

Be Fire Aware campaign launched in Peak District

The Be Fire Aware campaign, launched this July by Moors for the Future Partnership, aims to give the message that visitors can play a key role in preventing moorland wildfires in the area, which burn into peat causing deep, costly and long lasting damage to the landscape, wildlife habitats, recreational areas and even drinking water.



Children from Edale primary school using the Fire Ranger game

The campaign was funded under the EU LIFE's MoorLIFE project, which is being delivered by the Moors for the Future Partnership. It is backed by three innovative products that educate visitors on the impact of wildfires and how to prevent them.

Real-time fire risk tool

The first of these is the UK's first real-time fire risk tool. Developed in conjunction with the University of Manchester, the interactive system relies on a continuous feed from a local weather station to provide up-to-the-minute estimates of current fire risk at all points in the Dark Peak, the northern part of the Peak District National Park.

The display also includes an interactive map containing videos, photos and stories, as well as two moorland themed games, aimed to help everyone learn more about wildfires and how to prevent them.

Developing an interactive tool that provides real-time information on fire risk was seen as a powerful tool to help the public to understand how weather alters fire risk, and the impact of their actions.

Debra Wilson, Moors for the Future Partnership, said, "This educational tool combines weather and geographical data to give the relative fire risk across the moors. Aimed at visitors to the Peak District, the real-time fire risk tool has been installed in the Edale and Fairholmes visitor centres, which attract over 80,000 visitors a year."

The real-time fire risk tool uses a forecasting model which is directly based on published research in the Journal of

Environmental Management on 'Forecasting the outbreak of moorland wildfires in the English Peak District', undertaken by Jonathan Ayles and Julia McMorow of the University of Manchester and Gina Cavan and Kevin Albertson of Manchester Metropolitan University.

The second element of the tool is a GIS model, which uses wildfire locations collected by park rangers since 1976 to map where risk of ignition is statistically highest over the 30+ years of record. It was developed by Julia McMorow and Sarah Lindley of the University of Manchester's School of Environment, Education and Development.



Using the interactive fire risk tool. (From L-R): Simon Thorp, The Heather Trust and England and Wales Wildfire Forum; Jim Dixon, Peak District National Park; Debra Wilson, Moors for the Future; Julia McMorow, University of Manchester; Alan Clark, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service and Chris Dean, Moors for the Future

The exhibit developers, Wide Sky Design, combined the forecasting and mapping models so that visitors can see when and where risk is highest. Using weather records, it also allows users to explore fire risk history across the upland areas back as far as 2003.

Partnership approach

A partnership approach has always been at the centre of wildfire prevention and management work in the Peak District. The three Be Fire Aware interactive products are no exception.

The real-time fire risk tool could not have been developed without a strong relationship between wildfire management and research. The unique wildfire database maintained by the Peak District Fire Operations Group since 1976 was the starting point for both the mapping and forecasting research. In turn, the map has been used by the Fire Operations Group to target prevention activities and site new water resources for fighting fires. The forecasting model has now been combined with the map to add the essential 'when' element to the 'where'.

The other two products – the games and interactive map – have also been developed with the Fire Operations Group. They are proving incredibly useful in raising awareness, with fire services planning to incorporate the games into their schools education programme.

National perspectives

At the launch of the campaign, Simon Thorp of the Heather Trust and Vice Chair of the England and Wales Wildfire Forum, stressed that wildfire was not just a fire and rescue services issue, but also a land management one. He pointed to the emergence of national

initiatives on wildfire as a sign of growing awareness of the issue throughout the British Isles, especially as climate change scenarios show that wildfires are likely to become more frequent and severe. It was, he said, "A question of when, not if, a moorland wildfire will occur."

