

Solent Marine Sites: Summer 2020 Covid Snapshot Survey

1. Introduction

In spring 2021 the Solent Forum asked the Solent's Relevant Authorities, who are members of the Solent Marine Sites (SEMS) Management Scheme, to undertake a one off snapshot survey about if and how recreational activities in the Solent impacted on designated sites over summer 2020. This short report details the findings of that survey. There were 18 responses. The Solent Forum carried out the survey in its role as the SEMS Secretariat.

2. SEMS Annual Survey

Each year, as part of the SEMS Management Scheme, the Forum runs an annual survey for the Solent's Relevant Authorities on non-licensable recreational activities in the Solent. This Survey is used to deliver an Annual Management Scheme, which fulfils the Relevant Authorities' statutory duties under the Habitats Regulations to monitor and manage coastal and marine activities within their jurisdiction.

The snapshot Covid survey will be used to supplement the findings from the 2021 SEMS Annual Survey.

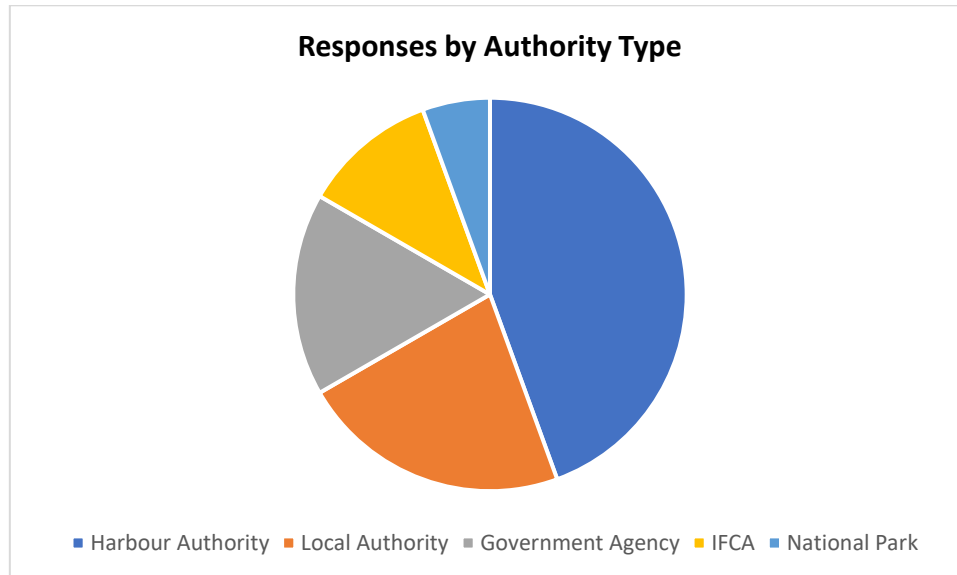
3. Activities Surveyed

Respondents were asked to report on the following activities:

- Walking (including dog walking)
- General beach recreation
- Angling
- Paddlesports
- Kite surfing/windsurfing
- Boating
- Personal watercraft
- Bait digging/shellfish gathering (hand)

4. Type of Organisation that Completed the Survey

The pie chart below highlights the organisation by type that completed the survey.



