

Carbon, Campfires, Cooking & English Land Rights

The are some innocuous uses of fossil fuels which go largely unnoticed. One such example is camping outdoors.

Camping shops sell a variety of stoves fuelled by gas, liquid petrol or methanol, or chemical-based solid fuel compounds. Thing is, if you're outdoors, is the use of fossil fuels necessary?

The deception of 'the land'

English land law is highly restrictive. In Scotland the [Outdoor Access Code](#) goes way beyond the English *law*. Ancient land rights still exist there allowing the public to freely camp on open land.

[The Countryside Code](#) does not ban lighting fires outdoors. What it actually states is that we should "be careful with naked flames".

The idea that "you can't" in the countryside comes from the historic domination of large landowners in British society.

They have used their influence over government – not least through the unelected House of Lords – to maintain their 'property rights', excluding the public as far as possible.

Though today we have greater access to the land than in the past, the domination of the ['landowning aristocracy'](#) persists in many parts of Britain to this day.

And as British property prices have surged, their influence been added to by a growing number of [UK-based](#) and [off-shore](#) companies trying to intensify their land-holdings to turn a fast buck.

That in-turn creates a well financed [land](#) and [farming](#) lobby in Britain, who try to restrict the public's rights of land access, while simultaneously attempting to [enlarge their rights](#) to exploit the countryside for financial gain.

Cooking outdoors on fossil fuels

The pervasive fossil fuel in camping is compressed gas – usually a butane and propane mix, commonly marketed as [liquefied petroleum gas](#) (LPG) for road vehicles and domestic use.

While it is often argued that LPG is [better for the environment](#) than burning oil, what that equation does not take into account is the impact of first compressing the gas and then 'canning' it in small-volume steel containers for outdoor use.

In fact, when many amateur campers try to extend their outdoor skills under more harsh conditions, they are often undone by their reliance on those little blue [Campingaz](#) canisters. When the air temperature is below 10 Celsius it gets progressively harder for the gas to evaporate, meaning that the stove doesn't work efficiently, if at all.

Consequently many experienced campers and backpackers use [Primus-style stoves](#) which burn paraffin, petrol or methanol. These work well in all weathers and temperatures, though have the disadvantage that you have to carry a quantity of smelly and volatile liquid fuel around with you.



The 'feral' stick fire grate in use

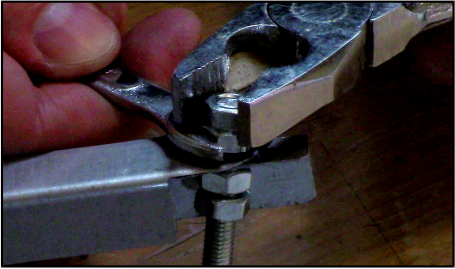
As a result of the limits of gas and the user 'unfriendliness' of liquid fuels, solid fuel stoves have grown in popularity recently. Each small block provides a certain amount of heat to cook on.

[Solid-fuel camping stoves use cubes](#) of methenamine, hexamine or trioxane solidified in paraffin wax. The difficulty is that manufacturing these solid compounds uses far more energy – and thus incurs a far higher environmental burden – than using everyday LPG or petrol.

More convenient perhaps, but ecologically solid fuel camping stoves are a nightmare.

Taking out the fossil fuels out of camp cooking

Making camp cooking "carbon free" is where the issue of land rights and fossil fuels meet, head on!



With some cheap metal and a few tools, the 'feral' stick fire cooking grate is relatively easy to make

That's because by lighting a fire with small sticks to cook or boil water I'm 'off-fending' not against nature, but against the perceptions of the landowner being wholly in control of their land.

In Scotland that's not an issue because of their historic rights of land access – rooted in the ['Allemansrätten'](#) [tradition](#) of other Scandinavian nations (though the recent [Loch Lomond camping ban](#), enforced through national park by-laws, has exercised many people around this issue of late).

The true struggle is in England and Wales. Over the last few years, since the Conservative Party entered Government, there has been some subtle reining-in of the public's countryside access rights – under amendments to the law on common land in the [Growth and Infrastructure Act 2013](#), and more recently new restrictions on footpath law in the [Infrastructure Act 2015](#).