Alan Clark, on behalf of the Chief Fire Officers Association Wildfire Group, spoke about the better equipment, improved training and safer tactics adopted by his own force, Surrey Fire and Rescue Service, following a major fire in 2006 on Thursley Common, a lowland heath area. He spoke of growing national awareness of the issues posed by wildfire among fire and rescue services across the UK. Alan also highlighted the importance of learning from European experience, as well as the USA's Firewise communities programme, shortly to be piloted in the UK. Most fires in the UK are caused by people, he said, so education initiatives like this are vital for fire prevention.

'The three main causes of wildfires are men, women and children, hence the need for raising awareness and educating people.'

Why educate?

Educating members of the public is crucial to the fight against wildfire. While hot dry spells increase the probability of fires, the main risk comes from people – more fires occur near footpaths and towns. Alan Clark recalled the fire services' adage that, "The three main causes of wildfires are men, women and children", hence the need for raising awareness and educating people.

Any naked flames can have devastating results, regardless of how careful people are. Chris Dean, Moors for the Future's Partnership Manager, explained, "The last major wildfire in the South Pennines took 32 days to put out and cost the fire service around £1m, all because someone used a £4.50 barbecue."

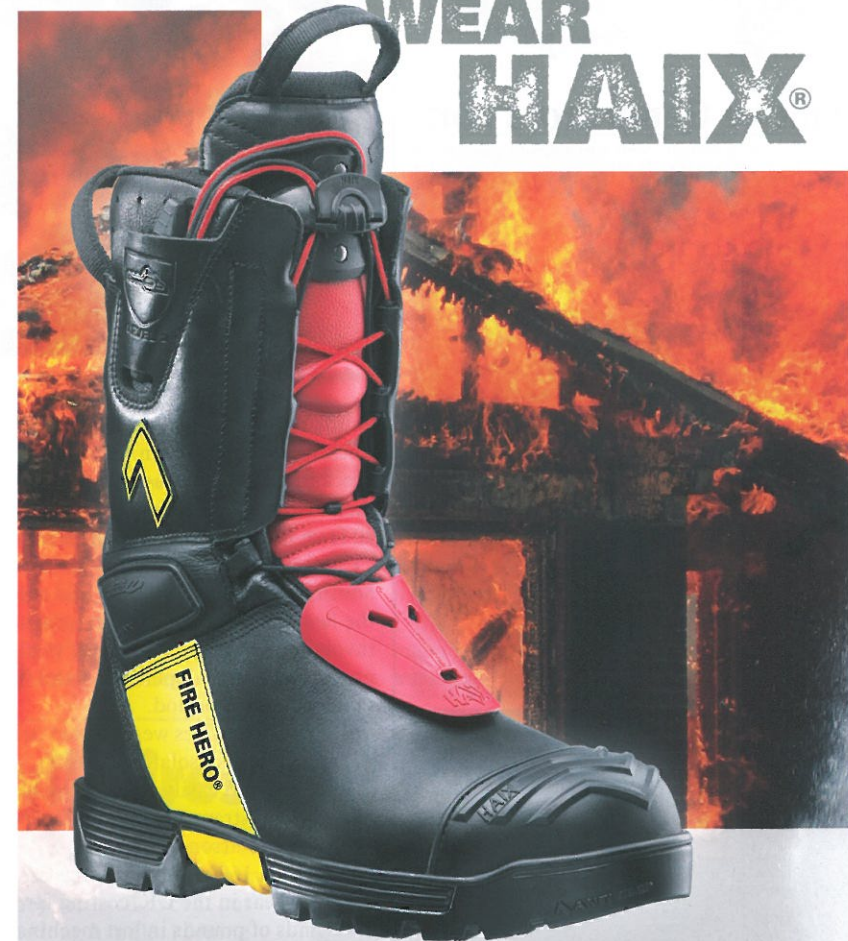
The impact is especially devastating when considering the special nature of the moorlands. Jim Dixon, Peak District National Park Authority Chief Executive, said, "We want to drive home the message that these internationally protected moors and blanket bogs are valuable, vulnerable habitats that need protecting from fires and other environmental damage."

www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/be-fire-aware

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