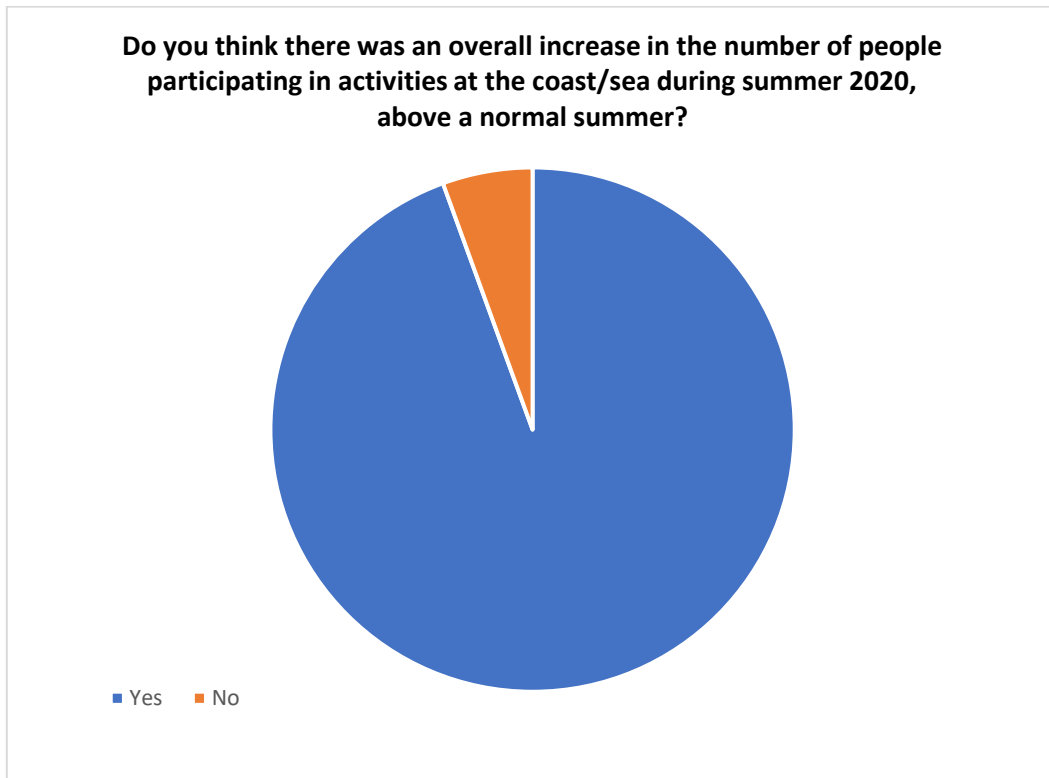
5. Area of Jurisdiction

Survey respondents gave information for the following locations in the Solent:

River Hamble
Beaulieu River
Chichester Harbour & Chichester Harbour AONB
Coastline of Gosport Borough (including Lee-on-the-Solent)
Dockyard Port of Portsmouth
Dorset, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight out to 6 nautical miles
East Devon to Kent
Isle of Wight Beaches
Langstone Harbour
Lymington Terminal Lay by berth, Fishbourne berth, Ryde Pier
New Forest National Park
Portsmouth City Council administrative area
Solent wide
Southampton Statutory Harbour Authority
West Solent
Yarmouth Harbour Western Yar and approaches

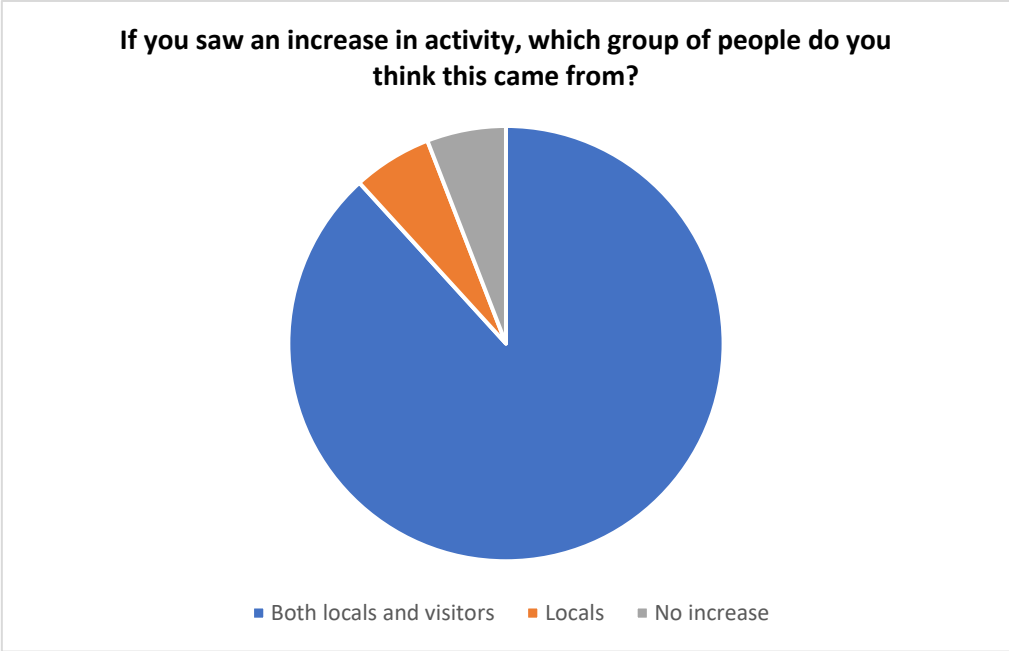
6. Changes in Activity Levels

Respondents were asked whether they thought there was an overall increase in the number of people participating in activities at the coast/sea during summer 2020, above normal summer levels. All but one respondent thought that this was the case.



