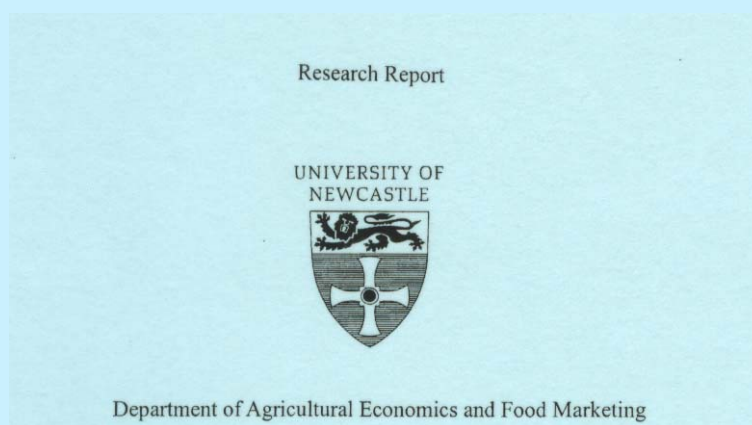




**PUBLIC ACCESS RESTRICTIONS  
AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION  
ON THE OTTERBURN TRAINING AREA**

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The map at Figure 2 was drawn by Ann Rooke.

Andrew Cattermole carried out the research for this report, which is based on his dissertation, submitted in June 1999, as part of the course requirement for the degree in Countryside Management in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Food Marketing, University of Newcastle. The research was carried out under the supervision of Dr Rachel Woodward of the Centre for Rural Economy, University of Newcastle, who undertook the editorial work on this research report.

## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

|         |   |
|---------|---|
| AFTC    | Army Field Training Centre                  |
| AS90    | Artillery System 90                         |
| CLA     | Country Landowners Association              |
| CNP     | Council for National Parks                  |
| CoCo    | Countryside Commission                      |
| CPRE    | Council for the Protection of Rural England |
| DoE     | Department of the Environment               |
| MLRS    | Multiple Launch Rocket System               |
| MoD     | Ministry of Defence                         |
| NHSN    | Natural History Society of Northumbria      |
| NNP     | Northumberland National Park                |
| NNPA    | Northumberland National Park Authority      |
| NoPD    | Notice of Proposed Development              |
| NWT     | Northumberland Wildlife Trust               |
| OPI     | Otterburn Public Inquiry                    |
| OTA     | Otterburn Training Area                     |
| OTA: LA | Otterburn Training Area: Land Agent         |
| OTA: RO | Otterburn Training Area: Range Officer      |
| RSPB    | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds   |
| SAM     | Scheduled Ancient Monument                  |
| SNCI    | Site of Nature Conservation Interest        |
| SSSI    | Site of Special Scientific Interest         |

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## **Chapter 1 RESEARCH AIMS AND CONTEXT**

### **The Research**

Military training in protected landscapes raises some difficult issues. For some, the very idea of military activities taking place on cherished rural landscapes, particularly those with National Park designation, is an anathema. For others, that military presence is not only valuable in terms of its contribution to the life and economy of rural areas, but is also representative of a legitimate and proper use of rural space. There are clear moral and ethical issues involved in the debate over the military use of rural landscapes. These issues are complex and defy easy reconciliation.

One such issue concerns public access. As a public access guide produced by the Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) (1997) points out, military training by its very nature can be a dangerous activity. Public access to military training areas thus needs to be controlled and regulated for safety reasons. This in itself is uncontroversial, as no-one would deny the folly of allowing unregulated access to impact areas used in the course of live firing exercises. What is less clear are the consequences of this public access restriction. For the MoD, arguing in a submission to the 1997 Otterburn Public Inquiry, public access restrictions can themselves be advantageous in protecting the landscapes and environments of military training areas (MoD, 1997a). For others, the advantages following from public access restrictions are less clear cut (MacEwan and MacEwan, 1992). The research upon which this report is based was conducted around this

central research question: does restricted public access to military training areas enhance the environmental conservation value of such areas?

Questions surrounding public access have been prominent within a wider debate over military training activities in National Parks. Public awareness and perceptions of the impacts of military activities on the natural environment appear to have become more focussed as a consequence of this debate. In addition, legislative changes from national and European levels of government, including the loss of Crown immunity by Government departments, have made institutions such as the MoD increasingly aware of their responsibilities as landowner and their duties to those to whom access is granted.

Yet despite the visibility of the public access issue, there has been relatively little systematic investigation of the environmental and conservation values and disbenefits of restricted public access to military training areas. A lack of reliable quantitative data is one reason. The complexity of the issue is another. The topic is also an emotive one, driven as much by political objectives as by verifiable facts and evidence. This research aimed to investigate the issue directly with a view to opening up the debate and providing some pointers to the development of access policy for the future. It draws upon one case study, that of the Otterburn Training Area (OTA), located in the Northumberland National Park in the north of England.

## **The Context**

The context in which this research was undertaken was important in shaping both the research question outlined above, and the methodologies pursued in

carrying out the research. This research was shaped by two important political and procedural developments. First, following geopolitical changes in 1989-90 and the reduction of the perceived Cold War threat to European and British national security, the deployment of British forces stationed in Europe was reassessed, primarily under the Options for Change programme (MoD, 1991). As part of this programme, armoured regiments previously stationed and trained in Germany were relocated to the UK. This in turn meant an increased demand for space in which to train, particularly with the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS) and the Artillery System 90 (AS90). In 1995 the MoD formally submitted a Notice of Proposed Development (NoPD) to develop physical infrastructure on the Otterburn Training Area (OTA) to accommodate both AS90 and MLRS units (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1 AS90 and MLRS**

Artillery System 90



Multiple Launch Rocket System



Because of the scale of these units and their support requirements extensive infrastructure developments were proposed. These included the widening of 57.5 km of existing roads, construction of 15.3 km of new stone tracks, the installation of new gun spurs, and alteration of other existing gun spurs, the



upgrading of accommodation at Otterburn Camp and the construction of a 4.45 hectare Central Maintenance Facility (see MoD, 1995). A number of individuals, groups and organisations objected to this development and a decision was made to hold a Public Local Inquiry into the matter (hereafter Otterburn Public Inquiry or OPI). This duly took place (see Woodward, 1998 for further details on the OPI). The result of the OPI was initially expected in 1998. However, following the publication of the Strategic Defence Review (SDR) in the summer of 1998 (MoD, 1998) concerns were raised by some parties to the original inquiry (notably the Council for National Parks) that new proposals contained within the SDR might have further impacts on the OTA unanticipated at the time of the original inquiry. The OPI was re-opened between March and June 1999. At the time of writing, the result has yet to be published. Although this research does not concern the OPI *per se*, the Inquiry is important to the research context for two reasons. First, it put into the public domain a large volume of information on military use of protected landscapes. Second, it provided space (amongst other things) for a public airing of the debate over the environmental benefits and costs of restricted public access to military training areas.

The second contextual element of importance to this study was the increased visibility of the debate on public access to upland landscapes more generally (the 'Right to Roam'). This debate was given an added boost with the publication of the Government's Green Paper '*Access to the Open Countryside in England and Wales*' (DETR, 1998). Whilst only a consultative document, announcements at the time of writing indicate the government's willingness to legislate on this issue. The Green Paper has had a mixed reception. Groups with a campaigning or administrative interest in public access issues, such as

the Ramblers, the Council for the Protection for Rural England and the (former) Countryside Commission have welcomed legislation on this issue. Others, such as the Country Landowners Association (CLA) have expressed concerns about the possibilities of greater public access to privately-held uplands. Whilst the MoD appears to have avoided any direct contribution towards this debate, and whilst in any case bylaws in force at many training areas will limit the impact of legislation on military lands, it should be noted that this research on access to military lands may well have a contribution to make towards a much broader public access debate. This is because many of the arguments against greater freedom of access have been made with reference to the conservation disbenefits of greater freedom to roam by the wider public.

### **Structure of this Report**

This report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 examines the issue of military training in National Parks. Chapter 3 introduces the Otterburn Training Area, chosen as the case study for an exploration of the research question identified above. Chapter 4 then explains the methodology used in this research. Chapter 5 discusses the research findings on the issue of the relative benefits and costs of public access and conservation on the defence estate. Chapter 6 draws together conclusions and recommendations of the study.

## **CHAPTER 2      MILITARY TRAINING IN NATIONAL PARKS**

The military presence in protected areas has prompted considerable debate within the literature on National Parks. This chapter draws out some of the key themes from this literature as a prelude to the discussion which follows of the debate over public access in military training areas. This literature is rather uneven. The historical background and raw data on the military's training presence in the UK, and more specifically within the National Parks, is well documented. The issue of public access restrictions and its relationship to conservation in the defence estate has received less attention.

### **The Establishment of the National Parks**

National Parks need to be understood within the context of the evolution of legislation on the protection and purpose of valued landscapes. As Shoard (1987) notes, since the time of Wordsworth public awareness of the value of rural landscapes has gained momentum. Her interpretation of this 'environmental awakening' filtering down through the social classes is concise and detailed. The growth of middle class pressure groups is analysed, highlighting the significance of the formation of large influential, organisations such as the National Trust, through to the mobilisation of working class access movements engaging in activities such as the famous Kinder Scout mass trespass of 1932. The author leaves the reader in no doubt as to her sense of loss for the countryside. Curry (1994) provides a more detailed, if somewhat less passionate, chronological listing of the formation of these pressure groups and emphasises the fact that the countryside was not initially perceived as being for all. The notion of access rights on a public scale is, it seems, a modern one.

MacEwen and MacEwen (1982) echo this opposing view on Wordsworth's selective vision, reminding us that, in his *Guide to the Lakes*, he sought to exclude certain classes of society from the Lakes stating they were not for 'artisans, labourers and the humbler class of shopkeeper', as he put it.

