



Promoting Responsible Camping in Scotland - Summary Report



AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

Promoting Responsible Camping in Scotland

Summary research report by BritainThinks on behalf of NatureScot and the Scottish Government



Background and objectives

Scotland's landscape and outdoor spaces make it a sought-after destination for visitors from all over the UK and the wider world. It is widely acknowledged that the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns fuelled an increase in people visiting the outdoors for recreation. Restrictions on international travel also led to an increasing number of 'staycations' in the UK.

This impact of the pandemic alongside Scotland's unique countryside, and freedoms for accessing that countryside, meant that Scotland became a prime destination for people to visit from across the UK.

The Scottish Government commissioned this research to inform strategies to encourage visitors to enjoy Scottish landscapes while practicing responsible behaviour when camping in tents outwith managed camping facilities. The term 'wild camping' is used in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC) to describe camping outside of managed facilities, as permitted by Scotland's access rights. Specifically, the research aimed to:

1. Identify the different audiences who are engaging in irresponsible wild camping behaviours.
2. Explore the channels by which they can be reached.
3. Consider what messages will resonate with these audiences and drive behaviour change.

Methodology

The research comprised three phases:

Phase 1: Scoping

- A short literature review of 24 publicly available articles on irresponsible outdoor behaviour including, but not exclusively when, camping;
- Stakeholder interviews with 14 representatives of national bodies as well as local rangers, access officers and land managers to gather their perspectives;
- These stakeholders were recruited from areas of Scotland where irresponsible camping behaviour is known to be a problem, so they are likely to have experienced more instances of these behaviours than those in other areas of Scotland;
- Their experiences therefore help illustrate the types of irresponsible behaviour that are sometimes associated with wild camping and not necessarily its prevalence in Scotland.

Phase 2: Primary research with target audiences

- Depth interviews with 20 participants who had wild camped in Scotland in the previous two years and demonstrated at least one of an agreed list of irresponsible behaviours;

- These participants were purposively selected to help understand irresponsible wild camping behaviour better. The prevalence of certain behaviours among this group is not therefore representative of all wild campers.

Phase 3: Behaviour change workshop

- A virtual workshop with the NatureScot, the Scottish Government and BritainThinks teams, alongside a few other representatives from communications teams in this space. Structured as follows:
 - A debrief of the findings from Phase 2 of the research;
 - A facilitated workshop, using the opportunities and barriers uncovered from the previous phases to map potential behaviour change communications and interventions against the Individual, Social and Material (ISM) behavioural framework.

Key findings

Who is demonstrating irresponsible camping behaviour?

Overall, the picture from stakeholders was that for the most part, irresponsible camping behaviour tended to be demonstrated by relatively local people going on a short camping trip with little or no experience of wild camping, rather than by visitors travelling from elsewhere.

Stakeholders' experiences suggest that people who wild camp irresponsibly in Scotland are more likely to:

- live in Scotland;
- be male;
- be young (<40 years old);
- most stakeholders report that wild campers tend to come from a relatively local area;
- however, commonly known locations or routes – such as the North Coast 500 scenic route (NC500) – are more likely to attract visitors from further away.

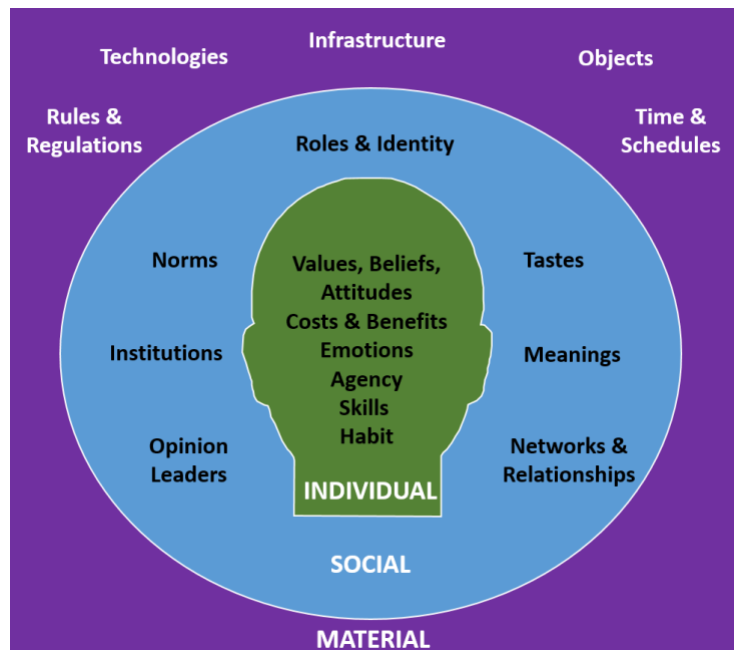
Understanding irresponsible wild camping behaviour

We used the individual, social and material (ISM) model to understand the behaviour participants described in their interviews. ISM is based on theory and evidence which shows that three different contexts - the individual, social and material - influence people's behaviours.