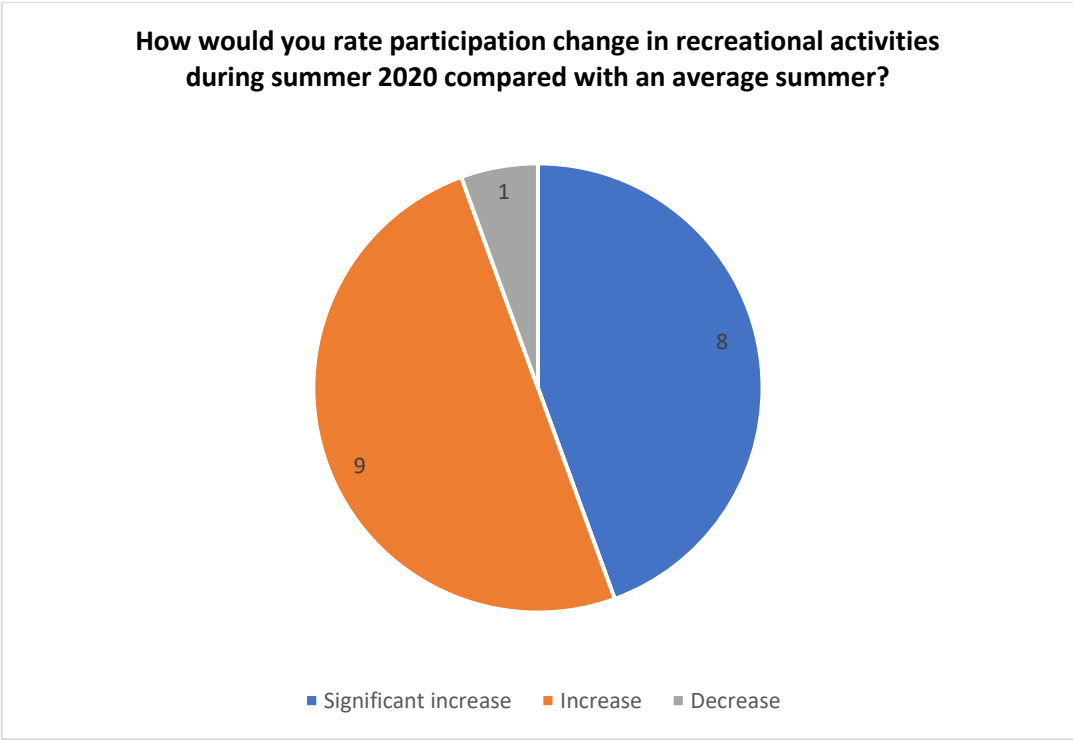
7. Group Increase by Type

Respondents were asked which groups of people created the increase in participation levels, nearly all respondents said it was both greater numbers of locals and visitors.



