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### **Lessons from Foot and Mouth**

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#### **Introduction**

Describing the spread of an animal disease to a mountaineering audience may seem rather strange. The spread of foot and mouth disease (FMD) in the UK in 2001 did, however, greatly affect walking, climbing and many other people involved in the tourism industry. Control measures associated with FMD led to restrictions on public access to large tracts of land and water for many months. Mountains, hills and climbing cliffs were all out of bounds.

All mountaineering federations need to be aware of what happened in the UK. We need to understand how FMD led to the closure of the countryside, the economic consequences and finally, what actions now need to be taken by mountaineering organisations.

#### **The spread of FMD**

FMD is a viral disease which affects many mammal species, both wild and domestic, including cattle, pigs, sheep, goats and deer. It is not fatal, being somewhat like influenza in its effects, causing high body temperatures, blistering of mouths and other soft tissue areas and, most importantly for farmers, causing loss of body condition and hence market value. It is present in many parts of the world, including countries in the Far East, Asia, Africa and South America. In areas where animal productivity is low, and especially where there is no international trade in livestock, no specific measures are taken to control the disease. In other areas, in North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand, for example, rigorous efforts are made to prevent the disease entering individual countries, through import controls. When disease

outbreaks occur immediate control measures are imposed, either through slaughter of infected animals or through vaccination.

In February 2001 a disease outbreak in pigs was detected in the UK. Unfortunately infected animals had already been sent to a market in northern England and this had led to the onward transmission of diseased cattle and sheep to several parts of the UK. Immediate import/export controls were imposed with additional restrictions on animal movements within the UK.

This was the first major FMD outbreak in the UK since 1967 and the farming industry was plunged into crisis. Government ministers and farmers leaders appealed to people to “stay out of the countryside” in the belief that this might help disease control. Organisations involved in land management began restricting public access. Walkers, climbers and ski tourers found virtually everywhere closed, from the edge of town to the tops of the hills. An international snow and ice climbing meet in the Cairngorms was stopped in its tracks.

Overseas tourists abandoned visits to the UK as television and newspaper images showed cattle and sheep being slaughtered and disposed of in burning funeral pyres, disinfection operations in progress and “keep out” signs.

These problems lasted for months, with landmanagers and local councils being extremely slow in reopening areas, despite repeated advice from the government that the risks of disease transmission by the general public were very low. Even by June only 50% of England’s footpaths had been reopened.

### **The Economic Consequences**

The last case of FMD in the UK in 2001 was reported on 17 Sept. By then the tourist industry in England is believed to have lost £5 billion in revenue, resulting in the disappearance of 20-30,000 jobs. In Scotland revenue losses of £350 million were reported, with most of this in the outdoor recreation industry. In Dumfries, for example, one caravan site owner, heavily dependent on Dutch and German visitors, reported that visitor numbers fell by more than 60% between February and September, triggering losses of £40,000. A business specialising in backpacking holidays in the Trossachs, soon to be established as part of Scotland’s first national park, lost 98% of their business from March to May.

A small village in northern England, Shap, which normally caters for 15-20,000 walkers annually, lost virtually all its summer business and a revenue of £850,000. The Youth Hostels Association in England and Wales, which provides budget accommodation for around 2.1 million visitors annually in 230 hostels, lost £6 million out of its normal turnover of £30 million.

Publishers of outdoor books, guides and maps reported serious losses, with one of the UK's main publishers losing 40% of its business in one month. Mountain guides, outdoor activity centres and trekking organisations were very badly affected with many concerned about their long term survival.

The huge economic losses associated with FMD have, however, had another very important consequence. They have demonstrated, in the most obvious way possible, how important walking and climbing and other outdoor activities are to the national economy. In effect FMD became an inadvertent experiment on the value of the outdoor recreation industry to the UK economy.

Earlier studies had indicated that residents in Scotland were estimated to spend around £900 million each year when taking around 300 million walks (of any length) for pleasure in the countryside and at the coast. In the mid 1990's visitors involved in walking and climbing were believed to contribute £438 million each year to Scottish tourism, with around £150 million spent in the Highlands and Islands where this supported over 6,000 jobs. Within the UK as a whole the turnover of outdoor manufacturers and retailers is in the order of £750 million, bringing valuable employment to towns and cities as well as the countryside.

FMD had the effect of bringing home the reality of these figures. Turning off the outdoor recreation tap became a most effective demonstration of the economic value of walker, climber and everyone who enjoys the outdoors. It became obvious, to politician and hotelier alike, that an open, welcoming countryside was a vital component of the tourist industry and essential to the economic lifeblood of the country.