The issue of social exclusion from the countryside goes against the ideals foremost in the minds of those drawing up legislation for the protection of the countryside in the immediate post-Second World War period. Both Dower (1945) and Hobhouse (1947) reported on the proposed establishment of National Parks. Dower stressed that access to the countryside should be for all, especially the young of all classes from every part of the country, and for the public at large and not just some privileged section of the community. These reports were instrumental in the creation of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, a broadly welcomed piece of legislation at the time. For its time, the Act was a well intentioned, if belated (compared to the U.S. National Parks) attempt to create protected areas for the nation on a legislative level (Blunden and Curry, 1990).

### **The Military Presence in National Parks**

The Defence Estate comprises 227,000 hectares freehold and 16,000 hectares leasehold. The Armed Forces have training rights over a further 270,000 hectares (HCDC, 1995). Around 3% of the land owned (44,247 hectares) is in National Parks, but that distribution is uneven, with Northumberland (22%), Dartmoor (15%) and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Parks (5%) having the greater proportions of military land within their boundaries. This presence in protected landscapes has been assessed for its consequences on environmental

protection and use (see for example MacEwen and MacEwen, 1982; Blacksell and Reynolds, 1987; Council for National Parks, 1993). One of the most wide-ranging and comprehensive surveys is Owens' assessment of military live firing in National Parks, which looks at the history and consequences of the use of these protected landscapes for military activities, mostly training (Owens, 1990). Whilst Savege *et al* (1995a) includes a mention of the conservation and public access issues, the driving force and emphasis behind these documents relates to the preparation for the 1997 Public Inquiry. A dominant theme in this literature is that live firing in National Parks is not necessarily desirable but there is a level of need expressed by the MoD which is difficult to deny given the UK's national security and military interests. Most authors accept the military need to train. The critical question is whether this training necessarily has to be conducted across landscapes valued for their environmental and recreational qualities.

The literature specific to the Otterburn Public Inquiries proved to be the best and most easily accessible source of information on the subject (see Doxford & Savege, 1995; RPS Clouston & MoD, 1995; Woodward, 1998, 1999). The OTA is essential to the Army as one of its eight AFTCs (Doxford and Hill, 1998). Elsewhere, Doxford (1995) places the UK's use of protected landscapes within a wider European context. On an international scale Walsh and Tierno (1995) provide a useful contrast to the UK debate in their analysis of military land use in the USA. Similar land use conflicts are apparent with the military having to contend with the powerful Endangered Species Act, a piece of legislation able to close entire training areas if necessary. Public pressure has forced the military to justify their activities to a much greater extent than in the UK which has led to conservation benefits and enhanced co-operation between

the military and conservation agencies. The key conclusion here is that wherever in the world military activities conflict with conservation interests, the onus is increasingly on the military to convince the public that it is a responsible steward of the countryside.

### **Public Access to the Defence Estate**

There has been limited research on visitor access conflicts with military training. The MoD has pledged its commitment to access to its land in National Parks and to conservation in Countryside Commission (1987), but always with the caveat of safety and operational requirements. General discussions on patterns in visitor trends in the countryside are widespread; Bouvaird *et al* (1984), analysing the nature of the demand for countryside recreation in areas such as National Parks, is one example. Interestingly, within this text there is a suggestion that the type of visitor to remote upland areas is an identifiable creature from particular socio-economic groups, differing in some way from other countryside visitors. Curry (1994) and Bromley (1994) provide useful, if fairly standard, further commentary on the types of visits to the countryside and the general visitor profile.

A significant paper is that relating to the recreational use of the OTA and crucially interviews conducted as part of a visitor survey by Cope (1995). This, and a subsequent paper by Cope and Doxford (1997), an update on the previous work, appear to be the only research carried out to date specifically on the OTA with reference to visitor profiles, pressures and perceptions. Cope (1995) provides a useful snapshot of the visitors but has its limitations in the size of

sample (less than 200) and the timing of the survey (May to early August only). Furthermore this survey was only carried out in the Dry Training Area of the Upper Coquet valley, an area always open to the public, therefore caution needs to be used when interpreting any of the data with reference to the more restricted live firing areas of the range. Whilst useful, the limitations of these two papers only go to emphasise the lack of research into the issue of public access restrictions on military sites and any relationships with conservation. Owens (1990) highlights the same lack of data on recreational trends within specific National Parks, a situation that would appear to have changed little since.

This lack of valid data is a key issue. It could be argued that the lack of data on public access issues allows for unsubstantiated claims from the military on the issue. For example, during the OPI the MoD argued that:

“...the benefits of constraints to access is less disturbance to wildlife by the public and this is a positive factor in the conserving the wildlife value of the Estate” (MoD, 1997a, p.8).

At issue here is not so much the statement itself as the lack of data to support it. This is an important point. There is little available published evidence to support or refute this statement either way. What is more striking is the rhetoric in which issues of access and conservation are discussed.

### **The Military, Conservation and Conflict**

The phrases ‘military training’ and ‘National Parks’ do seem to raise concepts of conflict to even those with a passing interest in the countryside and its

development. MacEwen and MacEwen catch the general mood of many authors stating:

“Military training presents in its starkest form the contrast not merely between conflicting governmental policies, but between conflicting aspects of human nature and society” (MacEwan and MacEwen, 1982, p.24).

Time and time again the reports and papers concerning the military presence in training areas, inside and outside of National Parks, refer to the conflict of these issues. Such concerns are not new. As far back as the seminal report from Dower (1945) the potential conflicts within National Parks were apparent, particularly highlighting military occupation especially tank and bombing ranges. The reaffirmation of this view comes in Edwards (1991) when the National Parks Review Panel gave its recommendations as to military activity in National Parks. The panel states that military use of the land is ‘discordant, incongruous and inconsistent with national parks purposes’ and states a long-term objective to remove the military. It is possible that the panel sought to oppose the military presence ideologically whilst working to ‘ameliorate’, as they put it, the military effect within National Parks.

As we have already noted, it is sometimes suggested that military training enhances conservation through restricting public access. The Department of the Environment (DoE, 1995) has supported the idea of the military presence helping to protect valued landscapes from farming and development. With regard to the OTA specifically, the recent Public Inquiry helped to put the Ministry of Defence case in detail. The contention that the military presence can actually conserve the landscape and wildlife due to lack of disturbance was



argued with some vigour in MoD (1997a). In making such statements the same document claims protection of the site due to access restrictions and range management practices as well as the prevention of widespread afforestation experienced elsewhere in the region. See also Owens (1990), Charlton (1996), Countryside Commission (1994) and University of Newcastle (1998), who would all seem generally agreed that afforestation has been avoided without, unfortunately, any reference to solid data to substantiate that claim. The general trends nationally do indicate an increase in afforestation between 1980/81 and 1994/95 for conifers and broad-leaved cover, according to Forestry Commission data in DoE (1996). We would contend that such general trends cannot reliably be applied to the OTA without more detailed, site specific data. There have even been suggestions from the MoD that a move to more live firing AFTCs would be beneficial to nature conservation, noted by Savege *et al* (1995a), but again with no data to support the claim.

In attempting to interpret such seemingly contradictory ideas it is worth noting the level to which conservation appears to be used to offset the military training impacts, a point noted by more than one commentator, see Woodward (1997). Others, including Mason *et al* (1995), have also noted how the military have realised that an environmental stance can also justify, and prevent the loss of, military control of large areas of the countryside. Coulson (1995) has an appreciation of the efforts made by the MoD with regard to its conservation profile but does raise the point often heard elsewhere that conservation happens more by accident than by design. The House of Commons Defence Committee (HCDC, 1994) raises relevant points concerning public access, apparently accepting the relationship between access and the continued toleration of the military presence. The committee acknowledges that if legitimate public access

is carelessly denied then public support for 'legitimate' military activities will be diminished. Statements such as this and the acceptance elsewhere in the same document that defence lands do belong to the public illustrate the fine line walked by the military. It is such references that echo the ideals of Dower (1945) and will continue to inspire those interested individuals and pressure groups of today.