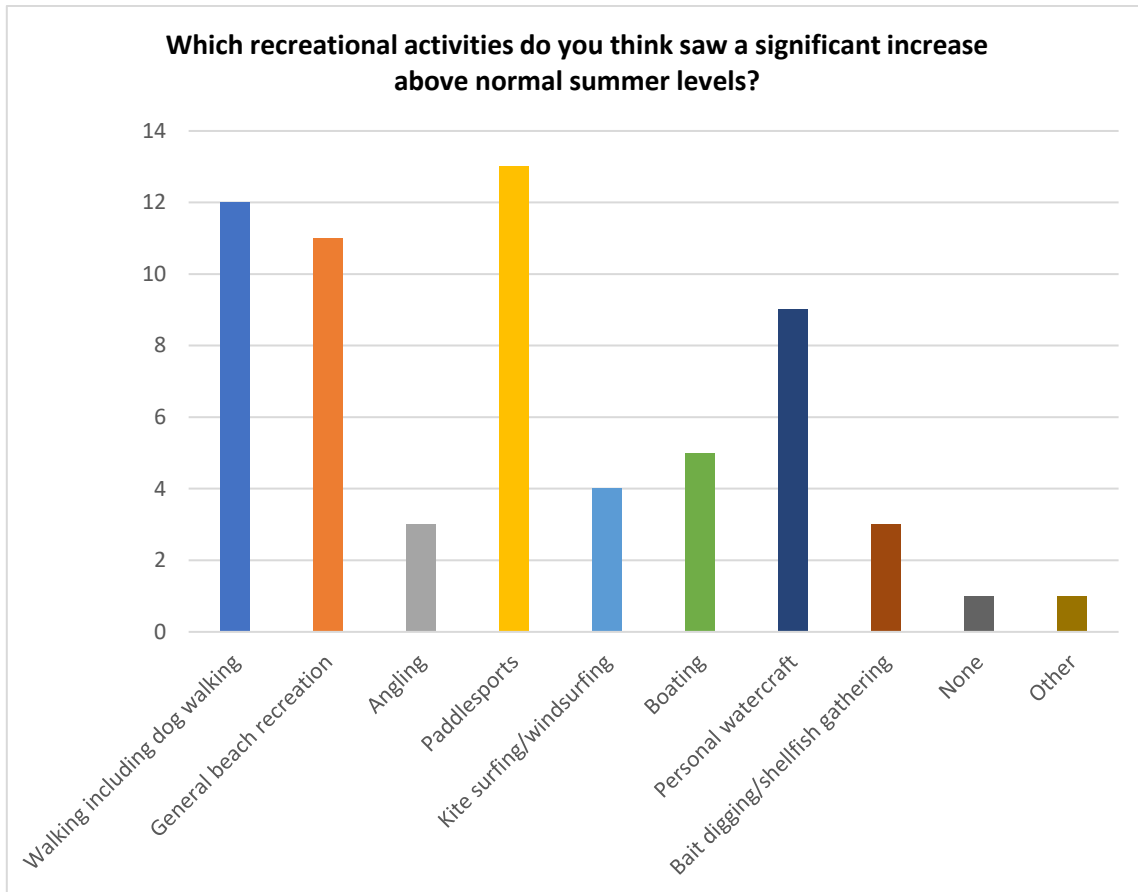
8. Participant Change

Respondents were asked how they thought levels of recreational participation had changed, the most common response was an increase followed by significant increase.



9. Which Recreational Activities saw an Increase

We asked which activities had seen an increase in participation levels, respondents noted greater participation in paddlesports, personal watercraft, coastal walking (including with dogs) and general beach recreation.



10. Hotspot Locations

We asked respondents to identify hotspot locations for increased activity. They reported the following:

River Hamble

The Hamble is easy to access and has a large number of adjacent housing developments. It has therefore been popular among many to walk the footpaths and beaches of the River. There was an 'explosion' of paddleboarding and small craft activity following the lifting of lockdown restrictions in May. While this took place throughout the River, the predominant areas used were from the slipway at Swanwick and northwards into the Upper River. The closure of some slipways in the Solent meant that Warsash slipway was made use of by a significant number of Jet Skis. It is estimated that more than four times the number of launches were conducted at this location.

Beaulieu River

The increase of slipway use by paddle sport participants saw a significant up rise and by people new to the sport. There was also an increase in the number of people trying to access the river through private land, so trespassing.

Southampton Water

PWC large increase especially around Calshot and River Itchen launch sites.

Wider Solent

On-going throughout the year - increased walkers/cyclists from Woolston to Netley and Ensign park/Hamble to Hamble Common, Swanwick to Hamble Country Park, Swanwick to Hook Lake, and Upper Itchen Estuary at Riverside Park. Swimming at Western Shore to Hamble Estuary, and Upper Hamble near/at Country Park. Angling on Upper Itchen Estuary at Riverside Park (EA Fisheries compliance and enforcement continued). Paddle boards - whole of Hamble and upper Itchen Estuary. Kayaking - Western Shore to Hamble Point, and all of Hamble Estuary. Large number of jet ski's at Ensign Park/Hamble public slip way and lower Southampton Water.

