

Three Peaks Challenge to get code of conduct

By Jonathan Brown *Tuesday, 6 January 2009*

For anyone who likes to blend a little altruism with their outdoor adventure, few feats of self-inflicted endurance match up to the popularity of the Three Peaks Challenge.

As well as conquering the highest mountains in England, Wales and Scotland, participants are required to negotiate the sometimes equally treacherous motorway and road network that connects them (although the truly intrepid cycle or more adventurously sail) – all within a 24-hour period.

But the growing popularity of the event, which attracts tens of thousands of entrants each year and raises millions of pounds for charity, has given rise to increasing complaints that the mountains are being over-exploited by the armies of well-intentioned hikers, some of whom descend in groups numbering several hundred and leave a trail of environmental destruction and human waste in their wake.

Later this month, representatives from the National Trust, National Parks and the John Muir Trust, which owns Ben Nevis, will meet at Fort William along with the Institute of Fundraising to draw up a new code of conduct for Three Peaks competitors. They hope it will end the worst of the excesses being inflicted on the beautiful landscapes while still allowing charity cash to be raised. Among the proposals being discussed will be a registration system that limits the size of the groups taking part and spreading out the times people attempt their challenge to reduce congestion during those most popular weekends in the early summer when the light is most abundant.

Fran Lockhart of the John Muir Trust said the aim was not to deter visitors but improve the experience for everyone. "Our aim is to encourage people to use the hill [Ben Nevis] but such large groups of people do detract from the enjoyment of others. There is a lot of habitat up there which is really fragile. The code will be voluntary and it is not our intention to lay the law down," she said.

Scafell Pike in the Lake District may be the lowest of the peaks but the National Trust, which owns it, believes it has the worst problems. The number of climbers it attracts increases ten-fold in the summer with some 45,000 tackling the summit in May. Local people complain of late-night door slamming, lanes crammed with minibuses and mountain paths left covered in faeces and toilet paper.

Tony Holliday, who runs Keswick Lake and Mountain Travel, says the key is to persuade people who want to raise money that there are other equally demanding pursuits in stunning locations where they can put themselves to the test in a good cause. "They have to be convinced that this is not the be-all and end-all of mountaineering in the UK. For a lot of people it has become a question of ticking a box - so they can say, 'I've done that'."