

The Big Pathwatch

15 January 2015

The Big Pathwatch is coming! This summer the Ramblers is launching an ambitious new project, to coincide with our 80th year. More information will be coming to the website very soon, but in the meantime here are the answers to some frequently asked questions:

What is the Big Pathwatch?

The Big Pathwatch is an exciting new project funded by the Ramblers Holidays Charitable Trust. This summer we will carry out a survey of all the paths (rights of way) in England and Wales, and next spring we'll be publishing our findings. We want to celebrate paths and the things that make walking great, as well as highlighting the problems walkers encounter.

Why are you running this project?

There is currently no national picture of the path network. Using a consistent approach to collect data across England and Wales will allow us to compare highway authorities with one another and identify patterns, for example, whether there is a correlation between the areas with the greatest problems, and the areas with the greatest funding cuts. The survey will provide reliable data on the most frequently occurring path problems in England and Wales, which will help to inform future Ramblers campaigns. We also want to use this project to engage a wider audience with our work and encourage more people to care about their local paths.

Where is the project running?

We're surveying all the paths in England and Wales, but anyone in the UK will be able to take part. We investigated the possibility of running the project in Scotland but due to different rights of way and access law there it would not have been possible to run the project using the same methodology and technology.

When will the survey be open?

The survey will open in Summer 2015.

Do I need to have experience of path surveying to take part?

No! We'll provide guidance to help participants complete the survey and know what to look out for. All participants will be able to download a free smart phone app which will make it easy for them to upload their responses during the walk. Alternatively you can take part using a paper survey, and upload your responses to the website later.

Can we rely on data collected by non-trained volunteers?

To achieve our ambition for this project - surveying every path, over a relatively short period of time- it would not be possible to use trained volunteers alone. We have given careful consideration to the wording of the survey questions, and guidance for participants, so that responses are as consistent and reliable as possible.

How does this relate to the surveys my Ramblers group or area already does?

We know that many areas and groups conduct their own surveys, and these provide valuable evidence to help improve paths in those respective areas. What is needed, however, is a picture of

the entire path network. This will allow us compare one authority with another and give us an overview of the condition of paths on a national scale. We hope that the Big Pathwatch data will reinforce and corroborate the information gathered in local surveys and we'd be interested to hear from you if this is the case (or not!)

Why are you only surveying rights of way that feature on the OS map?

There's no national data set of all the paths in England and Wales – this is recorded at local authority level (sometimes on paper only), and it would have been a near-impossible task to consolidate all these records into one database, for the purposes of this project. Rights of way that don't feature on the definitive map are an even greater 'unknown' and we are addressing the need for these paths to be added to the definite map through a separate campaign ("Don't Lose Your Way").

How does this project relate to other Ramblers campaigns?

We hope that the publicity the Big Pathwatch will attract will allow us to highlight other relevant Ramblers campaigns, such as Paths in Crisis, and Don't Lose Your Way.

How did you decide which survey methodology to use?

We looked at previous rights of way surveys conducted by Ramblers volunteers, Local Authorities and the Countryside Commission and asked for input from a range of stakeholders on how to carry out a survey on this scale. When deciding the methodology to use we have striven to achieve a balance between gathering robust, useful data, and keeping the survey straightforward and enjoyable, so that many people are encouraged to take part.

Will the survey consider usability from a horse rider or cyclist's point of view?

No. Though we will be checking all rights of way, it will be from a walker's perspective only. However, improving the condition of the paths for walkers will inevitably improve usability for all users in many cases.

How are you informing Authorities about the project?

We are communicating with Rights of Way staff via organisations such as IPROW (Institute of Public Rights of Way and Access Management), ADEPT (Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport) and the LGiU (Local Government Information Unit). At a local level we'd encourage all areas to ensure that their authority is aware of the project.

Who has given input into the development and planning of the project?

A steering group of advisers, including someone who led previous Countryside Agency and Countryside Commission rights of way surveys, a DEFRA Director, and a Ramblers Board Member. We have also consulted with a number of volunteers and other key stakeholders.

I'd like to get involved - how can I find out more?

You can sign up to a Big Pathwatch workshop at one of our Volunteer Development Days over the coming months, see www.ramblersvolunteerdays.eventbrite.com to book your place. For other enquiries please email bigpathwatch@ramblersweb.zendesk.com