Following the initial lockdown, when restrictions on exercise eased but many were still furloughed, we saw an increase in angling activities, particularly when the weather was good. Officers also observed and were made aware of an increase in shellfish gathering, particularly in areas near the Hamble, Lee-on-the-Solent, and parts of Langstone Harbour.

Isle of Wight

Hotspot locations are at Ryde, Sandown, Shanklin and Colwell.

Indirect reports from HIWWT reserve manager on IOW of anti-social behaviour, damage to interest features and increased litter. Similarly, evidence from IOW National Trust of increase in canoe and paddle boarders.

At Yarmouth there was an increase in local berth holders using their boats, an increase in sales of boats and an increase in PWC rentals.

Portsmouth/Gosport

Anecdotal increase in walkers at Lee-on-the-Solent coming from outside of the Borough as well as locals and an increase in general beach recreation. Southsea seafront and Stokes Bay were popular.

Southsea seafront had noticeable increases in activity when lockdown was eased, particularly during the evenings/weekends that coincided with good weather. At these times there were more large groups socialising on the seafront or using the water. It was unclear where these people came from, though likely to be a mix of local residents as well as some coming from further afield.

Chichester Harbour

Emsworth shoreline, Nutbourne Channel, Chichester Channel, Thorney island/Pilsey, Prinsted - most locations around the harbour with a car park or residential population. Rise in windsurfing noted.

Bait collection and hand gathering in the Dell Quay area of Chichester Harbour has seen an increase in the amount of activity comparative to normal. Officers reported regularly spotting 10+ people in the intertidal gathering bivalve molluscs/shellfish/bait.

New Forest

Direct reports from manager at North Solent NNR which saw huge increase in visitor numbers with anti-social behaviour such as fires for BBQs, camping, litter, bird disturbance, using bird sanctuary as a launch site for paddle boards etc. Disturbance is known to have resulted in the failing of schedule 1 breeding birds as people presence prevented adults from feeding resulting in chick mortality.

Langstone Harbour

Off road driving on sand dunes reported at Sinah Common.

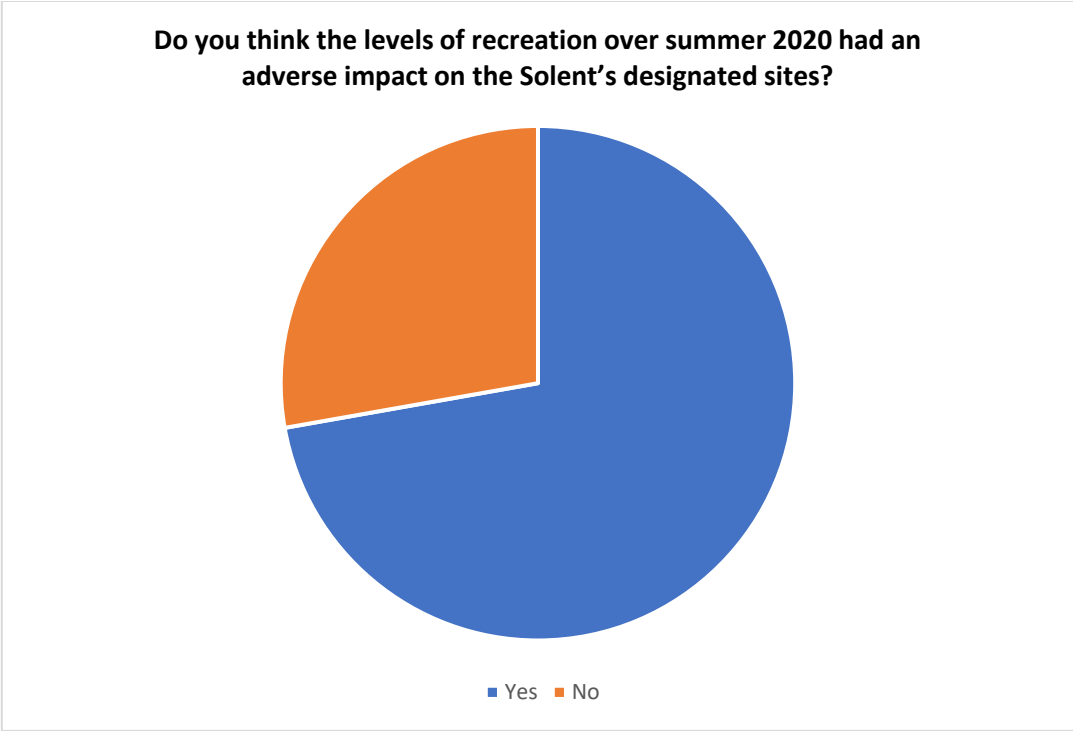
Almost double the number of jetski permits were issued in 2020 compared with 2019. Covid restrictions coupled with staff sickness created difficulties in managing these users. Anecdotally the number of paddlesports participant saw an enormous rise, as did shoreline recreation (for much of the summer only outdoor spaces were available for recreation). The Harbour Board received almost daily reports of large groups of individuals gathering shellfish by hand on the intertidal. staff shortage and Covid restrictions also resulted in kite surfing activity occurring in the harbour (kite surfing is prohibited in Langstone Harbour).

