

Report of the Gower Society Representative

Gower AONB Partnership Steering Group – 4 October 2021

Gower AONB Tourism Pressures 2021

There are two distinct but closely interrelated issues here: tourist capacity and visitor management.

1) Tourist capacity

We are reliably informed that there may be pressure being exerted upon the CCS and the Senedd to relax the current rules and regulations relating to camping ie tents, yurts and glamping on Gower. This is in fact covered by locally by the Local Development Plan. It is defined in Section TR6, TR7, TR8 and TR9 on , pages 221 to 224 within the LDP that is attached. The Gower Society had considerable input into these policies. The key is going to be consistency and regulation to ensure that the AONB is not damaged as reflected in the LDP Clauses. John Campion has been employed to undertake a further review of the Gower Sensitivity and Landscape Character Study for the Caravan and Campsites.

Permitted development rights were extended by the Government from the original 28 days to 56 days because of the Pandemic to allow more tourism within the UK. Camping on Gower is exempt from this due to the changes brought about by the Article 4 in the 1970's but it has not stopped pop up mobile cafes and additional car parking. However, we do not have any sort of official checking or 'policing' and so called wild camping as well as those living out of vans without any facilities has been rife this summer. I am not certain if additional legal spaces will prevent those who wish to camp on or at the side of the most scenic parts of Gower. We must not allow additional legal sites that intrude into the landscape and we must learn from the past. Use of social media is rampant and one can soon find where to stay without being moved on or be encouraged to mass up on some pop up attraction.

There undoubtedly has been increased pressure on the AONB this year (and to a lesser extent last year) with most existing sites full to capacity and unlawful activities being reported to us but not acted upon. Smaller official sites have been inundated with requests and whilst popular well run sites are always reasonably full the demand this year could have doubled their pitches. There is evidence that larger sites have soaked up much of the demand at the expense of the pleasure of normal customers and residents of Gower alike.

Knee jerk reactions to tourist and political pressure is the likely cause of possible discussions that are taking place behind the scenes with the City & County of Swansea (CCS). We have to accept that there are perhaps well concealed locations that may be suitable for small additional sites. Inappropriate and visually damaging locations must not be permitted and those that may be licensed must be firmly policed. Regrettably the last formal caravan survey by the CCS appears to have been in 2009 and very little checking carried out since then. Equally we ask when was the last traffic survey carried out on Gower to determine increased tourism numbers?

2) Visitor management.

Our AONB is seriously under pressure from increased tourism and those making money out of the Gower brand. How much money is in fact ploughed back into protecting what we have and which is so precious to us all? Gower is rapidly losing its character and in

danger of becoming a glorified theme park. Many of our traditional visitors have commented upon this and like many of our residents are not at all happy with this trend.

And the demographic of visitors has changed: rather than predominantly families, an increasing number of young singles, sometimes in large groups, (initially as a result of Lockdown “exclusion orders”) have now become regulars.

The rush for the great outdoors has also seen a huge increase in rough camping. It is now an offence to remain on land after an owner has asked someone to leave (“aggravated trespass”). In Pembrokeshire National Park wardens and local authority staff in collaboration with the Police have been issuing fines. In Gower, the National Trust wardens say they don’t have the resources to deal with rough camping. And where are the public disposal points in Gower for self-contained vans? The problem is not going to go away; some locations in Gower have been in use every night for the last 6 months (last year too). The word is out; people know it’s not policed. So it’s here to stay.

In their annual remit letter to Pembrokeshire Coast NPA in March 2021, Welsh Government allocated an additional 10% funding specifically for frontline staff, such as wardens to enable them to deliver sustainable tourism. The need for front line staff in Gower is self-evident. We are told that additional funding allocation has not been received (or sought?) by CCS. This should be pursued I suggest.

On the question of resources, National Trust has probably been one of the main beneficiaries of increased visitor numbers from car parking fees, e.g. Rhossili. In the question of sustainability, how much of that income is put back into the AONB? For example, when did it last do an ecological survey/audit of Worms Head and the causeway (including the mussel beds which inhabit it).

Finally, social media is widely blamed for spreading the word. How can it be harnessed to educate and inform those visiting Gower?

Gordon Howe
The Gower Society