

## Case Study

# Take the Lead - responsible dog walking in the National Park

### Background

Heathland is one of the many types of land use in South Downs National Park (SDNP) and describes lowland 'barren' areas that are dominated by colourful heather, gorse and bracken. It is home to a distinctive and diverse range of plants and animals, including a staggering 5,000 species of invertebrates, all six species of UK reptile, including the rare sand lizard, and birds, such as nightjar, stonechat, and the Dartford warbler.

UK heathland habitats and their associated species are currently threatened by a range of factors including: a lack of appropriate site management; habitat loss and fragmentation, perhaps due to new housing developments; air pollution; and recreational disturbance, from cycling, walking and dog walking.

Heathland is a wonderful location for dog walking, offering open spaces away from traffic, but dogs straying from the path can threaten the success of ground nesting birds and may scare / injure livestock, whilst dog poo adds unwanted nutrients to the soil.

Eleven organisations led by the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) have joined forces to expand, connect and protect the existing 1% of heathland left in the South Downs National Park (SDNP). The project is funded by partner contributions and a £1.44 million Heritage Lottery Fund grant.

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/heathlands-reunited/>



### The Campaign

We want everybody to enjoy the SDNP. The 'Take the Lead' media campaign aims to support the heathlands and to help responsible owners to keep their dogs, themselves, livestock, and wildlife safe. The campaign promotes four key messages:

- 1) Keep dogs on the lead around livestock.
- 2) Protect ground-nesting birds, stick to the paths, especially from the 1 March - 15 September.
- 3) Always bag and bin your dog's poo - any public bin will do.
- 4) Do not enter military training areas when the red flags are flying – find an alternative route.

The first stage of the 'Take the Lead' campaign (launched in 2015) used an amusing film animation with audio snippets from real dog owners talking about issues they faced whilst walking their dogs in the SDNP. With additional funding secured through the Heathlands Reunited project new scenes were added to the original animation, showing heathland landscapes (launched in 2017).

In addition four light-hearted canine confession video resources were created, based on reformed dogs confessing to their former bad habits! Alongside this there were four interviews with the real owners and their dogs giving practical advice on how visitors to SDNP can '**Take the Lead**'.

The animation and videos are promoted on social media.

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/take-the-lead>

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“This is the most comprehensive dog campaign I have seen, bringing together many separate elements that have been tried before into one package.”

Elliott Fairs, Hampshire Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust

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### The outcome

From March to September 2017 over half a million people engaged with the ‘Take the Lead’ campaign through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. The campaign was at its most powerful in terms of reach and engagement when tied with topical and/or popular content such as the first day of spring or April fool’s Day. Statistics show that engagement was highest on social media in the first two months of the campaign, which suggests that in future a shorter campaign may have more impact.

The #TakeTheLeadTo photo competition engaged over 121 people and was most popular on Instagram.

The individual animation and video resources have been collated into one longer film sequence that can be played in visitor centres and ‘outdoor’ cinema events.

The Heathlands Reunited project team have developed a ‘Countryside Ability’ dog training course that they hope to take to a range of public events across the project area. The course is a spoof on countryside agility and covers all four of the campaign key messages. Owners are asked to recall their dog, walk through a field of fake sheep, pick up their poo, and avoid the ground nesting temptations. Everybody receives a certificate graded at bronze, silver or gold.

### The future

There has been considerable national exposure regarding responsible dog ownership following an All-Party Parliamentary Working Group about sheep worrying and a related feature on BBC Countryfile in October 2017.

The SDNPA will continue to distribute the existing animation and videos to a wider audience. All resources, including campaign materials and leaflets can be adjusted for reprints to reflect the core key messages and the emerging national responses

In October 2017 the Heathlands Reunited project launched a pilot project recruiting Dog Ambassadors who will assist in educating people and encouraging responsible dog ownership to help protect and preserve this beautiful place. With assistance from ‘Natalie Light Dog training’ ambassadors will be given full training and receive ongoing support.

If you are interested in becoming an ambassador please contact:  
katy.sherman@southdowns.gov.uk

**The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2014–19** sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 11 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

**This project successfully achieves the following PMP outcome:**

**Outcome 8:** More responsibility and action is taken by visitors, residents and businesses to conserve and enhance the special qualities and use resources more wisely.

[southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SDNP-Partnership-Management-Plan-2014-19.pdf](http://southdowns.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SDNP-Partnership-Management-Plan-2014-19.pdf)

March 2018