# Supreme Court ruling set to decide future of wild camping in Dartmoor



As a highly contested legal battle reaches its peak, wild campers in Dartmoor are awaiting a significant ruling from the Supreme Court regarding their ability to camp freely within this picturesque national park. At the heart of the dispute are landowners Alexander and Diana Darwall, who are challenging a key ruling from the Court of Appeal that reasserted the public's right to pitch tents in Dartmoor’s vast commons without requiring landowner approval.

Dartmoor National Park, spanning over 368 square miles, has been a beacon for nature lovers who seek the freedom of wild camping, a practice that has held a special status in England unlike other national parks. The Dartmoor Commons Act of 1985 established specific rights for the public, allowing access to these commons for open-air recreation. While wild camping is broadly permitted across many regions in Scotland, it has remained a unique feature of Dartmoor, believed to be in place since the act's inception.

The legal quandary stems from differing interpretations of what constitutes "open-air recreation." The Darwalls argue that camping does not fall within this category, claiming that the act merely provides rights for pedestrian activities like walking and horse riding. Conversely, attorneys representing the Dartmoor National Park Authority contend that the public’s right to engage in open-air recreation inherently includes the right to camp. This has been bolstered by a recent Court of Appeal decision that overturned an earlier High Court ruling, paving the way for the assertion that camping is a valid form of this outdoor activity.

The Darwall couple, whose ownership of the 4,000-acre Blachford estate in southern Dartmoor dates back to 2013, has contended that wild campers pose risks to local cattle and environmental integrity. Alexander Darwall has voiced concerns about damages associated with camping practices, including the use of campfires, which he believes could lead to habitat destruction or wildfire risks. He has expressed frustration over what he regards as a lack of adherence to the ‘leave no trace’ principle among many campers.

In stark contrast, the Dartmoor National Park Authority has rejected these claims, describing the assertion that temporary camping causes significant damage to land and vegetation as "absurd." Their position is that allowing people to camp briefly does not substantially disturb the natural landscape, citing the relatively minimal impact compared to the benefits of public access and enjoyment of the outdoors.

As the momentum behind the right to campground has gained traction, thousands have rallied to support the cause, asserting their right to enjoy Dartmoor’s scenic offerings freely. Notably, the previous ruling by the Court of Appeal in July 2023 declared that the law indeed grants access for sleeping or resting, regardless of the time of day or whether in a tent. This ruling marks a pivotal victory for those advocating for the right to roam, significantly challenging the landowners' position.

Now, with the Supreme Court set to deliver a final verdict, the ramifications of this legal decision could resonate far beyond Dartmoor. A ruling in favour of the public right to wild camp could inspire similar movements across England, potentially setting precedents that safeguard public access to natural spaces against increasing restrictions imposed by private ownership.

As matters stand, the legal interpretation of historical statutes like the Dartmoor Commons Act remains crucial in shaping the landscape of land use and public rights. Whichever way the Supreme Court decides, the outcome will undoubtedly have lasting effects on the relationship between landowners, the public, and the preservation of shared natural resources.

### Reference Map

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