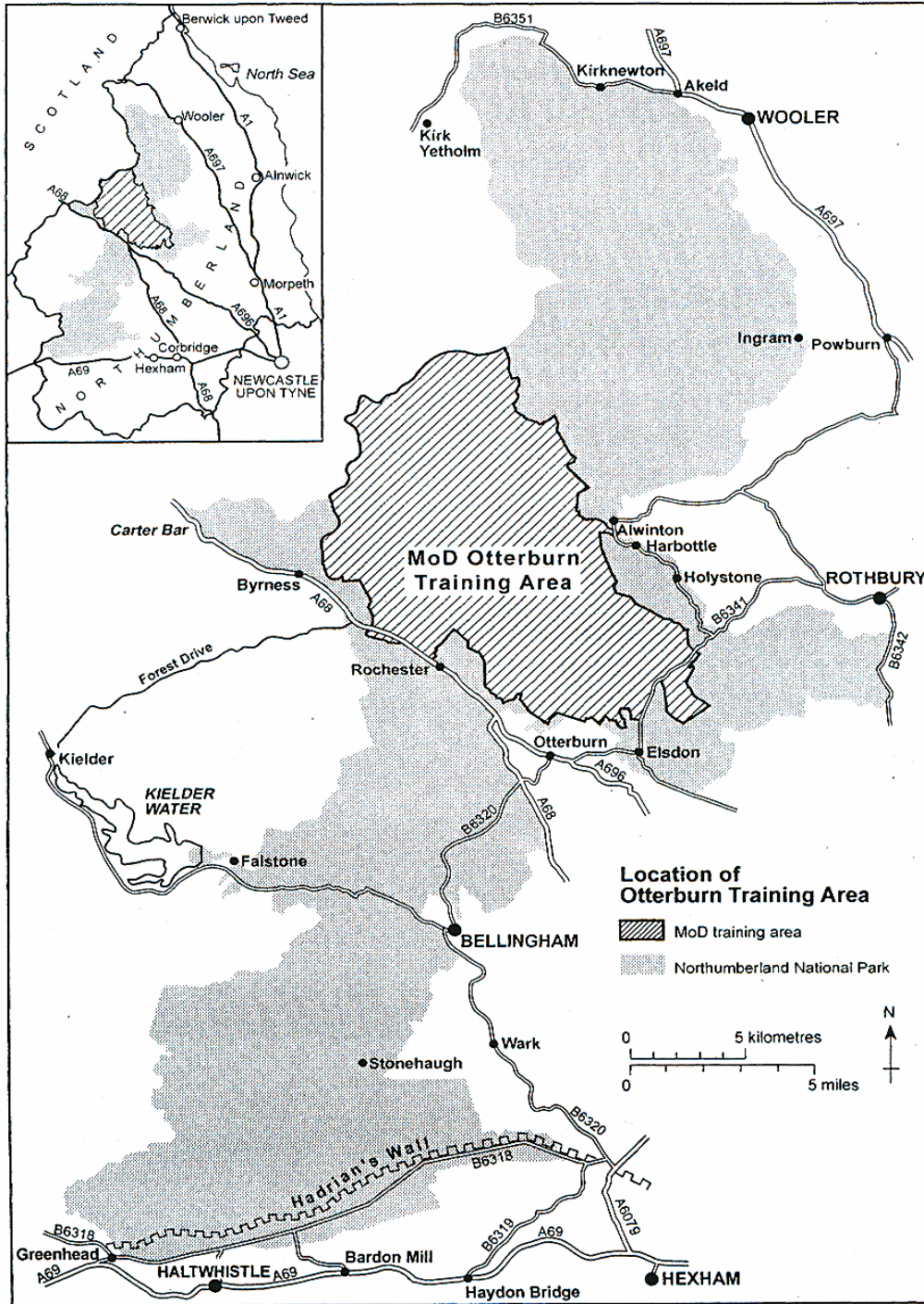
But, if the conservation card is thrown on the table by the military, how well does it stand up to scrutiny? The level of conservation on some military sites in the defence estate is well documented. Porton Down in Wiltshire is lauded both from within the MoD Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment by Pearson (1992), and externally by Shields (1996), for its abundance of butterflies, curlews and Neolithic sites, a stark contrast to the perceived death and destruction associated with the site. Porton Down is further described by some conservationists as the finest wildlife site in Britain (Savege, 1997).

At Otterburn, 12 out of 25 species are present largely due to the MoD's presence (Preston, 1997). The OTA itself contains 11 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), 12 Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCIs) and 50 Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs) (Otterburn AFTC, 1998 and MoD, 1997b). Its conservation value is undoubtedly significant. With such evidence to hand it would seem churlish to deny the MoD some of its thunder on conservation issues; in effect the MoD have little else to raise in their defence. It would not be an unreasonable assumption for any major organisation in a similar situation to maximise these benefits in a similar fashion.

Growing public environmental awareness, focussed on examples such as the OTA Public Inquiry, combined with new European legislation as discussed by

Savege *et al* (1995b), highlights how the military's hand has been forced to some extent by this changing political environment. The military want and need areas such as the OTA and conservation of their estates, whether deliberate or fortuitous, is something they must exploit if they are to swing public and political support in their direction. The publication of their conservation magazine *Sanctuary*, which promotes the wildlife value of areas such as the OTA is just one example of how they seem to be adapting to current PR requirements (on Otterburn, see for example DEO, 1997). In a similar way, Wright (1996), when discussing the loss of the village of Tyneham to the military 50 years ago provides a fascinating general commentary on the military use of conservation to trade off against training. Examples include the use of pictures of owls nesting in ammunition boxes and descriptions of the mutual benefits afforded military training and the environment by conservation activities. Using such depictions can also act in a negative manner to cloud the MoD's perceived priorities. The recent public access map for the OTA boasts a painting of a fox crossing a snowy upland scene, presumably the OTA, on its cover (NNPA and MoD, 1997). This almost quaint scene emphasising the wildlife value of the site contrasts starkly with Otterburn AFTC (1998) which classes foxes as pests controlled by the Border Foxhounds and the gamekeeper. Although a minor point it perhaps symbolises the complexity and contradictions present within the whole debate.

**Figure 2 Location Map of the Otterburn Training Area**



## **CHAPTER 3 THE OTTERBURN TRAINING AREA**

The OTA (more correctly the Otterburn Army Field Training Centre or AFTC) is situated approximately 30 miles to the north west of Newcastle upon Tyne (see the map at Figure 2). There are a further seven AFTCs situated in the UK. It is a mostly upland landscape (see Figure 3) enclosed by river valleys to the west and east with the Scottish border to the north.

**Figure 3 Photographs of the Otterburn Training Area**

Otterburn Training Area



Redesdale



The Army lists their ‘matrix of interrelated uses’ for the OTA as being military training, farming, forestry, conservation and public access (in that order). Their own description of the site as a ‘self catering military theme park’ provides an alternative light-hearted view on the site (Otterburn AFTC, 1998). The majority of British Army weapons systems can be used here with the exception of the Main Battle Tank and some ground to air missiles.

## Site Profile

23,500 hectares – altitude from 150m-550m

10,900-hectare impact area surrounded by Dry Training Area  
(used for blank ammunition and pyrotechnics)

|                   |     |
|-------------------|-----|
| Grassland & Marsh | 64% |
| Heathland         | 32% |
| Bracken           | 2%  |
| Mire              | 1%  |
| Other             | 1%  |

31 tenanted farms with 27,500 breeding ewes & 1200 cattle

1600-ha of managed woodland - 1.134m trees planted since 1986 (53%  
broadleaf)

11 SSSIs, 12 SNCIs and 50 SAMs

102 miles of public rights of way (53 miles byelawed - 49 miles unrestricted  
access)

The Army emphasises the importance of farming to military training as it maintains a realistic living landscape and also reduces the fire risk. Sheep-

stocking rates show that the OTA compares favourably with that of a similar upland training area, Sennybridge AFTC in Wales (Mason *et al*, 1995).

A Conservation Groups exists chaired by the Camp Commandant with representation from the Northumberland National Park Authority, English Nature, Northumberland Wildlife Trust, Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, an expert on birds, an expert on mammals and the Defence Lands Services Conservation Office.

Within the range are significant breeding populations of upland birds including red grouse, grey partridge, lapwing, golden plover, redshank, whinchat, merlin, curlew, black grouse, dipper, kestrel, peregrine and snipe. Other significant wildlife present on the site includes the Large Heath butterfly, foxes, badgers, hares, rabbits, roe deer and adders. Of these the Army classes the rabbits and foxes as pests and controls the former by contract rabbit catchers and the latter by means of the Border Foxhounds and a part time gamekeeper. Some control of the roe deer also takes place by the local Deer Management Group. The Army further state that positive steps are being taken to maintain heather in appropriate areas, control the spread of bracken and improve the habitat for black grouse.

Public access is controlled by byelaws and is restricted when red flags are flown. When these are not flying public access is permitted along rights of ways and MoD tarmac roads. The rights of way in the Dry Training Area in the Upper Coquet valley are open all year round. There is no live firing from 15<sup>th</sup> April to 15<sup>th</sup> May each year for lambing, on Bank Holiday weekends and one weekend a month. This totals around 70 no-firing days per annum.

**Figure 4 Wildlife at the Otterburn Training Area**

**Black Grouse**



**Roe Deer**



**Large Heath Butterfly**



Staff working on the range comprise the Commandant responsible for one Serving Officer (Range Liaison Officer), four Warrant Officers & Sergeants, three Retired Officers (Range Officer, Adjutant & Quartermaster) and around ninety Civilian Staff. Additionally, the OTA employs a Land Agent responsible for the 31 tenanted farms, forestry, contacts with statutory bodies, damage repairs, conservation, planning and development control and land management of MoD areas outside Otterburn AFTC. The Land Agent has a staff of a Head Forester, a Forester, forestry staff (x 2), a Land Warden and clerical and records staff.

The estate impacts on the local economy significantly, directly employing 99 people with a wages bill of £1.4m and sustaining a further 83 farmers and shepherds. The employment of local contractors and the input of funds from the 30,000 troops who use the range each year are also significant factors locally. A figure of £3m is quoted by the Army as being awarded to local or North East contractors for construction and maintenance work annually (Otterburn AFTC, 1998).



The use of the OTA case study for this research seems wholly appropriate considering its size, location and significance to the current military training in the countryside debate. Its size means that it must be considered as one of the most significant training areas in the UK. It also occupies around 22 per cent of the Northumberland National Park (see Figure 2), which in turn enhances the potential of the OTA as a case study for this research. Whilst acknowledging the uniqueness of the other military training areas within the UK the study of the OTA aims to provide an insight into the question of public access on the Defence Estate, particularly in National Parks within the UK as a whole. The nature of military regulation and procedure would seem to indicate that what occurs in the OTA is likely to occur in a not too dissimilar fashion elsewhere. Other military training areas have different landscapes and differing pressures but the basic influence of Government through the MoD is likely to remain constant.

## CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There are a number of possible ways in which research could be conducted into the conservation effects of public access restrictions on the defence estate. This research used a qualitative methodology, for three reasons. First, there is little (if any) extant, reliable data on public access and its impact on the flora and fauna of the OTA. The lack of published data, coupled with the time and budgetary constraints involved in this research made the collection of such data through examination of visitor numbers, environmental effects and validated with control samples, impossible. Second, and following from this, the complexities of the issue render straightforward statistical analysis very difficult, even had appropriate data been available. What factors should be controlled for, and which measured? Which variables weighted and which discounted? Third, and following from the issue of complexity, a methodology was required which could take into account the politics of the issue. As stated earlier, the issue of access and conservation effects is a political one, in that the terms and language in which it is debated are of as much significance for their intended effects on their intended audience, as they are for what they reveal about the facts of the matter. To put it another way, whilst *what is said* about the conservation effects of restricted access is important, as significant are the *ways in which arguments are presented*. The rhetorics or discourses deployed by different participants in the access debate are themselves a significant feature of the debate. For these reasons, a qualitative methodology was chosen which would allow for analysis of the language used by participants grappling with the complexities of the access/conservation debate.

The analysis of rhetoric and discourse in essence means the analysis of text, by which we mean written or spoken statements about the issue under investigation – what might be termed textual data. The generation of textual data was straightforward. Two major sources were used.

The first source of textual data came from interviews. In Chapter 3 we outlined some of the principal ‘actors’ in the debate over the conservation effects of restricted public access to military lands. A sample of these were chosen for interview. These were the Northumberland Wildlife Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds North of England Office (RSPB), the Natural History Society of Northumbria, the Northumberland National Park Authority, the Countryside Commission North East Region, the OTA Range Officer, the OTA Senior Land Agent, the Council for the Protection of Rural England Northumberland Branch, the Ramblers Association Northern Area and English Nature. With the exception of English Nature, representatives from all these organisations agreed to be interviewed for the study.

Interviews were conducted following a pre-prepared schedule broadly identical in each case but with minor variations to account for each individuals’ role in the access debate (see Figure 5). The interviews were conducted by Andrew Cattermole, and recorded using a Sony Walkman Professional tape recorder (with the exception of interviews with the CPRE and the Ramblers, during which notes were taken). On completion the tapes were transcribed.

## Figure 5 Interview schedule

**Research Question:** Does restricted public access to military training areas enhance the conservation of these areas?

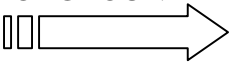
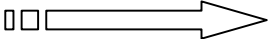
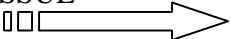
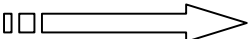
1. What role do you and your organisation play in the conservation issues within the OTA?
2. What is the allocated budget for that?
3. How much influence do you feel that you have on the conservation activities?
4. Which aspects of conservation in the OTA do you feel may be enhanced by the current public access restrictions and which are not?
5. Are there any specific examples of positive or negative conservation issues, within the OTA, which you would highlight as significant?
6. Are there areas /issues in the OTA which you feel the military need to address which would contribute to the enhancement of conservation issues? Are they related in any way to the amount of public access?
7. Do you feel the current level of public access to the OTA is acceptable?
8. If the level of public access were increased what impacts, positive or negative, would this have on conservation issues on the site?
9. What is your overall view on the research question or hypothesis underpinning this research?

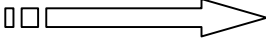
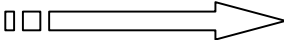
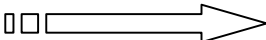
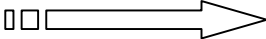
The interview transcripts were then analysed, using a system of coding to sort the data according to categories *as they appeared* within the textual data (see Fielding and Lee, 1991; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 1987). Coding essentially seeks to look at a sentence or paragraph and ask ‘what does it mean, what is the speaker trying to say?’ There are many systems of coding which are all relatively complex but achieve the same basic goal. As Figure 6 below illustrates, once this has been decided the aim is to place the responses into a number of ‘pigeonholes’ according to their general meanings and inferences. As Oppenheim notes:

“We do not code the contents of the responses, but rather the framework within which the respondents seem to be thinking, their frame of reference” (Oppenheim 1992, p.274).

The structure of the interviews appeared to work successfully as the interviewees all seemed to divulge much useful information based on these questions without additional prompting, leaving much to be coded. On completion of coding a total of 34 codes were identified, some relevant, some not. These codes could be classed into nine main headings containing the relevant codes.

**Figure 6 Composition of Coding Summary**

| <b>SUMMARY<br/>CODE</b> | <b>TITLE</b>  | <b>ORIGINAL<br/>CODE</b>  |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| A                       | INTERVIEWEES BACKGROUND<br>  | 1. Input into conservation<br>2. Conservation Group value<br>3. Reason for cons. work<br>4. Functions of Hab. Grp.  |
| B                       | REAL LIFE SITUATION<br>      | 5. Organisation influence<br>6. Personality dependent<br>7. Evidence of enhancement<br>8. Prioritising of work<br>9. Conflicts with others<br>10. Other range comparisons |
| C                       | KEY CONSERVATION ISSUES   | 11. Grazing & afforestation<br>12. Birds<br>13. Value of area   |
| D                       | COMPLEXITY OF ISSUE<br>    | 14. Complexity of issue<br>15. Lack of information  |
| E                       | PERCEPTION OF MILITARY<br> | 16. Suspicion of Army motive<br>17. Army misleading<br>18. Promises & incentives?<br>19. Military dictatorial<br>20. Views on the military                                |

|    |                            |   |  |
|----|----------------------------|---|--|
| F. | ACTUAL INPUTS              |    | 21. Budget allocation<br>22. Resource allocation<br>23. Under-resourcing of conservation   |
| F. | VISITOR PRESSURE PROFILE   |    | 24. Type of access<br>25. Desire to wander<br>26. Popularity of area<br>27. Perception of access<br>28. Varying class of visitor |
| G. | IMPACTS OF ALTERING ACCESS |    | 29. Positive for cons.<br>30. Negative for cons.<br>31. Indifference   |
| H. | DO RESTRICTIONS CONSERVE?  |  | 32. Acceptability of access<br>33. Hypothesis view<br>34. Hypothesis caveat  |

## **CHAPTER 5 PUBLIC ACCESS AND CONSERVATION ON THE OTA**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we present an analysis of the textual data collected during the research. The key question being addressed was whether restricted public access to military training areas enhances the conservation value of such areas. As we have discussed, one way of answering this question is to examine the terms in which the issue is discussed by those with an active role in the management and conservation of the OTA. Such a method has to take account of the complexity of the issue. It also has to be rigorous enough to provide a coherent and convincing explanation the rhetorics and arguments visible in the textual data. Accordingly, using an interpretative framework based on the coding of qualitative data, analysis was conducted and the results presented here with the grouping of different codes under six sub-headings. We discuss each in turn.

### **The Roles and Influence of Participants**

We start with an assessment of the roles and influence of each of the major participants in the debates over conservation at the OTA. This is important because of power balances that discussions over influence reveal.

Of the conservation organisations interviewed, both the Northumberland Wildlife Trust (NWT) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) are represented on the Conservation Group and the Habitats Group at the OTA.



This, they feel, gives them a valued input into the conservation activities at the OTA. On a regular basis the NWT has designated the Sites of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCIs) on the range and the RSPB has been involved for some time with bird population surveys and the determination of a monitoring strategy in conjunction with the Army. Phrases such as *'the Army do take notice of us'* (NWT 3)<sup>1</sup> and *'we have quite a lot of influence'* (RSPB 3) are indicative of the views held by these two organisations. However, the NWT also stated that their input at Conservation Group meetings is perhaps limited, as they are more *'sit and listen type affairs'* (NWT 3). The Northumberland National Park Authority (NNPA) is also heavily involved with the Habitats Group with their Conservation Officer charged with the responsibility of writing the Habitats Management Plan. This overall Integrated Land Management Plan appears to have a number of aims but is something that will only come to fruition *'if the money comes forward'* (RSPB 1). This perception of ideas, plans and promises being realised only on condition of the NoPD approval is a common theme discussed later in this chapter.

Whilst the NWT, RSPB and NNPA appear to have the most regular, relevant and coherent input into conservation matters at the OTA the views of other interviewees are also significant. The (former) Countryside Commission, whilst acknowledging their important role as the national advisory body on landscape recreation and conservation to the government, appeared keen to distance themselves from direct input into the OTA debate. Stating that they *'were quite at arms length as to the management of Northumberland National Park'* (Countryside Commission 1) possibly revealed a lack of willingness to be

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewees are quoted only with reference to their respective organisations. The numbers denote the particular question to which the interviewee was responding; see the interview schedule at Figure 5.

controversial on National Park issues despite also stating that *'it's fair to say we have a fair amount of influence ... we can reach an independent view and seek to influence Government accordingly.'* (Countryside Commission 3).

In terms of financial commitment to conservation activities at Otterburn, all of those parties interviewed stated that there was no budget specifically aimed at the conservation issues on the OTA. This is probably not surprising as each organisation's funds are finite and the OTA, with its military ownership and management, is just one of many areas to be covered. Whilst no specific funds are allocated to the OTA the direction of resources and time to conservation on the estate is something which does appear to be happening. The RSPB have supported the Army in the past with liaisons prior to the Inquiry, input into the North of England Black Grouse Project (NEBGP), bird counts and general advice. The RSPB, English Nature, MoD and the Game Conservancy Trust, with the aim of protecting existing numbers and creating habitats to promote numbers, jointly fund the NEBGP. Similarly the NWT have assisted the Army with a time and advisory input and whilst not specific to the OTA some of their Otter Budget has been spent on otter protection within the range. As discussed earlier, the Countryside Commission sees its role as an 'at arms length' advisory one, leaving budgetary matters to the MoD and the NNPA. For its part the NNPA sees its role as advisor, possibly encouraging the MoD in certain directions with the limited influence they have. NNPA was encouraged by some progress on funding issues stating *'more recently the MoD has funded much of the work that's gone on. In the past we would have had to be putting money in for grant aid'* (NNPA 2). This progress has not been quantified in monetary terms and this increased willingness to fund projects, as NNPA admits, does still have a training element built in and is therefore not carried out

for purely altruistic reasons on the part of the Army. The Land Agent at Otterburn, confirming his lack of a ring-fenced conservation budget, qualified his statement by highlighting that *'we have a Rural Estate Maintenance Budget which we spend on any rural works'* (OTA: LA 2).

