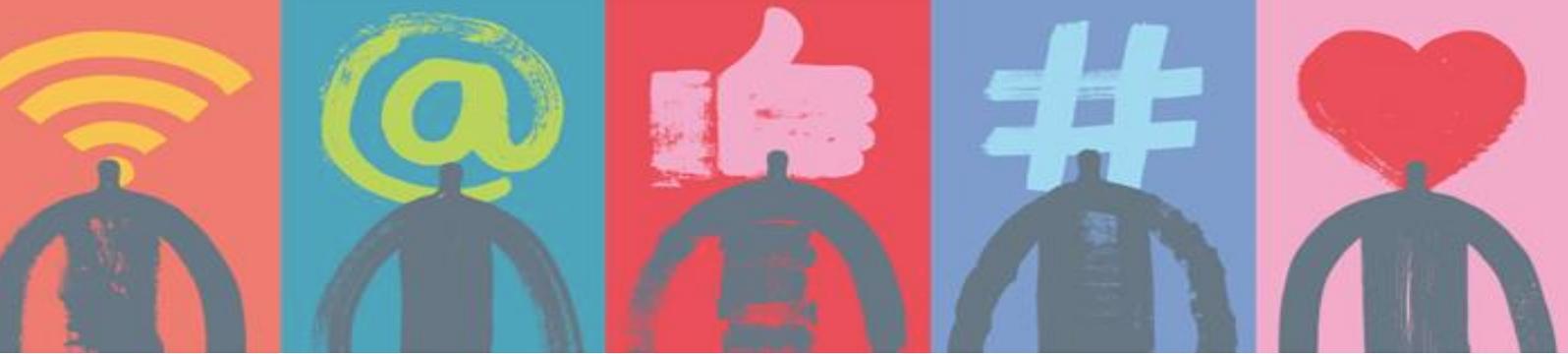
The rise in visitor numbers allowed the forest to be recognised as a tourist attraction and is now extremely popular, which in turn allows for funding to be made so the New Forest National Park Authority (NFNPA) can keep up with the aims they set out. However, although the first aim of the NFNPA mirrors that of the Forestry Commission, the second introduces new stresses.



Urry and Larsen (2011) recognise that a way of defining and understanding tourism is by identifying key characteristics. These characteristics include a break from organised work, visiting places which differ from home, and it is the process of movement and staying in other places. It is recognised that tourism is about leisure, a time away from everyday life. Spracklen (2009) states that leisure time, specifically holidays, is

socially organised as everyone has this shared understanding of taking time away from everyday life.

Urry and Larsen (2011) expand on this further by identifying leisure time as a separate sphere in 'modern' society from the organised and regulated sphere. From this, tourists develop the tourist gaze, this gaze is a learnt way of understanding the area which they are visiting which is done through marketisation and collective conscious (Urry and



Larsen, 2011). It is recognised that the lenses individuals see through are learnt and are shared through technology to 'enable tourists to see the physical forms and material spaces before their eyes as interesting, good or beautiful' (Urry & Larsen, 2001: 2).

The information that attracts tourists to the New Forest National Park is easily available online with pictures, short descriptions, and lists. Alongside this there are many explanations of how the area is to be conserved. This encourages people to visit the area as they anticipate their trip through technologies which are not primarily associated with tourism, but still construct and reinforce the tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011).

Grieco and Urry (2011) recognise this as one of the five interdependent mobilities. Not only does the way that the New Forest market themselves draw tourists in, but also shows how they plan to save the area. This is because there is currently a huge political interest in climate change, so people want to support the businesses that are doing their part (Brooks et al, 2021). In turn, profit will be made and used to improve the attraction and this is how the process of tourism links to that of commodification.

According to Wallerstein's (1975) tenets about neo-liberalism, commodification is where more human activities come to be seen as commodities and this is linked to the endless accumulation of capital. The accumulation of capital is the driving force to the World Systems Theory, and the buying and selling of such activities are done so on the market. The activities that are put through this process are ones that originally do not make profit (Wallerstein, 1975). Supporters of neo-liberalism believe in creating markets where they do not

already exist and the reasoning is that all spheres of life come into the market (Wallerstein, 2004).

In the case of the National Park, the commodity is the biodiversity which includes the ponies alongside cattle. The reason that the livestock are now being targeted for marketisation is because the other tourist attractions are saturated and cannot increase profit by attracting more tourists. This is an example of when Wallerstein (2004) explains that the imperative for an increase in