Before that, the creation of the much lauded 'right to roam' by the Labour Government in fact contained some highly restrictive caveats, brought in to satisfy the well-funded objections of the land lobby. Notable [amongst those restrictions](#), apart from banning you ['wild swimming'](#) in lakes and rivers or camping in general, was a prohibition on "lighting or tending a fire".

This is why taking fossil fuels out of camp cooking is so 'radical'. It redefines not only people's connection to how they cook outdoors, and thus how they relate to the countryside. It also challenges the long-held perceptions of the landowning classes ['feudal' right](#) to control the land, nature, and all activities therein.

Given the traditionally negative view of landowners of England to both land access, and people seeking recreation on open land (without paying, that is), promoting lighting fires outdoors is bound to ruffle feathers!

'Sticks', not 'wood'

Cooking over a stick fire teaches not only cooking under difficult conditions, it requires an involvement in the mechanics of 'the countryside' that you just can't get when using fossil fuels.

For example, not all woods burn well, or cleanly, so having an under-

Taking the Fossil Fuels out of Camp Cooking – why perceptions, and our practical skills need to change

standing of the trees and shrubs in our countryside has to be developed – which of course enhances people's [connection to nature](#) generally. Often that exploration is tied to foraging, and the informal understanding of soils, botany and hydrology that entails.

Cooking outdoors does not use 'wood', as in large lumps of tree – it *doesn't require that much energy!*

It's far easier, and more controllable, to cook using small sticks – nothing thicker than a centimetre or so.

Sticks burn quickly, and thus you can 'control' the amount of heat delivered by manipulating the qualities of the fire you're using. It's almost like turning the knob on a home cooker, albeit it requires a little more attention to detail.

Cooking on sticks, which are easily gathered outdoors without having to damage trees or hedgerows, has a much lower impact on the environment than using fossil fuels. Where you light fires, and how you deal with the scorch mark afterwards, are an implicit part of minimising that ecological footprint further.

Of course the question is *how* do you do cook over a stick fire?

You need equipment.

The Free Range 'Feral' Stick Fire Grate

There are some [stick-fire grates](#) available [to buy from](#) specialist 'bushcraft' suppliers. However these tend to be expensive – £50 to £150.

For that reason the Free Range Network has developed what they call the [Free Range DIY 'Feral' Stick Fire Grate](#). It's a small folding trestle which holds two small saucepans above a stick fire.

Two saucepans is another great benefit, since most 'off-the-peg' designs, including the eponymous *Kelly Kettle*, can only take one.

The emphasis behind the project is that the low cost design – roughly £10 if you buy the materials from a DIY superstore – can be easily built by those with some experience of using hand tools. It's also scalable – using the basic design

you are free to vary the dimensions to fit the size of pan you have available.

The issue is not only to allow people to remove fossil fuels from camp cooking. The idea is that cooking on a small stick fire re-

quires a far closer relationship to the land – and thus can be transformational for people's lifestyle generally.

Their emphasis on the self-build/DIY element of the stick-fire grate is part of that greater aim, allowing people to "gain the confidence to 'make' rather than 'buy' the things you need".

More importantly, it's good for any kind of outdoor camping. You could use it in your back garden, at a local park, and its compact folding design means it can easily fit in the pocket of a rucksack for use on longer treks.

In fact, one of the high-lighted features of the design is that, at 275 grams,

The Free Range Do It Yourself

'Feral' Stick-Fire Cooking Grate

Version 1, created by Paul Mobbs for the Free Range Network, June 2017
<https://www.fraw.org.uk/Fen/SFsq/INDEX.html>

Cooking outdoors is a fun skill to learn, expanding your ecological awareness and personal resilience. Cook well outdoors from fresh or foraged food and you can cook anywhere. Problem is, where do you find, or afford the kit required? The Free Range DIY Feral Stick-Fire Cooking Grate is a small, light-weight, trestle cooking grate designed to burn small sticks which, with a few tools and components, you can build yourself.

What's the issue here?

Despite its image, camping isn't that ecologically sound. For most people, cooking outdoors while camping or backpacking invariably involves the use of fossil fuels – in particular gas (e.g. 'Campingaz'). Few of the mainstream camping stores sell alternatives to gas- or petroleum-fuelled stoves.

If you're concerned about the climate, or worst still, camping outdoors in a protest camp against fossil fuels, using gas isn't particularly desirable.

