

News

Hiking trail through land owned by John Kerry's family opens in northern France following bitter legal dispute



John Kerry, the former US Secretary of State, attends a ceremony in 2014 in Saint-Briac-sur-Mer, the Breton village at the centre of the dispute

Credit: Jean-Sebastien Evrard/AFP

By Jannat Jalil, Paris
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A hiking trail in northern France through land owned by the family of John Kerry, the former US Secretary of State, has been opened to the public after a bitter 37-year legal battle.

Applications to open the scenic path along Brittany's breathtakingly beautiful Emerald Coast had been opposed by Mr Kerry's cousin, Brice Lalonde, a former French environment minister who is also a champion of green causes.

Criticised for "hypocrisy" in seeking to keep the trail closed despite right-of-way laws allowing public access to coastal paths on private land, Mr Lalonde, 73, insisted that his only concern was a potential "terrorist threat" to the former US secretary of state.

But there is deep local anger that thousands have been denied spectacular views because of a handful of rich proprietors who only visit the area for a few weeks each year. Patrice Petitjean, the head of a hiking club, said: "People had been growing impatient. They were tearing down the barriers to get in."

Mr Kerry, 75, who speaks fluent French, has often holidayed at the Essarts estate which the trail passes through. The estate is owned by the Forbes family of which he is a scion.

Mr Lalonde served as mayor of Saint-Briac-sur-Mer, the local commune, for 13 years. His critics say this is partly why this dispute has taken so long to resolve, an accusation he denies.



The village of Saint-Briac-sur-Mer, through which the footpath runs

Credit: Dean Howard/EyeEm

He told the Journal du Dimanche newspaper: “Two years ago, a man shouted ‘Allah akhbar’ on the beach. People could enter the estate.”

In 2016, a man brandishing a replica Kalashnikov caused panic on the beach and was convicted of “justifying terrorism,” an offence in France.

Mr Lalonde, who is not listed as an owner of the estate and was not directly involved in the latest legal battle, tweeted last year: “I never opposed the coastal path. I was only concerned about the security of the former American secretary of state.”

His concerns were mocked on social media. Eric Ingrand tweeted: “A former environment minister who does not respect the law on the coast... For the security of his cousin who spends what, no more than two weeks a year there. Doesn’t he care about his fellow citizens ?”



John Kerry, former US Secretary of State, lays a wreath in Saint-Briac-sur-Mer during a ceremony in 2014 to commemorate three US soldiers who died during the liberation of western France

Credit: Jean-Sebastien Evrard/AFP

Along with the Forbes family, a number of other wealthy and influential landowners were involved in the legal battle.

They employed a variety of arguments to oppose the opening of the trail to the public, including that it could weaken the cliff. They now plan to appeal.

One family has complained that the trail will breach their right to privacy because it passes beside their swimming pool, only yards from the cliff edge.

François Pinatel, their lawyer, said: “Hikers’ shoes will now pass only a few centimetres from the heads of people splashing in the water.”

Mr Petitjean claimed that the pool had been built without planning permission.

The local authorities said they had no record of permission being granted. “If the appeals court cancels the decree allowing access, it will be very annoying,” Mr Petitjean said.

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