It is designed to be a practical tool to help make recommendations to change behaviour within each of these contexts.¹ Figure 1 below shows the factors that influence behaviour in the three different contexts.

¹ [Influencing behaviours - moving beyond the individual: ISM user guide - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/influencing-behaviours-moving-beyond-the-individual-ism-user-guide/pages/1-introduction-to-ism.aspx)

Figure 1. How different influences on behaviour are mapped onto the ISM framework.



Motivations to go wild camping

Understanding why some people exhibit irresponsible wild camping behaviours begins with exploring their motivation, knowledge and understanding of wild camping before they embark on their trip.

We have identified the following factors that motivate people to go wild camping in Scotland:

Individual factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wild camping has a strong emotional draw, with participants associating wild camping with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Feeling connected with nature. ○ Enjoying the challenge of managing without home comforts. ○ A sense of freedom, including switching off from technology. • Wild camping was also seen as an affordable holiday, especially in the context of perceived price rises during the Covid-19 pandemic. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Affordability was very much a secondary motivation to the sense of adventure and freedom wild camping provides.
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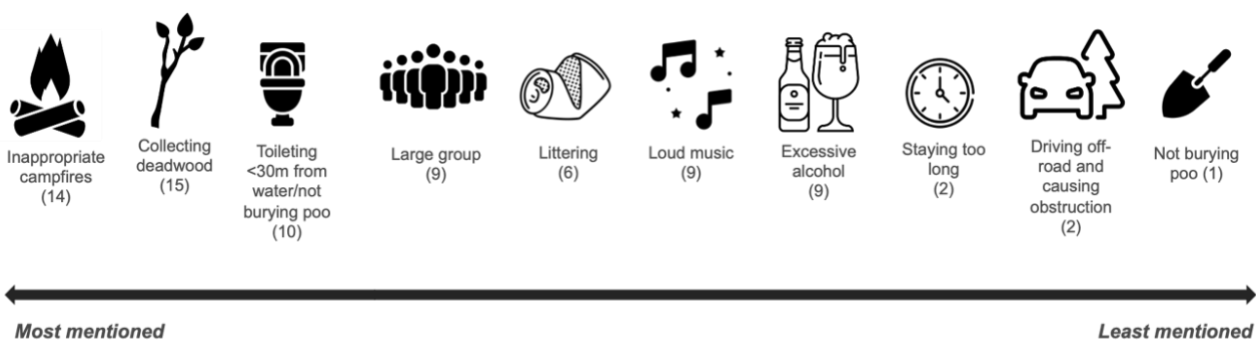
Social factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most participants were introduced to wild camping by family or friends, though many had camped in managed facilities before. • When participants sought information about wild camping, most were looking for where to go, rather than how to camp.
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Material factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most material factors stem from a desire to experience the freedom that wild camping is seen to provide. These include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Avoiding the rules and regulations of managed facilities. ○ Having a 'break' from Covid-19 restrictions. ○ The lack of other holiday options during Covid-19 restrictions. • Participants were not put off by a lack of infrastructure, such as toilets.
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Drivers of irresponsible behaviour

