

Commoning, Fencing, and Commoners in a Forest of Dean Biosphere

The following questions & answers note was provided to the Forest of Dean Commoners Association in advance of their meeting on the 11 April 2026

Introduction - Following meetings with the Forest of Dean Commoners Association (10/2/26 & 23/3/26) the association requested written responses to some key questions in order that they could consider how a biosphere would interact with Commoning.

How would commoners be affected in a Forest of Dean Biosphere?

Commoners' activities, grazing, would continue unchanged. In fact, it would be one of the core practices celebrated within a biosphere. It's one of those activities that makes the Forest of Dean special. It's the relationship between people and place that biospheres seek to acknowledge and support. It is hoped, and there is the opportunity for, representatives of the Commoners to be involved in the biosphere governance structures, so that the practice and role of Commoning is embedded in the work of the biosphere. A biosphere could also benefit commoners by providing funding for habitat restoration, grazing infrastructure, or support for future generations of Commoners.

Could biosphere designation in the Forest of Dean stop Commoning?

Biosphere designation does not add any new legal responsibilities. Therefore, the current rights and practices as well as the legal responsibilities would remain the same, so no, a biosphere will not stop Commoning, in fact the opposite, as set out above.

Would a Forest of Dean Biosphere lead to more fencing in the Statutory Forest?

The biosphere does not require any additional fencing. As mentioned above biosphere designation does not add any new legal responsibilities, so those with existing responsibilities carry on as now (e.g. Commoners, Verderers, Forestry England, Trading standards etc). Habitat restoration often favours conservation grazing and open landscapes rather than enclosure. Commoning grazing is vital to the culture, landscape, and wildlife of the Forest of Dean. The biosphere 'zone' maps presented do not require any new fencing.

How would commoners be involved in a Forest of Dean Biosphere?

Commoners knowledge of land, grazing, and local culture is valued as part of the long-term future of the Forest of Dean and are therefore central to proposed governance. Work has been going on thinking about how the biosphere will organise itself, ensuring that community voices are central. Currently there are thoughts to have a *Stewardship Assembly* (a wide partnership), *Delivery Group*, and *Custodians Panel* that all reserve places for Commoners, Verderers and Freeminers. Commoners would therefore participate in decision-making, monitoring, land-management projects, and cultural heritage initiatives.

If there's no new regulations with a biosphere what would a biosphere bring to the Forest of Dean?

The designation will bring international acknowledgement and recognition that the Forest of Dean is a particularly distinctive and special place. The designation will highlight the importance of having locally derived priorities and projects reflective of the area's communities, places, and practices. The importance, role, function, and purpose of Commoners and Commoning in the Forest of Dean will receive greater recognition.

The biosphere will also provide a framework for a wide partnership to look at the issues and opportunities facing the area. This partnership approach will bring community representatives and statutory organisations together to shape priorities and activity. This partnership approach will provide Commoners and Commoning, the opportunity to raise their concerns and opportunities with partners within the context that the biosphere has identified that Commoning is a valued and an intrinsically important activity within the biosphere.

The Forest of Dean has real economic strengths: high self-employment, a strong base of small and micro businesses, and depth in manufacturing, engineering, construction, food production, and land-based industries. However, a significant amount of employment sits outside the district, and parts of the visitor economy and service sector are externally owned, which means a substantial share of economic value often flows out of the area rather than staying locally. The biosphere provides a framework to respond to this challenge by providing stronger links between, employers, local suppliers, and local customers, increasing the share of public and visitor spending captured by local firms. The biosphere will also provide a valuable uniqueness or differentiation for local goods and services in the way they come from and support the Forest of Dean.