

THE SCAS Journal

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Dog activity trails: promoting fitness and fun with your best friend

Following his presentation at IAHAIO 2010 in Stockholm, SCAS member **Stephen Jenkinson** elaborates on his work to promote activity trails across the UK, and how you can get involved

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Dogs out of control. Human and canine obesity increasing. Bored pets disengaged from their owners. Behavioural problems due to insufficient mental stimulation. Wildlife chased by under-exercised canines. The list goes on...

The 21st century's combination of social pressures and ever fewer places to exercise dogs brings to my door a variety of countryside rangers, farmers, bird watchers and exasperated pet owners, seeking quick solutions to problems that have often been a long time in the making.

The traditional approach to these issues by local councils has been to restrict or constrain where dog owners go and what they do. For exasperated owners, the "solution" can be, at worst, the loss of a loved but frustrating pet or, at best, fewer trips to the park, more lead use and entry into the shady world of midnight dog walking when no-one else is about.

But with dogs being taken on nearly half of all visits to the countryside and greenspace across the UK, plus the many benefits of pet ownership that are so apparent to SCAS members, there had to be a better way forward.

I now work with councils and landowners to devise new approaches that are more holistic, effective and enduring – because they promote the good things about dog ownership as well as addressing negative impacts – and one of the most exciting concepts is that of "dog activity trails".

Here's an introduction to the concept, along with information to help you develop a trail in your area.

Integration not exclusion

In the United States the concept of having specific areas – "dog parks" – for exercising canines, particularly off-lead, is well-established and at face value sounds a good idea. But in truth, in many states dog parks are a modest oasis of positive provision, in an overall culture that imposes severe restrictions on dog owners, far greater in extent than anything we have seen so far in the United Kingdom.

In fact, a small dog park may be the only place where off-lead access is allowed for many miles around as, unlike in the UK, there is also scant public access to the wider countryside, state forests and national parks in the US. And where such access does exist, it is again most frequently on-lead, all year round.

Accordingly, there is a growing trend for commercial enterprises to offer extensive out of town areas for off-lead exercise, offering all that we in the UK would expect from a daily walk in the countryside: water to splash in, attractive natural landscapes, and feelings of freedom and



Photo © Nigel Whitfield

Coatham Wood activity trail.

