About two years ago the Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) put forward an idea to fence the commons between Iping and Trotton to allow cattle to be grazing on that area. There was considerable opposition from residents in the area, and a large number signed a petition to show their dislike of the proposal.  

I understand that the same Trust has now further forwarded an application to the Planning Inspectorate in Bristol for permission for such a fence, purporting to say that there was general agreement for this in the neighbourhood. There is no mention of the many letters or a petition which was signed and sent to them. Nor do many of us who know and love the area agree.  

For those who have enjoyed the beauty of this commons area for donkey's years, either by walking for pleasure, dog working or horse riding it is particularly upsetting to hear the news that this may be fenced by a trust who should be maintaining the countryside for wildlife and not sending farm animals to trample through this natural area, in total defiance against those who care deeply for its wellbeing.  

I understand that some of the other landowners will not agree to the fence meaning that their land will need to be excluded from the fencing. This must mean that a fence will go through the common at the Trotton end and also running south of the main car park. This may affect the area of pine trees where currently there are bike tracks, jumps etc. It will also affect areas which will become unwieldy for walkers and horse riders; it will degrade the views across the common by the fences and gates.  

In addition the movement of cattle on to the site has another worry. Areas on Stedham Common and Minstead were used to bring in cattle from elsewhere by the SWT, with the result that bovine TB entered the area after years of safety. The cattle had to be slaughtered as a result and any cattle in that area are now on 6 month testing rather than a 4 yearly test. I am told that some of the cattle moved into the area were brought in from East Sussex by the SWT, and that area is known as an infected area. The financial implications for our local farming neighbours are clear. There is always a risk in moving cattle, in bringing vehicles, feed and personnel from other zones. The Wildlife Trust must - at least - indicate how they would avoid creating the concerns about their history of taking cattle from a hotspot area to a low risk area.  

SWT's approach to the area is that cattle grazing will improve the heath land. There is however ample evidence that cattle on unworked land results in extended amounts of gorse and birch and that their grazing does not reduce this; in Gloucestershire, grazing on Rodborough Common led to increased density in saplings. This is seen at Stedham Common, where the amount of young birch saplings re-growing is much higher than on Iping and Trotton commons where there is no grazing. In short the science goes against grazing on commons such as Trotton and Iping Common.  

For riders, the proposals for the gates that are proposed are poor. Such gates need to be easy to open and close and should also not swing back quickly; they should also be able to be opened and closed for or by children, i.e. not need a weight lifter to open or close them. Parents will sometimes have children on a lead and therefore there should be time to get two equines through (unlike those Stedham Common). The proposed fence includes 7 kissing gates, which are impossible to negotiate for those with pushchairs or mobility scooters such as the disabled use; swing gates are also not easy for the disabled unless someone is there to assist.
The area is common land in the countryside; SWT have a planning application to put a car park and other signs on every gate around Stedham Common, to establish ownership. A fence around their parts of Iping and Trotton Commons would clearly do this too. This may seem like ownership, to the exclusion of those who do not ‘own’ the land and may feel that it is no longer open to the public.

Sadly, the application does not refer to any of the objections, claiming ‘broad general agreement’. Originally there was, I have heard, a statement that letters of objection would be attached to the planning application so that there would be a complete picture for the planning inspector to consider. This does not seem to have happened despite the arguments which have been raised in the past, at meetings and in letters directly to Sussex Wildlife Trust.

I have heard that the SWT have spoken of invisible fencing. I do not believe that this would work in this setting where dogs are walked freely and people could get too close but the issue also would have to allow for the varied borders where those local farmers who do not want to be involved in the proposals will create a patchwork of fencing.

Keeping commons as we know and love them is getting more difficult and we have to be careful that we do not cover the boundaries of every area of common land in England with fences. I totally support the work that the SWT have done in the past in many areas but not at all in the proposals for the Trotton and Iping Commons.

Tony Hogarth-Smith
The Lodge, Wiggonholt, Pulborough, RH20 2EL