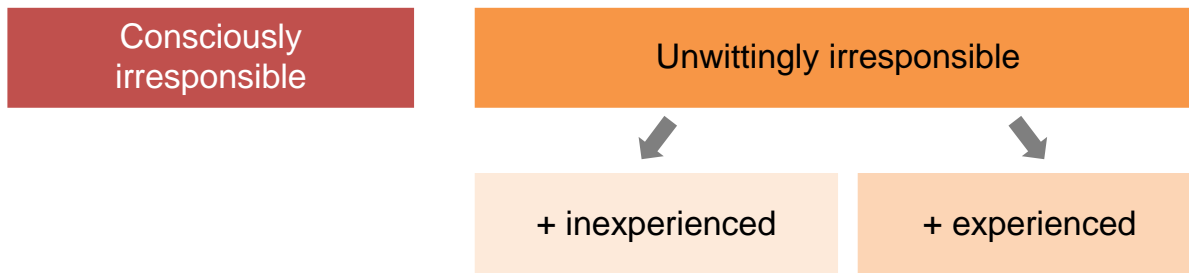
Phase 2 participants were recruited because they had camped outside of managed facilities in Scotland in the last two years and had engaged in at least one irresponsible behaviour. In the interviews we explored the full range of irresponsible behaviours that they had engaged in and examined which behaviours occurred most frequently across the sample. The frequency of those behaviours is summarised below.

Figure 2. Frequency of mentions of irresponsible camping behaviour by participants



Among participants in our study, we identified three groups of irresponsible campers based on knowledge and behaviour: 'consciously irresponsible', 'inexperienced and unwittingly irresponsible' and 'experienced and unwittingly irresponsible', as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Diagram of three groups of irresponsible campers based on knowledge and behaviour



Very few of our participants were consciously irresponsible, showing no regard for the environment. However, these findings should be treated with caution because the selected sample may not be representative of the whole and some participants may be hesitant to voice the real reasons for their actions.

Most wild campers were 'unwittingly' irresponsible; some because they are simply inexperienced campers, while others are more experienced but are not aware that something they are doing could be harmful to the natural environment or the interests of others.

Framed around the ISM model described above, we identified the following drivers of irresponsible behaviour when wild camping:

Individual factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lack of knowledge about wild camping or awareness of the consequences of their actions, especially about the risks of fires, appropriate sources of wood and appropriate toileting practices. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Most participants were unaware of any or all the details of the SOAC, leading them to fall back on their own perceptions of correct behaviour, which may not always be appropriate. ○ Even though all participants had engaged in at least one irresponsible camping behaviour, only a few identified with being an “irresponsible camper”. ○ The cumulative impact of large numbers of people camping was rarely considered, causing some to feel that some behaviours are more acceptable than others, e.g. collecting deadwood compared to leaving a tent behind. ○ This suggests that communications around these behaviours could be made more identifiable, and be clearer about the underlying reasons why these behaviours are considered irresponsible. • Although the cost of campsites was suggested by stakeholders as a factor that could push inexperienced campers towards wild camping, we did not find strong evidence of this among our participants. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Whilst those in our sample had been drawn to the affordability of wild camping, none had attempted to book a campsite and been put off by availability or cost.
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- Some stakeholders felt that a **lack of respect for the environment** or other people's property is a key cause of certain irresponsible camping behaviour, though this did not resonate as strongly with participants in our study.
 - Nevertheless, some participants admitted they could sometimes be lazy, e.g., leaving litter next to a bin even if the bin was full.
- The **perceived impunity** of a remote camping location, free from restrictions, was felt by both stakeholders and participants to be an incentive to behave irresponsibly without impact on others or fear of the consequences.
- **Excessive alcohol consumption** was seen as a driver of irresponsible behaviour by both stakeholders and participants.

Social factors

- There was concern among some stakeholders that a perceived **decline in outdoor education** may be driving a rise in irresponsible camping behaviour.
- The 'curse of knowledge bias' - when an individual, communicating with other individuals, unknowingly assumes that the others have the background to understand - means that advice from more experienced campers can fall back on **the assumption that it is obvious, easy, or common sense** to know what to do. When, in reality, there is a large knowledge gap.
- A **romanticised idea of camping** was felt by both stakeholders and participants to influence their behaviour.
 - This is especially true with regard to fire-lighting behaviour: for many participants, a fire is now an integral part of camping.
- Some stakeholders attributed more extreme damage, such as chopping down trees, to the **popularity of survivalist shows** such as Bear Grylls or Who Dares Wins.
 - None of the participants identified with this behaviour, nor admitted to causing this kind of serious damage.
- **Peer pressure** was also felt to influence younger age groups in particular, especially with regards to littering.

Material factors

- **Limited opportunities for socialising at bars or festivals due to Covid-19 restrictions** was felt to have prompted some people to wild camp in an irresponsible way.
 - Stakeholders thought some people with little experience were choosing to camp in place of a holiday abroad.
 - They also thought that others who would normally have attended festivals may bring a similar attitude of littering to

wild camping, not understanding that there are different guidelines.

