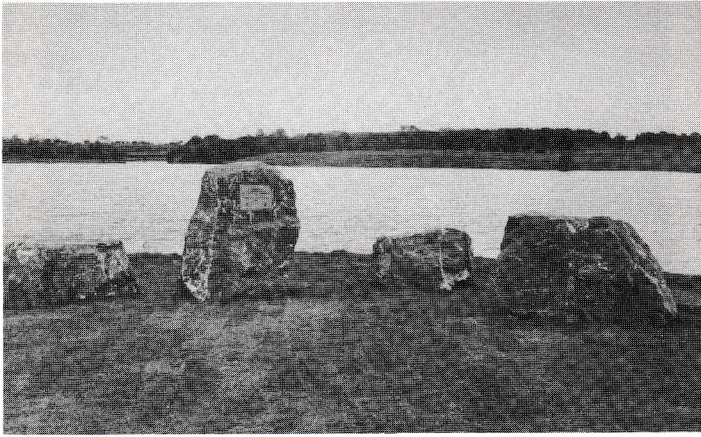


# NATURE AND RECREATION

A discussion of a site where both are blended

COSMESTON

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The east lake at Cosmeston

Do nature conservation and public recreation mix? Is nature for nature reserves and recreation for the football pitch? And does it matter?

I think it does matter and I would maintain that the answers to the two questions are important for both the Glamorgan Naturalists' Trust and for the wider public.

The answer to the second question must be an emphatic no. If you have seen my vegetable patch this summer you will know that nature has a way of reasserting itself over areas that are nominally under man's control. Also recreation takes many forms, formal and informal, individual and participatory. Informal pursuits, and in particular visiting the countryside, are the most popular recreational pastimes, exceeding in participants as they do all those who go to watch football on Saturday afternoon and even that numerous breed, the coarse angler.

I do not know the answer to the first question which if I may repeat and enlarge it is 'Can the conservation of nature be a valid use of a site that is primarily intended for public recreation?' For the past two years this question, or rather the proposition that the two uses can be compatible within the same site, has been put to the test in Cosmeston Country Park, near Penarth in South Glamorgan.

A country park is primarily a place set aside for public recreation, a 'pleasure ground' as the relevant statute says. It is also an area where informal recreation in a countryside setting is the principal use. So nature does stand a good chance of surviving in such an environment. The emphasis in the title should be on 'country' rather than 'park'. Formal flower beds and games pitches are replaced by grass areas where wild flowers can grow undisturbed and set seed and by picnic areas where kick-about ball games or kite flying or any other appropriate activity are possible. At Cosmeston Country Park there are 70 acres open to the public at present. This area includes two 15 acre lakes and associated grass areas, walks and car park. There is a warden service. A further 140 acres is being reclaimed from dereliction and neglect and could be available in 1982.

The Trust's help in providing information on the ecology of the Cosmeston site has been invaluable and the Development and Management Plan for the country park, produced by the joint developing authorities, South Glamorgan County Council and Vale of Glamorgan Borough Council, embodies many pieces of advice that have derived directly or indirectly from Trust members. The Trust has not been slow to make known its views when it has felt that the interests of nature conservation are being disregarded. Some areas of established or developing habitat have been destroyed in the process of development. Orchids have been disturbed in an area set aside for nature conservation and most notably, as far as the media are concerned, water birds including swans, have been injured and killed as a direct result of angling. The Trust has spoken up where it has thought appropriate and indeed the developing Councils have asked the Trust to act as a monitoring body to aid the sympathetic management of the site.

As one of the team responsible for planning and developing the country park I am often on the receiving end of the Trust's monitoring. I can assure Trust members that their advice is greatly appreciated and carefully considered. It is very difficult to weigh the

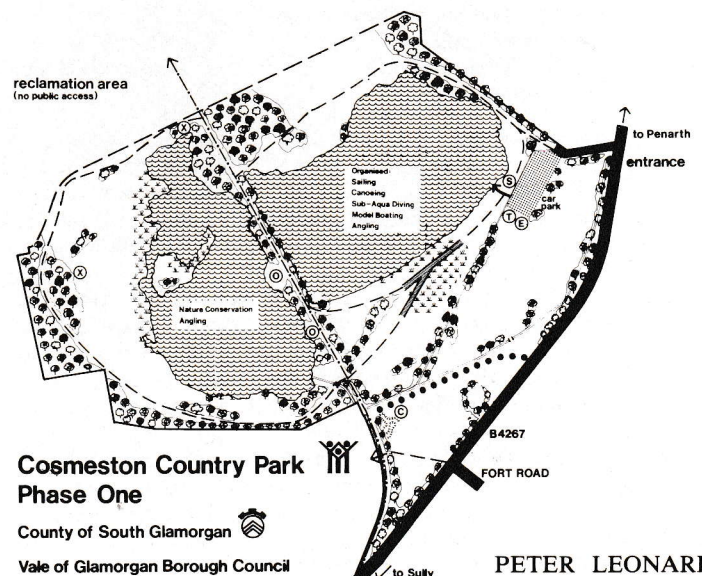
merits of one set of advice against the claims of another, however. The public authority, be it at district or county level, seeks to act in the best interest of the public in operating the country park. There is no easy way of defining that 'best interest' however and there is great scope for discretion. One common attitude that does seem to prevail without exception among all users of the country park is that their particular activity is the most important and deserves the greatest consideration. I know I am overstating the case slightly here but it must be acknowledged that different interest groups should be their own advocates or their sport or pastime would not prosper.

The country park is not a nature reserve although nature is the essential matrix within which all activities within the site must take place. It is perhaps the most essential 'user' of the site and in all aspects of the country park's development there has been a presumption in favour of the natural environment. The authorities have had to guard against making the site look 'pretty' or tidy just because this is the norm elsewhere. The natural area around the western lake at Cosmeston has been landscaped and views differ as to the necessity for this, but the footpath that penetrates this area is an essential management tool that enables the site to be exploited as an outdoor classroom.

Finally, I return to the question 'Does it matter?' I have said 'yes' to that but not explained why. Cosmeston Country Park is more than a pleasant place to go for a walk. It has a strategic role, or roles. It is for instance in its own small way contributing to the relief of the energy crisis by providing recreation on the outskirts of urban areas rather than many miles away. It and similar sites are reducing the numbers of visitors to sensitive areas such as the Glamorgan Heritage Coast and the Brecon Beacons. But most importantly for the purposes of this article, the site is one where the message of nature conservation can be directly conveyed to the public. Dogs in the country park might foul the footpaths but more importantly they are not in a farmer's field, worrying stock. Also people who pick wild flowers in the park receive a friendly chat from the warden on the need to conserve wild life for all of us to enjoy. The proposed Cosmeston Country Centre, through an interpretative display, will further reinforce this point. This is an entirely valid role for the country park and I would maintain that there is a need for these areas of 'pretend' countryside where people can learn to appreciate the value of the real countryside. I would further suggest that the Glamorgan Naturalists' Trust could be usefully engaged in similar work on some of its reserves, or indeed could acquire reserves with a view to exploiting them for environmental education purposes. Sites in the 'urban fringe', the countryside around towns and cities, would be particularly useful and could be a source of revenue for the Trust.

The Cosmeston experiment will continue to be monitored by the Trust and the local authorities. The opening of the second phase area will be the real test of the planning of the site. The mutual understanding between public and voluntary bodies that has been established to date augurs well for the future of the country park as a place where recreation and conservation of nature can complement one another.

The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author.



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