Keyhaven

Keyhaven - perception of staff of more kite surfing north of spit. Also increase in wild camping via parking of campervans along Saltgrass lane. May be linked to litter and other waste which was thought to increase in the area (or that may have just been derived from the overall visitor pressure). Similar trends at Calshot spit with campervans either staying for day or overnight. Increases in number of beach/coastal path visitors, litter/dog mess etc.

11. Impact on Designated Sites

We asked respondents whether they believed that increases in activity levels had an adverse impact on the Solent's designated sites. Thirteen out of the eighteen respondents said they believed that this was the case.



12. How were Sites Impacted

We asked respondents to report on what they thought were the main impacts on designated sites, the following observations were made.

- Bird disturbance, littering.
- Due to the lack of people's knowledge and experience on the water we had people going ashore on designated areas such as Gull Island and stopping on protected foreshores and pushing their kayaks and paddleboards across the protected areas.
- Trampling of saltmarsh as people avoiding each other on paths, and paths very muddy. Trampling across saltmarsh/disturbance to eelgrass beds from watercraft accessing water. Disturbance to birds from people, watercraft and dogs. Littering from picnics, water bottles, broken watercraft.
- Bird (recreational) disturbance, littering.
- Increased bird disturbance likely at locations such as Haslar Lake. Also, an increase in littering witnessed at Stokes Bay. Significant increase in dog walkers at Lee-on-the-Solent which includes trampling of SSSI at Lee-on-the-Solent and Browdown.
- Littering, disturbance to shoreline habitats and species through increase in paddle boarding and pedestrians.
- Bird disturbance, foreshore trampling, littering, mudflat disturbance, noise, social issues.
- Bird disturbance, trampling, seal disturbance, mudflat disturbance, littering, antisocial behaviour in general were all at heightened levels.
- Bird disturbance, compaction/ erosion from vehicles, trampling, increased litter. Potential (but currently unconfirmed) damage to seagrass beds in Langstone Harbour as a result of hand gathering activities.
- Mudflat disturbance and bird disturbance are the key issues due to increased foot traffic through bait/hand gathering - however the impact of 'usual' levels is unknown/yet to be quantified.
- Littering and bird disturbance.
- Littering, nutrient enrichment, potential for increased trampling (no data to support this). Disturbance may have reduced a little in the autumn due to other activities opening up and less reliance on meeting people outside.
- Increased littering along the developed seafront that could have had wider impacts.
- Activity levels have increased, but would need to be considered against sensitive areas, activities, sediment type and prey availability in assessments.

13. Additional Measures Implemented

We asked respondents whether they had put any additional measures in place to manage visitor pressures during summer 2020.

- Additional staff time was predominantly taken up policing anti-social behaviour at Hamble and Bursledon.
- We employed a roaming warden who educated users or moved them. We also implemented an online booking system for slipway to control the number of users and provide additional educational information when they booked.
- Implemented a Calshot Watersports area to help manage the waters in that area from PWC. Operation wave breaker is a joint collaboration with marine police and Harbour Authorities to help combat antisocial behavior on the water. Mostly from PWC users.
- Fisheries compliance and enforcement - Rod Licence checks.
- The Council released press releases regarding a 'bin it, don't sling it' campaign to reduce littering within the Borough. Extra staff were available in the summer months to deal with increase littering and the use of bins.
- Recreational Boating guidance published in the form of a Portsmouth Local Notice To Mariners.