The law in England and Wales (in Scotland the 'right to roam' legislation is wholly different) discourages the lighting of fires. Although The Countryside Code¹ is mute on the issue, lighting fires is prohibited by access land law².

Where people do use wood fuel it is often in the form of processed waste wood (such as pallets or sawdust) or sawn 'lump wood' – which doesn't burn very efficiently when used for cooking.

There are ready-made wood stoves³ and grates⁴ on the market, costing from £50 to £150. As many are enclosed, they also are quite bulky.

Some, especially the 'wood gas' stoves, require wood pellets or chipped/processed wood in order to function – which again needs to be bought/carried. In order to promote the use of more ecologically sustainable fuel for cooking outdoors, the Free Range Network have produced this guide to constructing your own 'stick fire' grate.

This guide outlines how to build the grate from cheap metal which can be easily sourced from DIY stores – or you might be able to salvage much of what is required from a skip in the street.

It also gives tips on using the grate, and UK law. The design is not fixed: while the pattern is standard, the dimensions should be selected to fit the cooking utensils which you have available.

Note: This guide is rather long and detailed. It assumes you have some experience of using hand tools. In making the grate we hope not only that you end up with a more sustainable cooking option, but that you also gain the confidence to 'make' rather than 'buy' the things you need.

The Free Range DIY 'Feral' Stick-Fire Cooking Grate, version 1.



To build the Stick-Fire Grate you need:

- Angle steel (steel bent at a right-angle) 1 metre or more, depending upon how big you wish to build the grate. Stainless steel would be ideal, mild steel will do, though galvanized is better. Avoid aluminium, as it is too soft when hot, and lightweight magnesium-aluminium, which might burst into flames.
- Threaded rod or stud. Studding is like a long bolt without a head on the end. Depending on the size of the grate you'll need at least half a metre.
- 24 nuts which fit the threaded rod
- A hacksaw to cut the metal. Ideally a large hacksaw with hard blade – smaller 'junior' hacksaws have too flexible a blade to work easily. If you have a professional metal table saw or disc cutter, even better.
- A metal file to finish the edges. When you cut metal it makes sharp edges – not a good idea for a camping stove. A small metal file, or emery paper, can be used to smooth the edges and make them safer.
- A drill and 'high speed steel' bit. The drill needs to be about half-a-millimetre bigger than the width of the threaded rod.
- Spanners to fit the nuts. It's necessary to lock the nuts together, so socket spanners are no good – though a spanner and pliers or grips will do.

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The design and construction guide for the 'Feral' stick fire grate – downloadable from the [Free Range Activism Website](#).

while it is heavier than the 'regulator' half of the *Campingaz* stove (200 grams), it is lighter than the *Campingaz* regulator plus an *empty* cylinder combined (300 grams), and is half the weight of the regulator and full cylinder (550 grams).

This all comes down to the ancient English struggle for 'land rights'

Enabling people to light small stick fires outdoors, combined with learning all

the skills and knowledge required to do that, is arguably a better route to learn how to live sustainably.

What objections there are to such activities come predominantly from the landowning lobby – as encouraging 'residing' on the land is an affront to their ancient property rights.

However, that 'Anglo-Saxon' idea of property rights is based on the dis-appropriation of the land from the people following the Norman Conquest – something those same people, after perfecting the principle on the English, enacted across the world as [British Colonialism](#).

That is the substantive reason why taking the fossil fuels out of camp cooking is a radical act. It challenges the status quo of English land rights – which of course under-pins the greater notion of capital, and processes of growth economics which has been responsible for the rapacious plundering of the planet's resources for the last five centuries.

More importantly, 'a land without people' implies 'a people without a land'. If we are to secure sustainable lifestyles in the future, that begins by re-establishing [people's connection to the land](#); and from there, realizing the principle that for true sustainability the people and land must exist symbiotically.

A first small step in that process is sustainably 'residing' in the land; taking the fossil fuels out of camp cooking is the most direct means to achieve that. Admittedly, such a small tokenistic step isn't going, in the popular parlance, to "save the planet".

That's not the point.

The issue is one of enhancing people's connection to the land, and through that experience, changing the orientation of their lifestyle.

Written by Paul Mobbs, Mobbs' Environmental Investigations, June 2017.

Created for the Free Range Activism Network – <http://www.fraw.org.uk/>

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