

Our crusade for greater access to the countryside wins wide support

Hunts ride where walkers are barred

FOX HUNTERS are free to ride across large tracts of Ministry of Defence land barred to walkers, including "impact areas" marked off for shell firing.

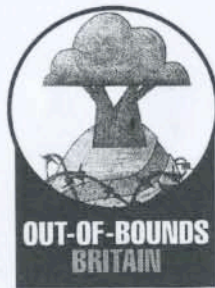
Anti-hunt campaigners and walking groups are furious that the hunts are given wide ranging access despite the fact that most members of the public are restricted to designated tracks and rights of way.

They are particularly angry that the Royal Artillery Hunt regularly uses MoD land on Salisbury Plain, which is entirely out of bounds to walkers.

They are also allowed wide-ranging access to land which is closed to the public most of the year.

"Many people feel quite strongly that since the military is funded by the taxpayer it should not be hunting at all. But if it does it should certainly be subject to the same restrictions as walkers," said Nick Ridge, of

BY JANE HUGHES



the League Against Cruel Sports.

"If the hunt is allowed onto land when red flags are flying, it begs the question of whether the flags are being raised unnecessarily."

Red flags are raised when the military is involved in exercises and there is a supposed danger

to the public. But Lt-Col Nick Hornby, of the Royal Artillery Hunt, admitted the dangers of the impact zones (where shells land) are exaggerated. "Everybody is OK really, it is only a political thing," he said.

Walkers have complained loudly about the restrictions but to no avail.

"I think it is scandalous that the hunt can go on to the impact areas on Salisbury Plain even though the public rights of way were closed in 1986," said Bill Riley, a rambler and member of the Wiltshire Bridleways Association.

"The only time we are allowed on the roads crossing the Imber ranges is on bank holidays but I am sure there could be more access when they are not in use."

The Labour government ordered reviews of foxhunting on MoD and Forestry Commission land shortly after coming to power in 1997. However,

after pressure from landowners, who threatened to block military access to their land if the sport was banned, ministers decided to continue renewing the 27 annual licences for hunts already using MoD land. The Forestry Commission followed suit.

"I don't see why the hunts should be allowed privileged access. If they are not observed then nobody knows what they are doing," said Penny Little, of the anti-hunting group, Protect our Wild Animals.

"I have clearly seen personnel of the Vale of Aylesbury hunt enter MoD land at Otmoor, Oxfordshire, when the red flag is flying."

A spokeswoman for the MoD said it had no legal grounds to stop hunting on its land unless there was a change in legislation, but that no new hunts could apply for licences.

She said the hunt routes,

which are based on "traditional rights", are agreed every season and accompanied by detailed maps laying out areas from which the sport is prohibited.

"Safety is our priority and we wouldn't allow people to hunt across land where it is dangerous," she said.

"The hunt may have access to areas of the defence estate which the public doesn't but there are strict areas in which they operate, according to their traditional rights."

She said that when the hunt crosses impact areas, huntsmen liaise with ground managers by walkie-talkie to check the conditions of access, and that special passes are needed if the red flags are up.

The hunt is also accompanied by qualified range staff and there are certain areas the huntsmen are only entitled to go in order to collect hounds, or on foot.



Privileged access: the Royal Artillery Hunt on Salisbury Plain yesterday

ANDY ROBB