There is, however, another important and disturbing aspect to the UK's experience of FMD in 2001. In the first week of the disease's arrival the UK's Institute of Animal Health made it clear that FMD spread was very unlikely through walkers and climbers and others involved in outdoor recreation. Disease was largely spread through people in direct contact with livestock. As the disease progressed, it became ever more obvious that farmworkers and others involved in visiting farms, as part of agricultural businesses, were contributing to the continuation of the

disease in many areas, largely through poor biosecurity measures. By the conclusion of the outbreak there had been 2026 confirmed cases of FMD in the UK. Not a single case of transmission of the disease has been confirmed as being due to the presence of walkers, climbers or other casual visitors to the countryside.

A major difficulty arose because of differing responsibilities for the closure of areas. In areas related to infected premises controls over public access were imposed by the State Veterinary Service. There was no disagreement with this as such controls were clearly based on veterinary expertise and need. Elsewhere, however, massive areas were closed down by local councils or landmanagers acting on their own initiative. Local councils appeared to react more to pressure from farmers, closing areas as a public relations gesture, without any real consideration of actual disease control needs or the wider implications of blanket closure of areas unaffected by the disease.

Further complications arose when it became obvious that many farmers who did not have the disease, but were affected by animal movement restrictions, were in a worse financial position than those who has been directly affected. The former found themselves in severe cash flow difficulties, unable to take their animals to market, whereas farmers who had the disease at least had financial compensation for the slaughter of their infected animals.

## **The Lessons**

For individual mountaineering federations it is clear that the first priority is to establish what control policy their government operates for infectious animal diseases like foot and mouth. Such policies should include straightforward advice on public access to land and water in the event of disease outbreaks. Federations need to ensure that the recommendations stress the importance of restricting public access only in areas where this is absolutely essential. Government disease control policies should include easily understandable action plans, readily available to local authorities and land managers, and held within their emergency planning documents.

Federations need to clarify exactly who is in charge of disease control measures at a local level. It is preferable that responsibility lies with the veterinary organisation directly responsible to the central government for control of the disease and any associated measures involving regulation of public access are directly related to veterinary requirements only.

Politicians and officials involved in disease control need to be made aware of the economic significance of walking and climbing and the benefits such activities bring to local communities. Federations made need to commission studies which measure such economic values.

For the UIAA as a whole there are wider considerations, involving both international disease control arrangements and general questions about land use in mountain areas.

International standards and protocols for farm animal disease control are set by the Office Internationale d' Epizootic, based in Paris. The UIAA may need to ensure that their advice on disease control includes sensible recommendations on the control of public access and these also take account of wider economic perspectives, including potential impacts on tourism.

Of more general concern is the issue of whether some of the problems faced by the UK in 2001 could have been avoided we had a different pattern of land use and especially if the agricultural industry operated differently. Many people have been surprised at the vast distances and frequency with which farm animals are transported between markets, farm holdings and slaughter houses. Hygiene and welfare matters have been under scrutiny, as well as wider issues involving the environmental impact of modern farming and the levels of public funding support enjoyed by farmers.

Scottish farmers receive over £2 million per day in public funding support, more than the whole of the rest of Scottish industry combined. So it is not surprising that, given the events of 2001, many people involved in outdoor recreation are beginning to question whether this is acceptable, especially when it appears to encourage a type of farming which is associated with so much risk to other interests.

Financial support for farmers in the UK derives largely from the UK's membership of the European Union and the particular arrangements of the Common Agricultural Policy which apply across the EU's 15 member states. In 2004 the Union will expand to 25 member states, so the direct influence of the CAP will extend to most mountain regions in Europe. At present 17% of EU farms receive 50 % of the financial support available for agriculture, with lowland farmers being the greatest beneficiaries. So the CAP has become a dangerous financial instrument which accelerates the destruction of the environment, threatens other parts of the rural economy, especially those engaged in outdoor recreation, and does little to secure the future of mountain farmers as they lose out to their neighbours in the lowlands. Better growing

conditions and access to markets, along with the financial generosity of the CAP, provide a competitive force which is driving farmers out of the mountains.

The UIAA needs to join with other voluntary organisations in persuading Europe's politicians to change the CAP so that we produce farming systems that take better account of environmental needs and the interests of wider society. The FMD experience in the UK should encourage the UIAA to join in this pressure. In pressing our case we should work alongside those who represent mountain farmers and others who work the land in particularly disadvantaged or remote areas. Mountaineers, lobbying with mountain farmers and nature conservation groups could be a powerful alliance arguing for new funding arrangements for mountain areas to deliver better public benefits and improved life styles. The mountain environment and mountain communities need friends to argue this case across all mountain areas of the world where the needs of the lowlands are overwhelming those of the uplands. It will be a really positive achievement for such an alliance to emerge from the UK's traumatic experience of dealing with the foot and mouth disease outbreak of 2001.

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Note: Most of the information contained within this paper derives from my work with the Ramblers' Association as head of their operations in Scotland.

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