- A **lack of infrastructure**, such as bins or toilets, was felt to contribute to irresponsible behaviour.
 - Stakeholders thought that some wild campers may prefer a basic or semi-formal campsite with facilities, but options have been reduced due to pressures caused by the pandemic.
- Stakeholders consistently attributed the rise in fly tipping of tents to the **availability of very cheap camping equipment** and a rise in 'disposable culture'.
 - However, only a very small number of our participants abandoned tents, and those that had recently purchased cheap equipment planned to reuse it. Most participants either already owned camping equipment or borrowed from friends or family.
- Given the significant increase in visitor numbers since the start of the pandemic, stakeholders felt there has been **insufficient investment** in protecting the natural environment (e.g., installing bins).
- **Proximity to available parking** was felt to prompt some irresponsible behaviours such as littering or anti-social behaviour, due to the ease of bringing more belongings.
- **Unpredictable weather and midges** can prompt inexperienced campers to abandon their equipment.

Preventing irresponsible wild camping behaviour

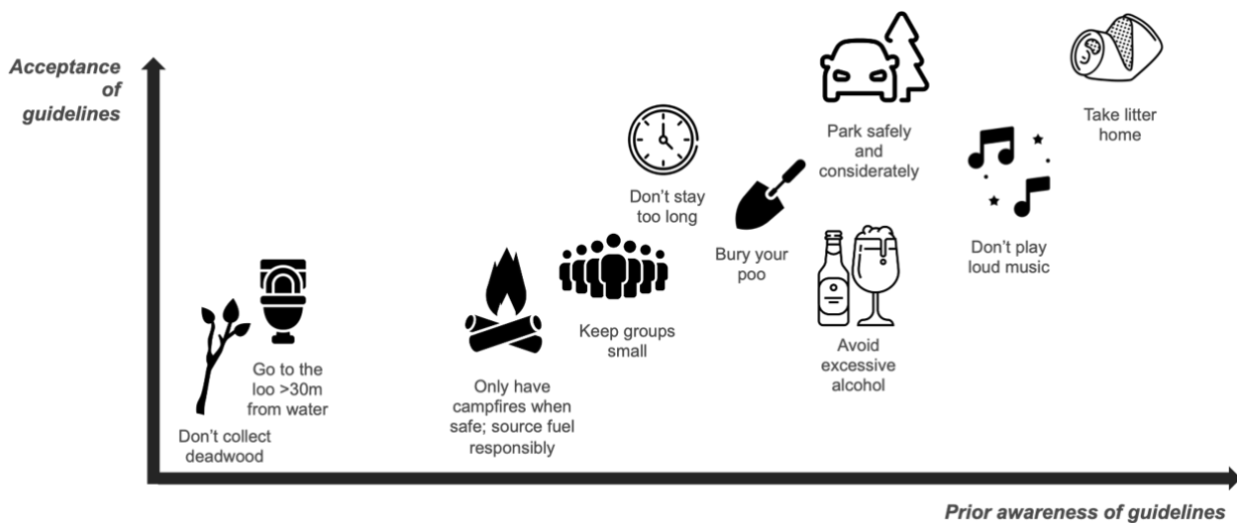
Addressing individual and social factors

In order to reduce irresponsible camping behaviour, we need to address the individual and social context affecting motivations to wild camp, and attitudes to protecting the natural environment that are driving the behaviour.

The behaviours that participants are most likely to accept are irresponsible broadly correlate with those they have more awareness of. For example, whilst the environmental impact of littering is clear, and 'leave no trace' is widely accepted among our sample, participants are less aware of the environmental impact of collecting deadwood, and less likely to accept guidance not to because they do not see it as problematic.

We have plotted each of the irresponsible behaviours against the axes of awareness and acceptance, in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Diagram showing relationship between prior awareness of guidelines about certain behaviours and how accepting participants were of the guidance



High awareness/high acceptance behaviours:

- Our participants most commonly singled out littering as an irresponsible behaviour that is widely known and easy to avoid. Disposing of rubbish properly is felt to be common sense guidance and widely accepted, even by participants who admitted to littering on occasion;
- Given the high levels of acknowledgement that littering is unacceptable, further education will likely do little to change behaviours.