Of the remaining groups, the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), the Ramblers and the Natural History Society of Northumbria (NHSN) are very much outside of any direct input with the CPRE's opinions apparently acknowledged slightly more than those of the Ramblers. The views of the NHSN lend well-qualified and authoritative weight to the debate even though they themselves admit that their only real input has been at the Public Inquiry when they felt a natural history view should be heard.

A number of interviewees remarked that the OPI had left a number of bridges between groups in need of mending following clashes at the Inquiry. The NNPA noted that *'We're conscious of having to rebuild relationships here after the Inquiry'* (NNPA 1), a view reinforced by the NHSN stating *'at the Inquiry we did expose ourselves as being in disagreement with the Ramblers'* (NHSN 1). None of these disagreements would seem to be irreparable but the regularity of similar comments from other parties would indicate the need for a period of reconciliation. It is here that issues of personality come to the fore; whilst all of those interviewed represented a group view it is the individuals on the ground who govern the success or otherwise of conservation on the OTA. A fact that became very apparent whilst interviewing was that the conservation organisations do genuinely value the work of the Conservation Group and the Habitat Group and consequently put real effort into making them work. Comments such as *'at those meetings we tend to get the people who are*

*actually involved in the actual conservation issues and those personalities tend to be genuinely interested'* (NWT 3), and a slightly more reserved *'it could be that there are people in the Army who do it just because they want to protect wildlife'* (NHSN 4) bear testament to that. Consequently it should be acknowledged that the conservation work that does take place is due in no small part to the commitment of individuals both within and outside the OTA. Furthermore, it was felt that the OTA Land Agent was particularly assiduous in ensuring that conservation was prioritised within the MoD land management agenda. For example, the NNPA were keen to highlight that *'more recently the Land Agent has acted very adroitly in getting the best for conservation and farmers'* (NNPA 5). The RSPB emphasised this point stating *'if they're [the military range management personnel] really into conservation then things happen, if they're not they don't'* (RSPB 3).

Conversely, the Ramblers took a different stance seeming aggrieved at what they believe is the intransigence of the Army in relation to their desire to have an input into access issues on the range. The Ramblers, in common with the NWT and the RSPB, see the Conservation Group as a useful exercise. The proposed Environmental Steering Group was welcomed, with the caveat that its remit should also include access issues; *'there's no consultation despite our requests for two representatives from NGOs on the Environmental Steering Group, we would like an input but we don't really have one at the moment'* (Ramblers 1).

## The Key Conservation Issues

Interviewees were generally in agreement as to the main conservation issues at the OTA. It would seem that the concerns common to the conservation groups revolve around the disturbance of birds during the breeding season, overgrazing and plant damage. Both the OTA staff and the wildlife organisations agree that bird disturbance is a problem, and it is here that the public access issue is first highlighted. The Land Agent stated that *'bird disturbance is a problem just at specific times of year'* (OTA: LA 4) and was supported by the NHSN when the latter added that *'the principle problems of public access are trampling of plants and birds'* (NHSN 1). The RSPB's main concern was that *'ground nesting birds are most obviously going to be potentially disturbed'* (RSPB 4) by humans but, this interviewee added, *'the key concern isn't necessarily people but dogs, people on footpaths are probably not a problem but dogs off the lead could have a serious impact'* (RSPB 4).

With regard to the issue of overgrazing, the views of the NHSN were important, as although some general views were voiced elsewhere, the NHSN felt that this was their particular field of expertise. Their feeling that much of the area was overgrazed, stating that *'the proportion of white moor and rough grasses, a consequence of overgrazing, is high'* (NHSN 7), was in direct contradiction to a view held by the NNPA and the OTA staff. The NHSN were supported by the RSPB who also felt that the area was overgrazed, adding *'recently there have been positive steps (by the Army) which will reduce the overgrazing problem over the winter'* (RSPB 5). The OTA Land Agent was very specific on this issue stating *'the level of grazing within the range is less than outside'* (OTA: LA 4) and was supported by the NNPA who added *'they've maintained a low*

*grazing level and restricted land improvement*' (NNPA 5). There was no apparent reason for this difference of opinion and none of the groups offered any data to support their views.

The belief that the Army presence has prevented large-scale afforestation is a common view amongst many parties despite a lack of solid evidence to substantiate it. A comment from the Ramblers stating '*if the Army hadn't been there then much of the area would have been afforested*' (Ramblers 4) was representative of views also held by all of the interviewees with the exception of the Countryside Commission who didn't comment specifically. Nevertheless, the Countryside Commission's agreement with these views is highlighted elsewhere (Countryside Commission, 1994) and echoed by Charlton (1996) in an archaeological appraisal of the OTA and by Owens (1990) in her discussion on live firing in National Parks.

The OTA is not an isolated case but part of the extensive Defence Estate, comprising 227,000 hectares freehold, 16,000 hectares leasehold and interests in a further 270,000 hectares (House of Commons Defence Committee, 1994). The OTA was used as a case study of this wider estate and some references and comparisons to other properties and training areas were made in the interviews. The Land Agent argued that they '*are doing more here than at any other estate because commercial return is not our main objective so we can legitimately spend money to enhance the military environment*' (OTA: LA 6). He expanded on this view, both in interview and with subsequent clarification, suggesting that at Otterburn the priority was the maintenance of both the environment and a training landscape, and that in the management of the training area this took precedence over maximising rent levels in the management of the estate (given

the correlation between rents and stock intensity levels). MoD defence estate management policies and practices facilitated this at Otterburn; *'some of my compatriots elsewhere are more interested in getting money in. Their view is that they should get as much money in from the estate as possible, which is not my view. There is a degree of interpretation of MoD policy'* (OTA: LA 6). He was slightly contradicted when the Range Officer stated that *'most military training areas are the same'* (OTA: RO 6), but is still supported when saying *'in terms of any comparable private estate we're probably doing more'* (OTA: RO 6). This is perhaps a view to be expected but even some groups who might be expected to criticise the OTA specifically have some supportive views. The RSPB took a pragmatic view on this stating that *'they're not the best and they're not the worst at Otterburn, there are some steps being taken, but they could always do more'* (RSPB 3) but they were less certain when comparing the OTA with other areas. The RSPB echoed the points made by Pearson (1992) on Porton Down (an area thought to have benefited from the military presence) when they enthused that *'if you look at Porton Down, which is an amazing chalk grassland site, which has never been ploughed, fertilised, had pesticides on it, it's never been improved agriculturally, whereas the OTA has a lot of hill farms. I suspect the OTA won't be as heavily intensified as other upland areas but general trends will still be the same in terms of sheep numbers and loss of hay meadows to silage, use of sheep dips, so it's not that distinct as opposed to neighbouring areas'* (RSPB 4).

For their part, the Countryside Commission commented on training areas generally by stating *'some of the impacts of training in terms of the way they manage grazing have potentially good effects'* (Countryside Commission 4). Most of the other parties interviewed declined to comment on this point but

perhaps surprisingly even the Ramblers conceded that in terms of public access *'the access is a lot better than at other ranges'* (Ramblers 7).

### **Visitor and Access Profile**

Statements that access restrictions can enhance a military training area's conservation value required clarification, as part of the interview process, as to the type of access being referred to. Types of land available, timing of that availability and the uses made of that land were all highlighted by interviewees.

In terms of public access the NWT was clear that *'what would be of benefit would be an increase in time access'* (NWT 7) but did add that *'it does depend on the level of military access also, if the public is excluded but soldiers do more damage then public access is not such a factor'* (NWT 9). The RSPB were also not as concerned about damage caused by public access as might be expected stating *'the big issue here is weapons not people'* (RSPB 6) but they did also raise another concern with respect to the presence of dogs. *'People on footpaths are probably not a problem but with dogs careering round chomping nests, that could have a serious impact'* (RSPB 4). They repeated similar worries throughout the interview that highly sensitive areas should be avoided by both soldiers and the public at breeding times but people on footpaths were not a concern unless they were irresponsible with their dogs. The Countryside Commission made a valuable point in support of increased access when they said *'if people in society are going to have an understanding of conservation and it is to be seen as something important in generations to come it's necessary for people to have contact with it to understand it'* (Countryside Commission 4). This is a crucial point.



The Ramblers came across as very keen and committed to additional access both at Otterburn and on a more general national scale. They accept that total access is not practical at Otterburn but add *'there needs to be a lot more routes'* (RAM 6). They also expand on the notion of time access highlighted by the NWT when they say *'they (the Army) need to take more account of when demand for public access is there such as school holidays'* (RAM 7). They go on to say *'public notice of access times could be better and the length of notice given could also be improved, the type of access needs to be increased, we would like more off road routes'* (RAM 7). These seem constructive and sensible points which the Ramblers feel have not been addressed.

For the Land Agent the issue was that *'access is not all about quantity, it's about quality'* arguing that *'most people don't want the area promoted because the ardent hill walkers' experience is detracted if he is following a whole line of red and orange anoraks'* (OTA: LA 7). The Ramblers supported this point, adding that *'the charm of the area is its solitude so a huge increase in visitor numbers wouldn't be desirable'* (RAM 4). The Land Agent made the point that it was possible to identify different types of visitor, highlighting the Coquet Valley situation saying *'they are two different animals, the people in the valley bottom park next to each other whereas the walkers are spread out and they have a completely different quality experience'* (OTA: LA 7). This view of there being varying classes of countryside visitor is something that pervades many other comments. The CPRE talked of protecting the area from *'certain types'* (CPRE 8) and the Countryside Commission used exactly the same term when they stated that *'the upland environment does seem to attract a certain type of countryside user who tends to be more educated [with respect to countryside matters and pursuits]'* (Countryside Commission 8). Clearly, even

for those advocating increased access to the ranges, there are issues concerning the walking experience on the ranges which follow from increased access.

