

Thetford Forest – sled dog training and racing



(Photo: Chris Wellstead)

Objectives	For the Forestry Commission: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- To enable sled dog owners to run their dogs in harness in a controlled and organised manner and to avoid the possibility of owners accessing the forest as they please- To allow events/training which brings in income to the FC and also to the local economy
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	<p>For the sled dog owner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To maintain a long term positive relationship with the local FC office in order to enable sled dog owners to keep their dogs fit and healthy - To retain excellent venues for competitive husky racing
Background	<p>Sled dog racing has taken place in the UK – mainly on Forestry Commission land – for the past 35 to 40 years. As a sport it has grown but is unlikely ever to become a major sport due to the commitment involved in raising, maintaining and training a relatively large number of dogs such as is necessary in order to be competitive. It is seen as a commitment for the lifetime of the dogs and due to the larger than normal number of dogs kept, running in harness is the only practical means of keeping the dogs fit. A positive relationship with the FC is therefore critical to the future of not only the sport itself but to the individual owners/competitors and the dogs themselves.</p> <p>Forestry Commission land is generally seen as being better suited to sled dog training than privately owned woodland since the trails are maintained and kept open by the FC and also by other forest users. Sled dog training and racing is restricted to open trails and fire routes and is low impact on the forest causing little if any wear on trails. Similarly the impact on other forest users is kept to a minimum since the need to run in cooler temperatures generally sees sled dog trainers out in the forest in the early mornings or at dusk.</p> <p>Training in Thetford Forest is limited to four main areas and permits are issued through a central volunteer administrator from the sled dog group – these are limited to 45 permits annually and there is generally a waiting list for permits. The Thetford area is ideally suited to sled dog training since the soil is largely sandy and therefore free draining. In areas of the country where the land becomes waterlogged the FC has to lay down roads to enable vehicle access and these roads are largely unsuitable for sled dogs given that they run on ‘bare feet’. As a result sled dog owners have specifically moved to the area and it is seen as being the ‘centre’ of sled dog racing in the UK.</p>
Actions and achievements	<p>In the time since sled dog training first began in Thetford Forest, the number of users has grown from a handful to 45 permit holders (plus a waiting list of others). Similarly the number of events held has grown from one or two ‘fun’ rallies in the early years to regular highly competitive series of sled dog races numbering in the region of around 12 to 15 events per winter season. The sled dog racing season is limited to the winter months when other events are less</p>

	<p>frequent so sits well alongside the event calendar for the forest area.</p> <p>Every race held in the area brings significant income to local hotels, restaurants, fuel stations etc at a time of year when business is low. Races held in the area attract larger entries than anywhere else in the country and competitors travel from throughout the UK to attend – with anything up to 130 teams competing at any one race.</p>
Relationships	<p>The need for a positive relationship between the Forestry Commission and sled dog trainers is paramount and the fact that a single group of sled dog owners exists helps to ensure this. Similarly local forest users generally view the sport as positive – something interesting to watch both at race events and when out walking in the forest. The relationship with local businesses is also positive since the sport brings in significant income particularly during the winter months.</p>
Funding	<p>Costs to the FC are minimal – over and above that which they already bear in keeping the forest available for all forest users. Costs for competitors and regular sled dog trainers in the area are kept as low as possible though payment is made to enter races and for training permits in order to pay FC venue and annual training fees.</p>
Significant issues	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The FC prefers one point of contact. b. Race organisers must be aware of any restriction or areas to be avoided e.g. felled areas or sensitive habitats. c. Organisers need to be aware and act on any request from the FC. d. Sign posting to alert local forest users of an upcoming race must be used. e. Provision of insurance cover is required by the FC for both training and events (although claims are very rare). f. A full risk analysis is required by the FC for both training and events.
Contact	<p>For further information on sled dog racing in Thetford Forest contact: Caroline Kisko at caroline.kisko@thekennelclub.org.uk</p>