Medium awareness/medium acceptance:

- Tackling irresponsible behaviours in this middle ground needs to be particularly sensitive to people's concern about being reprimanded for behaviours where they are not confident about the right thing to do, and do not necessarily see the harm of their 'one off' evening of, for example, drinking in a large group;
- Instead, they are seeking positive information about how to enjoy their camping experience within the guidelines – such as how to deal with the remains of a campfire in a responsible way, or where to park considerately to lessen the environmental impact;
- They want to know how to sustain the natural environment rather than being told not to do things. Much of this can build on the 'leave no trace' ethos that is well known and received.

Low awareness/low acceptance:

- Across these low awareness/low acceptance behaviours, not seeing the irresponsible behaviours as an issue is a barrier to changing behaviour, for example leaving a fire ring. Participants need to be shown why it is problematic and persuaded to consider the wider consequences.

Addressing material factors

The research suggests that the following changes to the material context could reduce levels of irresponsible behaviours when wild camping:

- A visible presence of rangers or authority figures on the ground, to encourage campers to behave responsibly;
- Infrastructure improvements, such as installing bins or toilets, and better signposting to existing facilities;
- There was no support amongst participants for regulating minimum pricing for camping equipment. Most participants used older or borrowed equipment, and they were concerned this could create barriers to an otherwise low-cost activity.

Tailoring communication strategies

A number of communication strategies, some of which NatureScot and other bodies are already using, could be effective in driving behaviour change in this area.

Communication approaches:

- Stakeholders, wild camping participants and the literature all point to the importance of communicating with clarity and consistency when promoting responsible behaviour;
- However, it remains a challenge to strike a balance between making guidance as detailed and specific as possible (so that it is clear what campers should and shouldn't do), with the need for short, simple messages that also make it easier for communications to be consistent;
- There is no straightforward solution, but it is likely that combining elements from all four of the following approaches will be most effective:
 - Consolidating wild camping guidance into one central "landing page";
 - Using terminology that is as unambiguous as possible;
 - Tailoring messages to the local context and making them specific to each site;
 - Explaining the rationale behind behavioural asks or using outcome-focused messaging.

Communication channels:

- Many do not engage in any research beyond talking to experienced friends and family, while others use only 'unofficial' information sources such as social media groups.
- **Potential touchpoints** where participants may be open to receiving communications include:
 - When planning a trip, especially when planning where to go;
 - When travelling to their campsite, such as when using navigation apps;
 - At bed and breakfasts, hostels, or managed camping facilities, as many participants combined wild camping with other types of accommodation;

- Near or at common destinations, such as service stations or businesses close to hotspots, and signage at hotspots or along walking routes;
- Targeted reinforcement of messaging at hotspots, such as with face-to-face contact with rangers.

Methods:

- Utilise **advertisements**, especially on social media;
- Use local people, trusted bodies (e.g., NatureScot), or knowledgeable figures (e.g., Bear Grylls) as spokespeople in the advertisements;
- Use a positive, light-hearted and welcoming tone – negative messaging can feel patronising;
- Content by **social media influencers** can feel more relatable than advertisements, especially for young people, but must be used carefully to ensure credibility;
- **Engage with online social media groups and forums**, using a positive rather than admonitory tone;
- **Ensure official online information is accessible and available**, using Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) to ensure it is prominently displayed during internet searches;
- Continue and develop **engagement with schools and youth groups**.

