

Three Peaks Challenge – A Local's View

By **Guy Newbold**



OUTDOORSMAGIC member Guy Newbold is a walker and climber who lives and works in Wasdale. As the Three Peaks Challenge season hits its heights - hordes of walkers attempting to climb the highest mountains in Scotland, England and Wales, he's not a happy bunny. Here's a local's view of the damage inflicted in the name of good causes. Time for a re-think?

A lot has been said recently about the impact of the Three Peak 'challenges' held on Scafell Pike, Ben Nevis and Snowdon. The main problem with the debate is that most can only base their observations on individual events and there are few who are able to comment on it as a year-long phenomenon without being accused of vested interest and a local anti-tourist type of attitude.

Well I am a local of Wasdale, but I also make my living from visitors to the fells, so my viewpoint is as balanced as you could hope for. I wasn't born here, instead taking the route of the "off comer" settling in the area because of a deep love for the Cumbrian fells. I'm a climber, a walker, and a runner and a kayaker and perhaps my view may be of interest to some?



Scafell Pike on a busy Easter weekend, but most Three Peakers make the ascent in the dark causing huge disruption for locals

Thousands of people have done the Three Peaks challenge; some have done it as part of a large organised group and some as part of a smaller team. The rules are pretty random, some set a time constraint on completing the event - usually either

24 hours or three days - and some require you to start at certain points away from the peaks themselves. Whatever the rules most people arriving to climb Scafell Pike have already climbed one of the other peaks and most choose to begin from Wasdale as it represents the shortest possible route up and down.

Some Facts To Consider...

But before we get into the debate lets get a few facts straight:

? The majority of people will try to climb all three of the peaks in 24 hours.

? As a result of the above most will arrive at Scafell Pike during the night.

? The summer months around the longest day are the most popular times of the year although from May to October you will find groups doing it every weekend.

? Most people do the event as part of a large sponsored event raising money for a charity

? A large percentage will not be regular fell goers, as they are doing it solely to raise funds for a good cause.

? We are not talking about a couple of hundred people spread out over the year, it is

hundreds of people each night, and nearly 6,000 each year.

? Wasdale has no mains water or sewage and only one public loo.

? 200 people using a path in one hour does ten times the amount of damage as 200 people do using the same path over the course of a week.

? Large numbers of people arriving in the middle of the night by minibus cannot do so quietly.

? People still need to go to the toilet even if there isn't one available.

? Some charities pay event companies to organise the events for them, the more the better for the company and the charity. It isn't just a fundraiser, it's big business. 2,000 eventers at £100 a head - someone's getting rich and it's not the charity.

Patience strained among locals woken almost every summer weekend...

So those are the facts, what's to debate? Well the problem is the event keeps on getting more and more popular as it raises more and more money for good causes. This has meant that patience is now low among locals who can spend almost all their weekends awake, visitors are not returning to the B and B's, hotels and campsites are empty as they too don't want to be kept awake and finally the environment is starting to suffer.



Above Wasdale, looking towards Mickledore and Scafell Crag - are Three Peakers simply missing the point?

Wasdale is a remarkable place, remote and beautiful. It doesn't have the facilities of Ben Nevis or Snowdon and that's half its charm, it is still a remote wilderness.

Scafell Pike doesn't have one main path and so there isn't a continuous pitched and paved route to the summit.

The increased traffic is in concentrated time periods and so causes much more damage than the same number of feet spread over a week. The result is that paths are now becoming deep ruts 30 to 40 feet wide. Even the old Brown Tongue path which was redirected is now suffering and is slowly returning the large muddy scar it was before the renovation work was done 10 years ago as the sheer number of walkers means many ignore the new, pitched path.



The summit plateau on Scafell Pike

No toilet facilities...

And the valley floor is fairing no better either, there are no adequate toilet facilities as there is no mains sewage, the result is little piles topped with tissue behind every wall and tree. The water too is in great demand as it all comes from private wells, which are all too easily drained by a team of thirsty Three Peaker. Litter now piles up during the night and the verges and green spaces are becoming bogs as the hundreds of minibuses churn them all up, even spaces reserved only for emergency vehicles are used as base camps during the night.

Answers?

Wasdale is taking a beating, and is not always a pretty or pleasant place to be. So what can be done? well relatively little actually. More parking can not be provided, nor can toilets and bins, as someone has to pay to install, equip, clean and empty them. That's without considering the effect they would have on the whole feel of Wasdale and the detrimental effect on the breathtaking natural scenery.

The fells paths can't all be pitched, as it would be hugely expensive and impact on the wild beauty of the hills. And try as they might hundreds of people booting up and preparing for a walk can't do so in silence. Rubbish will always be created try as they might to stop it but tell someone that they are doing something for charity and the ends will always justify the means.

So who can do something, the National Park? National Trust? Government? Well in a word no. You can't deny people the freedom of the fells, access is for all at all times of the day or night and long may it continue.

Charities need to be more aware...

To my mind the event needs to be controlled not on site, but in the planning stages and before. Charities need to aware of the damage they are causing and made to pay for the repairs, or installation of facilities. The event needs to be controlled so that it isn't going on during the night and large groups don't pick the same weekend.

But mainly and most positively the charities need to take a responsible stance and find something else to do instead. Sit in a bath of baked bean, don't talk for a month, shave your head anything but don't put 2,000 people on Scafell on a Saturday night! People who might volunteer to do it and charities that want the money need to think.

Please come to Wasdale and perhaps do the Three Peaks, you and a few friends, just don't come with one or two hundred close personal pals and definitely not in the middle of the night.

Guy Newbold