NNPA took an opposing view to the OTA staff on the access issue stating that *'we feel the quantity and quality of access could be improved significantly'* and concurring with the Ramblers' view on increasing access times stating *'with more directed training more access could be offered especially in the summer when people want to use it'* (both NNPA 7). NNPA also confirmed a common view that *'much of the summer use is low level and confined to small areas'* (NNPA 7). They also put forward useful suggestions as to the practicality of the Army's policy of closing the whole range even when not all in use as they said *'we believe the public can be safely directed round training'* (NNPA 7). This issue of range flagging is a contentious point: range management personnel maintain that the Otterburn, Redesdale and Bellshiel ranges are flagged separately, and are only raised when dangerous military training is taking place. Some interviewees were of the opinion that flagging was less discriminate with a net consequence of restricting public access unnecessarily.

In an unexpected revelation the OTA staff seemed keen to promote access in one particular way – that of using the training activities as some form of public spectacle. The Land Agent stated that *'we have a specific resource that people want to see ... that's a unique thing that we don't promote, I think we should'* (OTA: LA 7). Whether this would go as far as the 'self catering theme park' suggested in the Army's own site description (Otterburn AFTC 1998) is unclear although the Range Officer did make it clear that *'what we wouldn't do would be to use military training as a theatrical performance'* (OTA: RO 7). Reservations may exist on this point as he goes on to talk of the desire for

visitors to come on firing days and the possibility that *'there would be organised safaris to go and see it'* (OTA: RO 7). These, it was later confirmed, were understood by the Range Officer as a mechanism by which visitors could be taken to see military activities and thus providing further access without detriment to conservation activities on the range.

When discussing access to this area it would be wrong to automatically assume that there was a demand to have freedom all over the range. Most of those interviewed, including the OTA Land Agent, agreed that that most people tend to stick to footpaths limiting any damage. As the RSPB says *'people on footpaths are probably not a problem'* (RSPB 4), a thought echoed by the NWT, the Countryside Commission, NHSN, CPRE and NNPA. The Range Officer seemed unperturbed about the impacts of any legislation resulting from the government's Green Paper (DETR 1998) stating *'I don't think many people will actually exercise the right to roam, it's more of a perceived freedom than an actual one'* (OTA: RO 8). As the government announced its intentions on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1999 it would seem that as the Defence Estate is a byelawed area, the Range Officer is likely to be proved correct. The Ramblers themselves accept that a total freedom to roam on the OTA would not be practical. There is a common perception amongst many of those interviewed that the remoteness and relative inaccessibility of the area will always mean that visitor pressure is light. Northumberland National Park currently has the lowest numbers of visitors of all National Parks (NNPA 1998). Most accepted that any increase in numbers that did occur with additional access would be small and manageable. The NHSN's view that *'simple trampling over the hills in the sorts of numbers that are conceivable wouldn't make much difference'* (NHSN 8) are a fair reflection of views held by NNPA, Countryside Commission, CPRE and the

RSPB. The Land Agent highlighted the fact that Northumberland is the least visited of all National Parks and was firm in his belief when he stated that *'I don't believe there's a huge demand to walk across the OTA [i.e. the impact areas on the range]'* (OTA: LA 7,) and was supported in this by the Range Officer who adds *'if demand exceeds supply it will be in other areas first'* (OTA: RO 8).

The general acceptance of the lack of popularity of the area being because of its location is tempered by the feeling that the Army is not exactly going out of its way to correct certain misconceptions about the level of access. There was a suggestion from the Ramblers and others that people only know the area as MoD property and consequently always avoid it. The NHSN confirmed this, stating that *'many people misunderstand the current level of access, see the MoD signs and think it's all out of bounds. A lot of people have never been on the range because they never thought they could'* (NHSN 8). Even the OTA staff accept this with the Land Agent adding *'the biggest problem with access is education, most people's perception is it's a military training area and people are not permitted'* (OTA: LA 7). NNPA expressed a view on that issue stating *'the whole idea of access is put off by the training area so we need people to know the areas they can visit 365 days a year'* (NNPA 7). The automatic question might therefore be what are the Army going to do about that? The Land Agent went on to say *'the only way we are going to get over that problem is we're talking about possibly building a visitor centre'* (OTA: LA 7). He confirmed subsequently that a visitor centre would provide a mechanism to enable the message on access to be communicated more directly to the visiting public. For some, this seems an interesting manipulation of the access argument, with the MoD willing to talk about increasing access opportunities

by means of a visitor centre which will only be built if the NoPD for the developments to the OTA infrastructure is approved.

### **Perceptions of the Military**

The issue addressed in the research question surrounds the validation of the Army contention of an alleged conservation benefit gained from reduced public access to their land. The complexity of this issue has already been highlighted and therefore the willingness of certain parties and members of the public to rely on the Army viewpoint to clarify this complexity bears further investigation. Although the interview schedule did not directly ask for views on the Army, the interviews did reveal a considerable number of views on how the Army's actions were perceived.

There was certainly an amount of suspicion regarding the Army's motives in many areas. For example, the NWT believed that the Habitats Group was '*a project prompted mainly by the OTA Inquiry, although the Army might not agree with that view*' (NWT 1). The NHSN would seem to echo this opinion stating '*I wouldn't care to say what the original motivation was but I'm sure that public approval must be one of them*', and further adding that '*there may be a certain amount of deliberately keeping the public happy by deciding to put effort into this matter [i.e. conservation].*' (both NHSN 4). The NHSN also pointed out that there appeared to be a deliberate policy at the OTA, of using redundant structures on the range as '*bargaining pawns*' (NHSN 6). The NHSN highlighted how the '*Estate Manager found himself saying the reasons some structures had not been demolished long ago was that they were being kept for later years to show a balanced improvement*' (NHSN 6). This point

was debated at the OPI where it was rejected by the range management team. Clearly, there is a gap between range management policy and practice on the one hand, and perceptions of that policy and practice on the other.

This gap was also apparent when some interviewees spoke of their perception that conservation works would only be completed if permission was granted to carry out the developments proposed in the NoPD. With regard to the Habitat Management Plan the RSPB highlighted how *'if the MoD are granted the application it should definitely happen'* (RSPB 1) and the NWT also raised concerns about the appointment of a Conservation Officer *'all of which the Army say will happen once the Inquiry is resolved'* (NWT 5). These potential 'sweeteners' promised by the Army are added to when the OTA Land Agent suggested that *'if we get this decision from the Inquiry we would put up £100,000 into the provision of a visitor centre'* (OTA: LA 7). Again, this had been a point of contention at the OPI. A mitigation package tied to the NoPD included environmental conservation works to be undertaken if the proposed developments went ahead. Some parties to the Inquiry were of the alternative view that many of these environmental conservation works should proceed in any case, as part of good estate management practice, regardless of the acceptance or refusal of the NoPD.

A perception of the strength of the Army position was apparent in many of the comments made by interviewees. An underlying feeling of the Army being overly dictatorial in some instances was a common theme in many discussions. One interviewee talked of Conservation Group members having to 'sit and listen', rather than participating fully (a point contested by the range management team). The RSPB raised concerns that more research was required

regarding human disturbance on birds because *'what there is is ambiguous but that is interpreted (by the Army) as therefore not being a problem rather than we should do more research'*. The RSPB therefore have justifiable worries about the Army's attitude of *'we can't research forever, the studies that have been done show its not a problem'* (both RSPB 6). Many interviewees felt that the Army was perhaps overly autocratic.

This perception rests in turn on a fundamental difference of opinion. For the MoD, the OTA exists as a military training area, owned and used expressly for that purpose. Although efforts were made to ensure the compatibility between farming, conservation and military training, ultimately that training activity had to be given priority. For other groups, the OTA exists as part of a National Park, and inherent with that status comes a set of assumptions about the most appropriate uses and practices to be carried out thereon. For some interviewees, any action that limited those uses and practices could be interpreted as symptomatic of autocracy on the part of the MoD as owners and managers of the OTA.

The interviewee from the Countryside Commission pointed to this difference of opinion and the consequences for conservation. *'[T]here is an ease by which the military, by virtue of their power, and having a sort of sole purpose of using the land to train troops does make it quite easy sometimes to meet some objectives without some of the complexities of land ownership'* (Countryside Commission 9).

In general, and as might be expected, there were mixed views on the MoD and Army. The NHSN, which at the OPI had asked some searching questions of the

consequences of military activity for conservation, was still happy to point to the good work done in the past stating that the Army was a good landowner and that they *'had protected the environment with great care in the past'* (NHSN 4). The CPRE were less inclined to criticise the Army's past record but raised a number of concerns as to the impacts of the NoPD echoing previous comments that *'their presence was incompatible with the ideals of National Parks'* (CPRE 8). The Ramblers also felt that some of the access issues arose because *'the rules are quite restrictive on the range because the Army is liable for any injury resulting from ordnance explosion. Because of this they are perhaps too cautious as to the areas open to access'* (Ramblers 4). At the OTA itself the Land Agent admitted that the *'MoD has been very bad at public relations, but its been improving in recent years'* adding that in the past *'we've been bad at putting plans on paper....you asked for documentary evidence and there isn't any'* (OTA: LA 9). The situation was now felt to have been rectified with initiatives such as the Integrated Land Management Plans (soon to be completed) and plans for the management of Habitats and SSSIs.