Conclusions

Behaviour change strategy

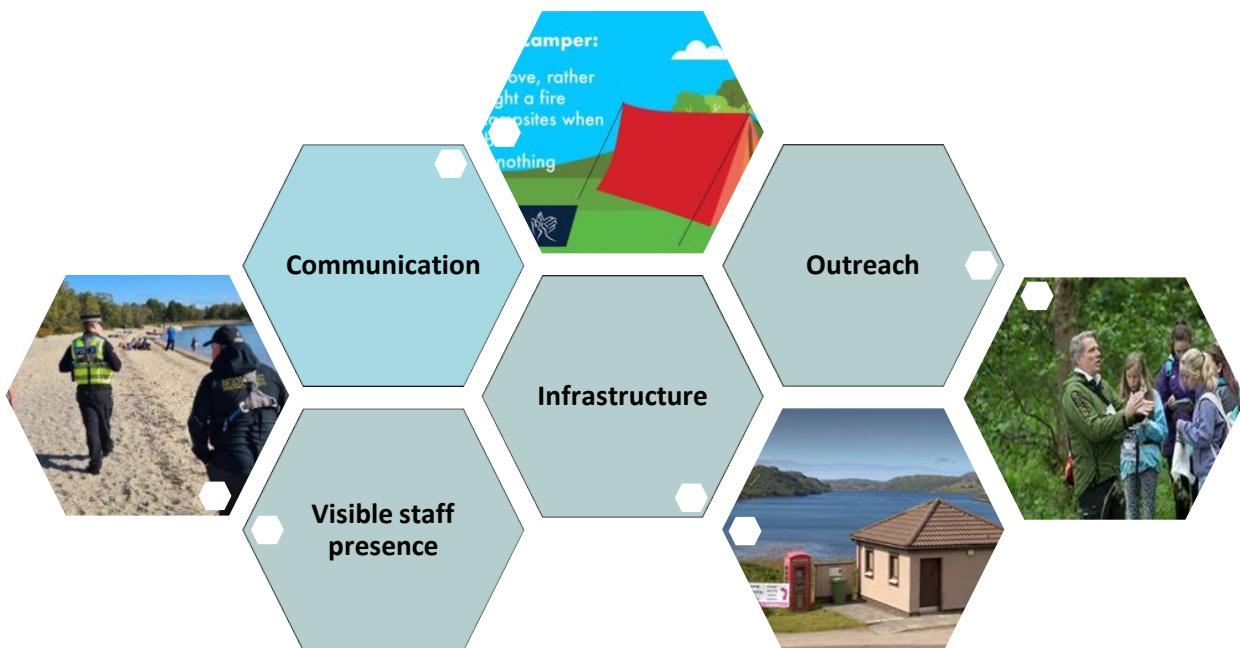
This research has focused primarily on how communications can be designed to encourage responsible behaviour. Communications, however, are just one of many tools available to encourage behaviour change.

A recurrent theme in this research was the lack of knowledge and awareness of the SOAC and other guidelines. Carefully developed communications will be an important tool for filling this knowledge gap, whilst also changing the social context by making it socially unacceptable to engage in irresponsible camping behaviours.

The greatest impact will be achieved through traditional offline media in areas that are popular wild camping destinations, such as flyers at local retailers and service stations or noticeboards in car parks or laybys.

Given the lack of detailed pre-departure research, search engine optimisation should be used to direct people towards guidance when they conduct broader online searches, such as about where to camp or how to get there. It was clear from the literature review and speaking to stakeholders that other interventions also have an important impact on behaviour, pointing to a multi-pronged behaviour change strategy, outlined in figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Diagram showing a multi-pronged behaviour change strategy.



- **Infrastructure:** Additional infrastructure, particularly toilets and bins, will make it easier for campers to do the right thing and will lessen the amount of effort needed to educate them about responsible and correct toilet practices. Such practises require preparation, knowledge and effort. Additional infrastructure will lessen the environmental impact of inappropriate toileting and littering.
- **Outreach in schools:** It is easier to prevent irresponsible behaviours than change them once established. If ways can be found to incorporate discussing the environmental rationale for responsible wild camping behaviour into lessons and activities among schools and youth groups, there is a better chance of a behavioural shift – similar to the decline in adolescent smoking – among future cohorts of campers. This approach could be taken forward through NatureScot’s current engagement with schools to promote the SOAC and joined up with the outreach work that some other stakeholders are already carrying out.
- **Visible staff presence:** At present, perceived impunity is an enabler of consciously irresponsible behaviours, such as littering. Messages based on legal penalties are unlikely to be effective unless there is a perceived risk of being caught, which emphasises that communications campaigns need to be accompanied by a staff presence on the ground in areas where problems occur.

Recommendations for public facing communications

A recurrent theme in this research was the lack of knowledge and awareness of the SOAC and other guidelines. Carefully developed communications will be an important tool for filling this knowledge gap, whilst also changing the social context by making it socially unacceptable to engage in irresponsible camping behaviours.

Our recommendations for these communications are as follows:



Be precise about what action you want campers to take.



Provide the rationale behind these actions.



Emphasise the cumulative impact of irresponsible behaviour.



Keep messages positive, rather than admonitory.



Be strategic about which behaviours to target with communications.



Take a cascading approach to changing behaviour.



Use multiple sources, channels and messages.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics

are available via an alternative route

may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors.

Please contact SocialResearch@gov.scot for further information.

cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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