- Additional signage, additional Harbour patrols and security and improvements to signage around the Harbour.
- No additional measures, but officers were regularly visiting hot spots, engaging with the public and where appropriate considering activities against existing regulations.
- Staff were restricted by organisation's own approach to lockdown rules and Ranger activity was centred on the terrestrial Open Forest sites due to fire risk, designated sites verge erosion from parking.

Operation Wavebreaker

Operation Wavebreaker is a county-wide initiative launched by the Hampshire Police Marine Support Unit to target anti-social behaviour on the waters of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. Working with partners and the community it aims to tackle any issues involving all types of watercraft to ensure the marine community stay safe and abide by the laws on the water. The Police encourage any anti-social behaviour to be reported by calling 101.

In addition to working with other Police Marine Units around the country to share ideas and practices, Hampshire Marine Unit are working closely with local harbour masters, maritime rescue agencies and community groups to quantify the issue and look at effective ways of modifying the current behaviours to ensure everyone can use the water in a safe and enjoyable environment.

14. Guidance and Best Practice

Respondents were asked if any existing resource(s) or best practice guidance was helpful in assisting with visitor pressure during this period, e.g. Countryside Code.

- Government guidelines following the lifting of COVID restrictions was reasonably straightforward to follow and translated into guidance for River Users. Most were compliant although a number required stronger advice. Other resources were not used. Some external sector agencies 'jumped the gun' and raised inappropriately boat owners' expectations.
- We produced our own Code of Practice which was sent to everyone when they booked online or handed out to visitors.
- No resources available. Budget restraints prevent good practice and management of visitor pressure.
- It was just so hard to reach the number of extra people present irrespective of their activity or any guidance.
- Countryside Code.
- We distributed information on our byelaws (e.g. hand gathering closed areas, minimum size), national legislation (e.g. bass regs, nursery area legislation), Solent Bait code of conduct and information provided by the local authorities in relation to food hygiene (mainly focused on the shellfish hand gathering and classified harvesting areas).
- Produced own local version of Countryside Code - Forest Code. A part of another initiative led by freshwater Habitats trust also produced a water Code which included messaging for behaviours related to freshwater, also relevant to coast. https://freshwaterhabitats.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/FHT_New-Forest-leaflet_Final-low-res-2.pdf.

15. One Wish

Respondents were asked if they could be granted one wish in a similar scenario to summer 2020 again what would it be.

- COVID has proved to be a significant disruptive challenge for approaching a year. It and the associated restrictions have changed daily lives to such an extent that people now have become used to distancing and

other measures. It would seem less likely that similar events to last summer will re-occur to the same extent. It remains to be seen whether the public will feel emboldened by the success of the COVID vaccination programme with a corresponding impact on SEMS. Getting back into a societal regime and routine that will bring with it associated reduced leisure time will help.

- To improve people's knowledge and experience before accessing the water with regards to water safety and the environment.
- More staff both internal and with external stakeholders to be able to manage the situation with personal watercraft.
- Reduce littering - probably the longest lasting impact.
- Better awareness and assertiveness of wider public to respect the environment - with a better understanding of how their litter can end up in waterways.
- Not to repeat a similar scenario to summer 2020!
- Additional resources.
- More staff for various agencies to ranger sites and communicate directly with visitors.
- Central Government giving more appropriate guidance.
- The increase in activity was largely due to people making the most of lockdown restrictions being eased, good weather and staycations. These increases would be easier to manage without the burden of the Covid-19 virus and everything that brings with regard to safety.
- More staff and resources to manage increased activity. Also, that more recreational activities which are not centred on the coast (pub gardens, shopping centres) were allowed to remain open to reduce pressure on the coast.
- Just for people to be more respectful (and knowledgeable) of the environment and its sensitivities. From talk of nature being our saviour in spring on the likes of Springwatch to watching people litter, trample, set fires damage etc. was very disappointing.
- That people respected each other and the environment in their behaviour and acted in collective rather than individual basis, or if that's too esoteric, simply more staff to try to improve communication and control on the ground.
- Greater monitoring data for coastal areas to understand activity levels and potential impacts.

Solent Marine Sites, c/o Hampshire County Council

The Castle, Winchester SO23 8UE

Email: sems@hants.gov.uk

www.solentems.org.uk

