

the big debate

Three Peaks in 24 hours? It's certainly a challenge and one that's not without controversy

Should people be encouraged to participate in the Three Peaks Challenge?

Against the Challenge!

James Keen



Despite man's history of aggression and conflict, it never ceases to amaze me how charitable, kind and generous people can be towards one another. The collective public willingness to help victims of the 2004 tsunami disaster, for instance, was phenomenal. So what possible reason could I have for disapproving of charity events such as the Three Peaks Challenge?

An event that raises large sums of money for worthwhile causes is surely an admirable one – instead of tutting from the sidelines, would I not be better off shutting my mouth and digging into my pockets?

Let me say from the outset that I am pro-charity. Christmas gifts this year will be the usual annual subscriptions to the John Muir Trust, Friends Of The Lake District and adoption schemes for the World Wildlife Fund. My problem with events such as the Three Peaks Challenge is the sheer scale of them.

The Three Peaks Challenge attracts thousands of participants from across the world. This has both macro and micro effects on the environment, resources and local communities. I will focus on Wasdale, the tiny community at the foot of Scafell Pike, as the smaller scale of the facilities and services of Wasdale accentuates the pressures that all three areas are put under.

Thousands of people participate in the Three Peaks Challenge each year. Naturally, they often do so in high summer to make the most of the better weather and longer hours of daylight. As most people have day jobs, the weekends are the obvious time, which focuses large numbers of people into the valley over a few weekends. All those people and just one public lavatory; all those minibuses and one narrow road with limited parking facilities; all those participants and just one stretched mountain rescue team.

I can't help but feel that there must be ways of raising money for good causes that have a lower impact on the environment and cause less disruption to local communities. What is the carbon footprint of the Three Peaks Challenge? Surely in an age of climate change, we should be minimising our use of fossil fuels, not flying or driving long distances to trot up a few hills?

Setting aside the funds raised for a moment, what is the contribution to society of climbing the three peaks? Would it not be better to raise money by doing something that would have an immediate benefit to your local community, such as building a childrens' play centre or tending the gardens of your local hospice for a year? A legacy that is apparent and beneficial to the local community for years to come, rather than a further-eroded path, litter, pollution, congestion, human waste and a disgruntled local community. As one resident of Wasdale put it: "Sit in a bathtub full of baked beans, shave your head, but please don't come to Wasdale for the Three Peaks Challenge."

James Keen lives and works in London as a musician, but can often be spotted in the Lake District, Snowdonia or the Scottish Highlands. He dreams of relocating north to the hills one day, for the Jennings beer if nothing else.

For the Challenge!

Tony Holliday



The Three Peaks Challenge offers many benefits. For the individual, it is a great test of stamina and mental strength and an excellent personal development tool. For private groups, business and charity fundraising organisations, it also provides a superb team-building platform and a chance for people with minimal experience to enjoy the outdoors and raise substantial funds for charity.

Ascending the highest peaks in England, Scotland and Wales provides a challenging objective requiring commitment and discipline, factors often the catalyst for positive change for the individual or organisation. However, as an event organiser based in the Lake District who is also a fervent supporter of the locals' viewpoint, I believe a radical rethink is required to ensure that its environmental impact is kept to a tolerable level.

To ensure a long-term future, the pending revisions to the Code of Practice for Outdoor Fundraising in the UK should reflect the event's popularity and incorporate a registration system so that organisers can submit applications in accordance with a predetermined standard. Fundamentally, this must include a scaling down from the current recommended maximum of 200 participants, which does not make allowance for the accumulative number of walkers participating in different events.

If a registration system were adopted, requiring prior approval by a National Park Authority or alternative designated body, it would facilitate a degree of control over numbers. It would also provide a much needed stimulus for policy change within those organisations who have hitherto subscribed to mass challenge events unaware or unwilling to address their inherent problems.

There are also other practical measures which can help: organisers should project a balanced approach to marketing, offering alternative and/or mid-week and off peak events, sensible routing and start times to minimise impact on local communities and a responsible attitude to litter, ensuring all waste remains in the vehicle for disposal outside the National Parks.

Perhaps the best we can hope for is responsible self-regulation on the part of organisers; however, this is reliant on the commercial objectives of individual organisations. In our case, the Three Peaks is part of a diverse business and we operate a small group policy, ideally with a 1:8 instructor ratio. However, mass events are all too common and where safety is defined by a marshalling system, pointing the way for herds of "Three Peakers", it raises the inevitable question about the motives of organisers.

There are no easy answers, but clearly existing guidelines do not reflect the adverse impact of the Three Peaks and the revised Code of Practice must now seek to ensure a better deal for the environment and local communities.

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