### **Complexity of the Issue**

As we noted in Chapter 1, the complexity of this issue soon became apparent once research had begun. When the various parties were consulted, particularly in relation to conservation enhancement through access restrictions and evidence of positive or negative conservation issues on the OTA, very few definite answers came forward. The RSPB stated *'it's not a place where you could ever disentangle military training and access'* (RSPB 4) and the NWT underlined the difficulty of providing evidence stating *'there's not really anything tangible'* (NWT 4). The Countryside Commission questioned whether



it was possible to *'compare the impacts (of military training) with those of people walking around'* (Countryside Commission 4). Characteristically they managed to step back from any overly provocative statements when questioned further on the impacts of increased public access on the site stating *'its difficult for me to say'* (Countryside Commission 8). NNPA had a view that *'making links between training and conservation is difficult, there's very little research and evidence to go on'* and summarised the complexity well when they stated *'we are opposed to training intensification but what that means has never been defined'* (both NNPA 3). Groups such as the NHSN also found it difficult to be conclusive on many issues because of the lack of valid comparable data. They stated that *'if you want to prove a conservation gain you're going to have to find a place where things have changed from open access to closed and there are figures for the wildlife before and after, I don't know of such a place'* (NHSN 9). The Ramblers, perhaps due to their simpler agenda, didn't highlight complexity as a major issue although they did acknowledge that *'it's difficult to say'* how access interrelates with conservation (Ramblers 4). A comment from the OTA Land Agent stating *'it's difficult to separate public access from range management'* (OTA: LA 4) does act as confirmation of the lack of clear cut boundaries in this debate. The Range Officer passed no particular comments as to the complexity but that may be due to some extent to the military background which perhaps tends to perceive matters in fairly defined ways. The CPRE didn't pass comment on this area either, perhaps that was a reflection of the complexity but that is unconfirmed. Comments from most of those interviewed illustrated that the inherent complexity in proving the conservation value of the estate covers the uniqueness of the site, lack of data kept by the Army or anyone else and problems of comparing it with other sites.

## **Do Access Restrictions Conserve?**

When asked directly for a response to the hypothesis statement (that public access restrictions enable conservation), interviewees fell broadly into two camps. The RSPB gave a guarded agreement with the hypothesis stating *'if you compare two areas, one with public access and one with none the chances are the productivity of the one with no access might be better'* (RSPB 4). They did add the caveat that they were keen to have considerably more research done on the access issue. The NWT were more definite in their assertion that *'on balance that is probably true'* (NWT 9) whilst the CPRE were a little more circumspect stating that *'it would be difficult to see how that might be'* (CPRE 9). NHSN also felt that *'the restrictions probably have protected it, there's far more wildlife there than if there had been totally unrestricted access'* (NHSN 9). A more politically cautious response from the Countryside Commission indicated that if the site were better in conservation terms *'is that really the effect of restricted access? It's more likely to be the effect of grazing management'* (Countryside Commission 9). As with the RSPB they were keen to stress the need for more information, adding *'I would be wary of conclusions drawn'* (Countryside Commission 9).

In contrast to this NNPA were adamant that *'we don't accept that because the public is kept out of Otterburn that that is good for conservation'* (NNPA 7). They firmly believe this view, adding *'it's a view that's often put forward but it can't be substantiated, it may be a factor but probably not'* (NNPA 9). Such a view, taking an opposing stance to the NWT, RSPB and NHSN continues to lend weight to the complexity of the issues. NNPA are not alone in disagreeing with the hypothesis, the Ramblers were equally sceptical simply stating *'I*

*would disagree with it'* (Ramblers 9). They continued with this opposing view, adding *'The Ramblers can produce examples of areas where public access is much greater and the level of conservation has not suffered'* (Ramblers 9; see Sidaway, 1990). However, they were willing to concede that *'if the Army hadn't been there then much of the area would probably have been afforested'* (RAM 9). This leaves an interesting situation with the conservation lobby generally agreeing with the central hypothesis guiding this research, and with the Park Authority and main access lobby taking an opposing stance.

Interestingly, the OTA staff did reiterate the Army stance that originally prompted this hypothesis but in doing so contradicted themselves to a certain extent. Rather than push the access issue as being the true conservation reason the Land Agent said *'here, public access, in terms of the conservation aspect is not the major player, it's a factor'* (OTA: LA 9). This seems to very much play down the impact of public access restrictions and is reinforced when he continued *'if you ascribe ratings to these things I would say that the restriction on public access probably rates less than 10% in terms of other military activity, management of farms and farming activity'* (OTA: LA 9). This view is reinforced by the Range Officer who stated that *'the management regimes, forestry and planting are much more important than the public access issue'* (OTA: RO 9).

The majority of groups contributed opinions to this hypothesis producing a wide range of opinions and the Army to a certain extent changed their stance on the access issue. Such results certainly strengthen the belief that the debate is a complex one.

## **CHAPTER 6      CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Key Conclusions**

The objective of this study was to establish whether restricted public access to military training areas did enhance the conservation of those areas. It has been a lengthy process to analyse all of the various components of this debate and much unexpected information has come to the fore. Before a final conclusion as to the hypothesis could be arrived at the issues of each group's role, conservation priorities, visitor profile, Army motives and the subject's complexity had to be taken into account. In essence the hypothesis cannot be fully tested because of the complexity of the debate. Instead, a number of conclusions have been arrived at, based on the evaluation of the information collected through the interview process. What this evaluation equates to is that the specific hypothesis underpinning the research question – that restricted public access promotes environmental conservation on military training areas - is accepted by some of those interviewed but opposed by others. This revelation of the debate's complexity is tempered by the possibly more significant conclusion that public access is not the major component in conservation issues. The research conclusions are summarised as follows:

## Figure 7 Key Conclusions

1. The hypothesis cannot be fully tested due to the complexity of the issues.
2. Conservation and access groups have limited influence in conservation decisions.
3. The Army overstates the value of the Conservation and Habitats Groups whilst excluding important groups e.g. the Ramblers Association.
4. There is a lack of comparative data but it is likely the Army presence has contributed to the conservation value of the OTA estate.
5. Current Army policy regarding publication, timing and notice of access is inadequate and often inappropriate.
6. The Army uses the conservation issue to enhance their public profile.
7. The Army are seeking to validate their presence at Otterburn by promoting training activities as an attraction.
8. Access restrictions have contributed to the conservation value of the estate but are significantly less important than the estate management regime.
9. A managed increase in public access would not significantly impact on conservation.
10. Whilst Otterburn is an excellent case study for the hypothesis the individuality of each AFTC means generalisation is often difficult.

In realistic terms it would seem that whilst various groups have some advisory and consultation roles, no group or collection of groups has any real influence. The public pressure groups, such as the Ramblers and the CPRE, although very vocal on the OTA issue seem to receive varying degrees of acknowledgement from the Army. It is a little difficult to draw a full conclusion as to the CPRE's

view due to the incomplete data provided but they argued that although the Army has done some conservation work the landscape would be improved if the Army were not present.

Whilst the Army take conservation into account the reality is that conservation will always come second to military training. Despite the goodwill and best efforts of many genuinely interested individuals, including OTA staff, the Land Agent concedes that all work must have military benefit. This stance essentially states that conservation is a side issue and an often fortuitous by-product of the training environment created at Otterburn. Consequently, there can only be so far that the Army can go with conservation but what they do is publicised well. This position is no surprise as it merely restates the view outlined in Countryside Commission (1987) of the MoD's commitment to conservation and access in National Parks with the caveat of safety and operational requirements. The Army overstates the worth and effectiveness of the Conservation and Habitats Groups allowing the involvement of respected organisations such as the RSPB, NWT and NNPA to lend a certain amount of kudos to the Army's claims regarding nature conservation. All of those groups given a voice on the Conservation or Habitats Groups would be foolish not to accept such an opportunity but that does not necessarily mean that their input will either be truly valued or worthwhile. Conservation activities are, at the end of the day, governed by what the MoD wish to do. As an organisation the MoD appears prudently to entertain the attentions of certain groups such as the RSPB and NWT, and hears the NNPA because of statutory obligations. Others are often ignored, notably the Ramblers, who despite requests feel that they have received insufficient hearing from the MoD.

This is a negative view of the military but it is also crucial to differentiate between central MoD policy and the actual inputs made by individuals on-site. The Land Agent at Otterburn is strongly behind the estate management programme and the entry of farms into Countryside Stewardship schemes, with resultant stock number reductions, combined with this management programme is undoubtedly beneficial. This is an example of the Land Agent interpreting MoD policy to meet training aims whilst simultaneously attempting to attain the maximum conservation gain. This has, undoubtedly, not been an easy job and he should be applauded for his efforts but he has only a certain amount of flexibility before stepping out of MoD guidelines and that is where renewed efforts need to be made. The local input of all of the parties involved can only have so much effect before they have to accept that they need to be pressurising on a national scale. To a certain extent national organisations such as the RSPB, English Nature, the Ramblers Association and the Countryside Commission must take the lead in their relevant fields of expertise. The Ramblers are campaigning nationally on the public access issue and some of the other organisations would also claim to be making efforts nationally. What was illustrated at the OPI was that many smaller groups had not had significant dealings with one another and therefore contradicted themselves on some points. If the smaller groups want to be heard on the issues of conservation and access on the Defence Estate they need to combine with some form of common voice as was assembled for the OPI e.g. the Council for National Parks Consortium. In this manner CPRE (undated), voicing concerns about the proposed intensification of training at the OTA, was a notable document registering the concerns of a wide number of groups.