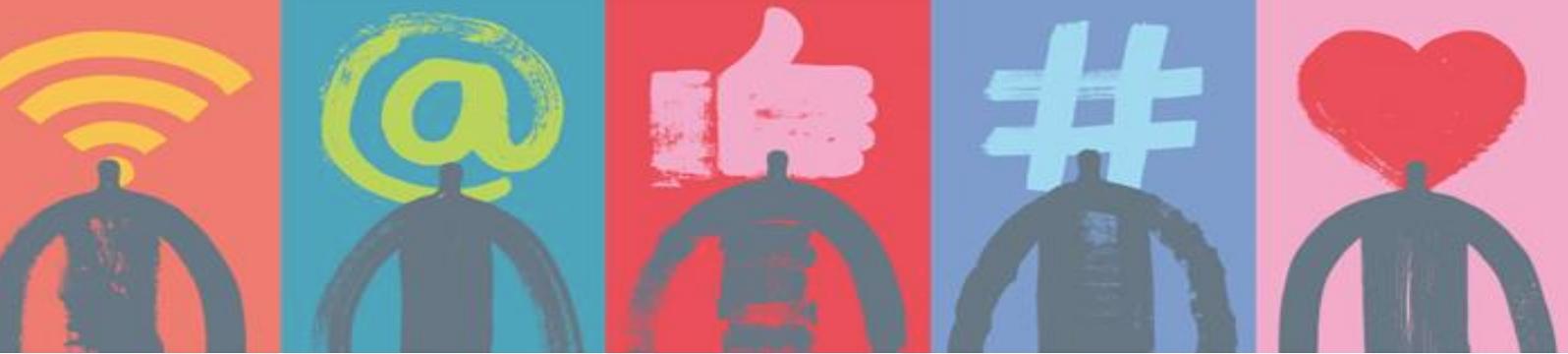
capital means that there must be a constant expansion of the market.

The Verderers' Grazing Scheme (VGS) and the EU funded Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) were introduced to help farmers. They are paid per head of livestock. For the



VGS, there is a cap of £6000 per farmer who is also required to have at least three years' experience before they qualify for the scheme, which means that there is little chance of farmers using the ponies as commodities to gain capital. However, when the BPS was introduced, there was no set cap, nor was there a minimum amount of experience necessary for them to qualify. This has meant that there has been a dramatic increase in numbers of New Forest Ponies which has led to the overgrazing.

The population of the ponies has grown from around 2000 in 1960 to 5000 a few years ago (Williams, 2016). This is due to the ponies and cattle being used as a way of accumulating endless capital, as stated by Wallerstein (2004). Tourists interact with the ponies, who have learned to associate them with food, congregating near tourist hot spots, further encouraging overgrazing.



Commodification and encouraging tourism could be seen as positive as it brings economic success to the area despite leading to degradation of the habitat. This is how risk and reflexive thinking links to the area. It is a conflict between economy and nature, but the reflexive choice to be made is to encourage tourism and commodification in a way that can also help nature and this choice is made as in modern society, everything comes with risk (Beck, 1992).

Beck (1992) says that risks represent a global threat, one which does not discriminate from social class, country or species and these risks are developed through modern activity. Often, these risks are invisible to the naked eye such as air pollution and climate change which are some of the main ways in which risk has been brought to the forefront of the New Forest and the ponies. Air pollution is linked to how the tourists travel to the New Forest which is usually by car. 96% of all visitors to the park travel by car which in turn generates pollution (New Forest National Park Authority, 2018).



Climate change is something that was only recently considered. Beck and Lau (2005) recognise that this is a process that holds both characteristics of hazards and risks, where everyone is affected by them, but they have been triggered by the processes of modernisation so are therefore recognised as man-made disasters. Due to all these risks, the New Forest and the ponies are victims of late modernity. Local travel to the area alongside the high carbon output into the atmosphere from both manufacturing and transport, both overseas and around the UK has meant that there are more extreme weather events that have affected the ponies (Deloitte, 2013).

This has caused more overgrazing, so when there is a dry season, all the animals congregate in the wooded areas near water supplies, but vice versa when there is a rainy season. This means that the areas in use are overpopulated by all the species in the forest which leads to the vegetation being overgrazed, reducing the chances of the forest rejuvenating due to the extreme pressure (Forestry Commission, 2021).

The consequences of commodification seen in the BPS system, tourism, climate change and the aims set out by the National Park Authority to make the forest more accessible has meant that there is a decrease in forest that is able to rejuvenate well, so the ponies are slowly losing natural habitat. Beck (2009) recognises that these risks are non-compensable and incalculable as damage done to the forest cannot be reversed, nor can it be calculated to what extent or speed more damage will be done, creating uncertainty for the ponies and their future.

In the past, the eco-system developed by the New Forest, and the commoners that lived there, was a virtual circle, everything worked together to enable growth and health for the forest. However, as tourism and commodification of the forest has developed, there are new risks that are coming in and creating a vicious circle. This means that the forest is unable to rejuvenate properly and therefore is being destroyed through human behaviour and lifestyles.

The manufactured risks of commodification and the natural risks of climate change (albeit triggered by human activity) combine to threaten the future of the New Forest ecosystem and the ponies. Although New Forest ponies have been evolving in their environment for centuries, they are simply unable to evolve at the same speed as manufactured risks, which has led to them losing parts of their home and therefore will eventually lead to decline in this native breed.



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### **Pictures:**

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