The discussions on how the OTA compared with other private and MoD estates were inconclusive. Both the Land Agent and the Range Officer at the OTA believe the range is managed, in conservation terms, better than other comparable private estates highlighting the stocking numbers and general management. Confusingly, the Range Officer doesn't agree with his Land Agent who believes the range is also better managed than many MoD estates. It is difficult to draw definite conclusions here with the OTA staff and the NNPA stating the area is undergrazed whilst the NNHS disagrees. In terms of other training areas the livestock levels compare well with similar areas. This evidence, combined with the earlier mentioned planned stock reductions at the OTA, would indicate that the stocking numbers are not excessive and better than some similar training areas. The views expressed indicate that the military presence may well have avoided the widespread afforestation experienced elsewhere, meaning one form of development has stopped another. The question to be asked is which is better? The benefits of avoiding afforestation need to be assessed in the context of what exists in its place, is the Army presence really a better alternative? The pros and cons of afforestation versus the military presence will easily fill another document of this size but it is a point worthy of note. The contradictions raised here highlight the complexity of the intertwining strands of the debate.

Conclusions drawn as to the validity of the military's contention of conservation gains through lack of public access have to be drawn in the light of their performance and reliability in other areas. A wholesale attack on the integrity of the Army's case would be unwarranted but serious concerns have been raised as to their real motives for undertaking the conservation work that



they do. The NWT and NHSN both raised specific concerns that much was publicity related or driven by the need to present a positive image at the OPI.

Of more concern was the perception by some groups of a calculated policy of manipulating the demolition schedule of redundant buildings on the OTA in order to give the impression of a balanced improvement over time. The MoD was perceived as being dictatorial, yet has made clear that if the NoPD is approved, certain initiatives will proceed in terms of visitors and conservation. The question could be asked as to what real value does a Conservation Officer, the allocation of finance for the Habitat Management Plan or even the provision of a visitor centre have? It could be suggested that such promises illustrate that the MoD will only aid conservation on its own terms. The cost of these schemes to them is small compared to the environmental benefit which they might bring. If the MoD were truly concerned, some would argue, such schemes should not be conditional but put in place now as a sign of good faith. Such evidence leads to the conclusion that claims from the MoD with respect to conservation should be viewed cautiously. Conservation would appear to be a convenient flag flown at times when public support is required for plans such as the NoPD. The fact that they state certain things will happen if they prevail can also be seen, by implication, as a threat that nothing will be done if they do not.

If restrictions on public access truly do enhance conservation issues the conclusions drawn on the definition of access and the perceptions of those interviewed will go a long way to answering the research questions set out in Chapter 1. A number of clear issues arose here. The commonly held view, including that held by the Land Agent, that most people adhere to linear routes seems plausible. Furthermore the demand for additional access would seem to

be relatively low, a point again agreed on by the Land Agent. There are concerns about the impact of dogs but this can be managed. As the main representative of walkers, the Ramblers' proposals do not seem radical; they want to have access to some off-road routes but accept that total freedom is impractical. If the OTA staff agrees that most walkers will maintain their adherence to linear routes and are unlikely to arrive in vastly increased numbers then it seems illogical to deter walkers on the grounds of them causing detriment to the conservation value of the estate.

It seems obvious from the evidence presented that the Army is willing to have additional access only on its own terms. There is a contradiction in the lack of willingness to co-operate with the Ramblers when the type of access they are requesting would appear to have limited impacts on conservation. When contrasted with the concept of organised 'safaris', specifically to view military training, the Ramblers' and other views seem fairly inconsequential. Concerns are raised that the Army would be attracting visitors who had no interest in the countryside at all, only in the military hardware. Whilst there is nothing wrong with that in itself the question has to be asked, will the area lose its traditional visitor base because the Army has actively encouraged another type of visitor in? Furthermore such a situation has the potential to be used by the Army to validate its activities by comparing countryside visitor numbers to military training visitor numbers. If the conservation value of the estate is significant but is the preserve only of specified groups then that value is diminished because of its exclusivity.

One of the more obvious conclusions of this investigation, already mentioned, is that the interrelation of the Army's presence, public access and conservation

is a complex one. There have been no studies into this specific area and of those interviewed several raised views that point to the inherent complexities. The general acceptance of the complexity does raise some concerns as to how this is dealt with by those consulted. The RSPB highlighted how the ambiguity of some data is accepted by the Army as meaning that there is no negative data. If this is the case it could be suggested that the Army is using the complexity of the access and conservation debate as a tool to distract critics from other issues, most recently at the OPI. The OTA staff accepts that the questions of access, conservation and military training are intertwined but appear to have made no positive steps towards additional research, as suggested by some of their critics. The Army knows that this uniqueness means that any comparative studies are difficult to perform and it would seem unlikely that they will go out of their way to correct this situation. This view returns to the paternalism point raised earlier and should be used as a spur to those interested parties to commission further studies into the issues. The use of the complexity of the situation as a distraction should not be accepted by the conservation and access groups who would do well to pursue such investigations further whilst continuing to work alongside the military. As an extension to this point such research might help to clarify exactly what the issues involved may be as one group may have differing perceptions of conservation than others. An illustration of this is a quote from the OTA Strategic Estate Management Plan which seeks to define conservation:

“Conservation should not be regarded as preservation i.e. protection from damage, but comprises pro-active management to enhance the value of the environment” (MoD, 1993, p.84).

Such an attempt to redefine conservation to accommodate MoD policy might differ from goals towards which some conservation and access groups are

striving. If conservation does not include protection from damage it may be that some organisations need to redefine their own stance. Interestingly, the Ramblers and the CPRE raised no particular points on complexity and it must therefore be assumed that they perceive the issues as clearer cut from their view. This is understandable to a certain extent as the Ramblers in particular, whilst interested in the conservation aspect, have a prime purpose of increasing access. Nevertheless other groups could learn from the Ramblers who have commissioned much research to support their case.

The overall impression drawn from the interviews is that most groups accept the presence of the OTA to varying degrees but wish to work to maximise the potential for increased access without diminishing the conservation value of the estate. There is an acceptance of the OTA's wilderness value and a feeling that any increase in public access restrictions is unlikely to have a significant effect on the conservation value because of the relatively low visitor numbers to the area. Data specific to the OTA is sadly lacking but most groups confirmed their belief that walkers tend to stick to footpaths anyway. An exception to this were the Ramblers who specifically want to be able to walk off the paths and therefore from their angle more needs to be done in terms of access.

There is unfortunately a fundamental disagreement between the OTA staff and the other groups on the need for more significant access. The OTA's view that access should be on their terms and be about quality not quantity essentially dictates terms to access and conservation groups. The wilderness value of the estate is undisputed and whilst the Land Agent does not believe there is a huge demand to walk across the estate there is still a demand there, demonstrated by the Ramblers protestations. The only data specific to visitors at the OTA is

Cope (1995) and Cope & Doxford (1995) which only concentrated on the Dry Training Area and made no attempt to measure latent demand for the byelawed area. The reluctance of the OTA to encourage further access and interpretation unless the NoPD is approved is discussed elsewhere but their reluctance to build additional paths despite a National Parks policy of increased access raises concern.

Both the Land Agent and the Range Officer spoke enthusiastically of attracting visitors specifically to view military training, including 'safaris', with the promise of funding for a visitor centre pending NoPD approval. Such a scheme has serious long-term implications for the existing visitor profile and that of the future. If such a scheme were implemented it is always possible that this will to alienate current visitors to the site whilst encouraging a new type of visitor into the Park who might be attending principally to view military activities. Such a plan is wholly incompatible with the aims of National Parks and would represent the promotion of the military presence as a tourist attraction. It is also possible that the change in visitor profile from countryside users to those wishing only to view the training activities represents an opportunity for the Army to validate its presence by quoting these new visitor figures

The responses of interviewees to the central research question of this report lead to the conclusion that there is an acceptance from some organisations that on the face of it restricted public access to the OTA has enhanced its conservation. This was not universally agreed with significant disagreement from NNPA and the Ramblers but guarded acceptance of this point from authoritative groups including the RSPB, NWT and NHSN lends weight to the Army's contention. In drawing such a conclusion this study has actually revealed that the public

access issue, whilst relevant, is not the key issue in terms of conservation. Having raised the issue of restricted access enhancing the estate the Land Agent has since played down the significance of this highlighting the management practices. The generally held view that the Army's presence and the access restrictions may have enhanced the conservation value of the site is tempered by the feeling that until recently such conservation was fortuitous and access a minor component of that equation. The type and level of visitors to the area is low and unlikely to increase to any significant level to threaten the wildlife or ecology of the site. Nor can the findings revealed in this study be generally applied to all AFTCs. The complexity of the issues and the uniqueness of the OTA environment mean that only general observations can be made on MoD policy. At the OTA the limited influence of the conservation and access lobby is notable but cannot be applied generally. The Army's positive promotion of its conservation policy is not isolated as the national Defence Estates Organisation promotes this view via its *Sanctuary* publication.

On reflection, this examination of the central research question revealed public access to be a less significant factor within a much larger complex debate. This complexity has not allowed the hypothesis to be fully tested but nevertheless a number of important views and opinions have been revealed. It was accepted at the outset that the issue was unlikely to be settled to everyone's satisfaction and that has certainly been proven correct. Hopefully the data contained within this document will contribute a small part to the wider debate and hopefully be a prompt for further research into the many questions raised.

## **Figure 8 Key recommendations**

1. The OTA staff should be commended for their work to date to enhance the estate.
2. The Army should allow greater input into conservation and access forums from access organisations.
3. Conservation and access organisations should resist the temptation to accept short term incentives offered by the Army.
4. The Army should fund a Conservation Officer and visitor centre immediately regardless of the OPI outcome as a gesture of goodwill.
5. The Army should attempt to liaise with access groups to plan access better.
6. The Army should look to increase the access to off-road areas.
7. The Army should look to fund further research into the impacts of access and conservation.
8. The implementation of any plans to promote military training as a spectacle should be opposed.

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