



Ireland's mountains: *valuable and vulnerable*



A report on Mountaineering Ireland's 'Helping the Hills' conference, held in Glendalough, September 2012

In a two-page preface to his book *Irish Peaks*, Joss Lynam made three references to the absence of paths on most Irish mountains. That was in 1982. Thirty years on, there are few mountains left without some sort of path. Once-faint paths have evolved into worn and muddy lines, with the worst damage to be seen on blanket peat and steep ground. Concern that we respond appropriately to this erosion prompted Mountaineering Ireland to organise *Helping the Hills*, Ireland's first upland path conference, on September 13th-14th, 2012, in Glendalough, Co Wicklow.

Before going further, it might be helpful to clarify that by a 'path' we mean a line that is visible on the ground, which may be man-made but in most cases has evolved through repeated footfall. This is

distinct from developed walking routes that have directional marking; these are sometimes referred to as trails.

The main aim of *Helping the Hills* was to develop an approach to the management of upland path erosion which protects the integrity of the mountain environment and facilitates continued recreational enjoyment in harmony with other land uses.

The objectives of *Helping the Hills* were:

- To learn from those already undertaking footpath management;
- To raise awareness of the challenges facing the mountain environment;
- To demonstrate the spectrum of interventions for managing upland path erosion;
- To emphasise the need for skills and ongoing



Bill Murphy outlining Coillte's work in recreation management.

investment;

- To establish a set of principles to underpin upland pathwork in Ireland.

The conference attracted 120 participants, considerably more than anticipated, which was an indication of the interest in this topic. Amongst the attendees, drawn from all corners of the island, were Mountaineering Ireland members, Rural Recreation Officers, Mountain Meitheal volunteers, representatives from state agencies with a role in recreation and local authority staff.

These were joined by about a dozen visitors from Great Britain, some as speakers, some bringing technical expertise and others there to learn about upland path management in Ireland.

The conference was officially opened by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan TD, and the Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan, TD.

Programme of events

The programme for the first day of the conference included presentations from a variety of speakers, with workshops afterwards to address specific topics.

Dinner that evening was followed by an entertaining presentation by author and broadcaster Dermot Somers.

On the second day, participants had a choice of five site visits, to see pathwork that has been done or sites where erosion management may be required.

The event concluded with a feedback session and conference summary by Ross Millar, Chairperson of Mountaineering Ireland. Recurring themes from the presentations, workshops and site visits are outlined below.

Recurring themes

(i) Special areas

Mountains are a significant element in Ireland's landscape, providing defining geographical features, some of



At the conference: Karl Boyle (CEO, Mountaineering Ireland), Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan TD, and Ursula MacPherson (President, Mountaineering Ireland).

our most beautiful scenery and our largest areas of relatively wild land. Most of our upland areas are designated under EU legislation as Special Areas of Conservation, due to their special habitats and the species they support.

(ii) Cumulative impact

People gravitate towards the mountains for recreation, seeking physical challenge, contact with nature and a counterbalance to everyday life. Not that long ago, *'Take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints'* was considered the height of good practice. However, the cumulative impact of footprints is now causing concern in many mountain areas as our damp, peaty soils are highly susceptible to erosion.

(iii) Complex ownership

It is obvious that landowners must be centrally involved in decision-making regarding the management of upland path erosion. However, as most of Ireland's mountains are privately-owned land, this could present a challenge. Our hills are a mosaic of land parcels, some individually owned, some commonage with multiple shareholders, and there is currently no mechanism for the landowners in a given area to collectively agree how recreation activity on their land should be managed.

(iv) Skills and judgment vital

It was clear from the conference that there are differing opinions on upland path management as to when repair work is required and what the scale and nature of that work should be. The need for sensitivity and skill when intervening in the natural environment was a common theme that ran through many contributions. The requirement for a skilled



Michelle Shannon (Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark, Co Fermanagh) discussing options for erosion management with conference participants.

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workforce was emphasised, as was the need for the skill to judge when it is necessary to intervene, and to determine the most appropriate solution for each erosion situation. No two areas are the same and factors such as the local geology, topography and hydrology must be considered.

(v) Maintenance

The issue of maintenance came up again and again; experience in Britain and here shows that investment in path repair can be negated by a failure to regularly carry out minor work such as drain clearance.

(vi) Personal responsibility

Personal and group responsibility was also a recurring theme. While rainfall and other natural processes contribute to erosion, and vehicle activity and grazing have a role in places, we can't escape the fact that most upland path erosion stems directly from our own activities. Caro-lynn Ferris captured this very well with the following quote:

"The mountain environment and wild land experiences are precious, demanding thoughtfulness and sensitivity in their

management. All who venture into the uplands contribute to erosion and therefore have shared responsibilities to mitigate the impact of their presence."

P. Sedgwick (1990)

(vii) Need to take overview

Throughout the conference, Ireland's current economic situation hung like a spectre in the background. However, it was pointed out that we can use this period to agree our approach to the management of upland paths and to build our understanding and skills. Repairing erosion blackspots could be a case of treating the symptom rather than the cause. We need to take an overview, to understand the causes, to see how we can really help the hills.

(viii) Local management

With the continued growth in outdoor recreation, we are going to need some structure at the local level to address the issues that arise, not just path erosion, but parking, damage to fences, disturbance of livestock and so on. A forum in each upland area for negotiation between landowners, recreational users and other upland stakeholders could defuse potential difficulties and over time deliver benefit to the area.



Elfy Jones (British Mountaineering Council) highlighted lessons from experience of upland path management in England and Wales.

GARRETT BYRNE



Glenmalure hillfarmer Pat Dunne points out the sights to Martin McGuigan from Co Tyrone during the site visit to the Zig-zags and Clohernagh, Glenmalure, Co Wicklow.

Actions arising from the conference

From the outset, it was clear that the work of *Helping the Hills* would not be completed in two days and that Mountaineering Ireland should agree actions to follow through on the conference.

The agreement of guidelines for upland path repair in Ireland would help ensure a consistent, sympathetic and quality approach. A draft set of principles was presented during the closing session of the conference. These have been amended to better reflect the issues raised and are presented on the next page for consideration by Mountaineering Ireland members. The adoption of a set of guiding principles at our AGM in March 2013 would provide Mountaineering Ireland with a clear platform for engagement with other upland stakeholders.

Listed below are some of the other actions proposed during the conference:

- Build a shared understanding between land managers, funders, contractors and hill users, as to how appropriate and sensitive erosion control can be achieved;

- Arrange a site visit, possibly to the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales, to see a variety of upland path repair projects, and meet with local stakeholders;
- Host a one-day follow-up seminar with a focus on the structures needed for upland path management. This could lead to the formation of a network of professionals, volunteers and hill users in Ireland, to share information on best practice in the management of upland path erosion and recreation;
- Develop a simple survey methodology so that comparable baseline information can be

gathered on the condition of Ireland's upland paths;

- Maintain the website www.helpingthehills.ie as a resource on upland path management and related matters;
- Seek political and funding support for path repair and maintenance and the management of recreation in Ireland's upland areas;
- Agree a vision for the future of Ireland's upland areas.

Most of these actions will be delivered in co-operation with other organisations. The Board of Mountaineering Ireland and our Access and Conservation Committee are currently looking in detail at what Mountaineering Ireland's role should be in addressing the issue of upland

path erosion.

Regardless of which actions are given priority, there will certainly be a role for Mountaineering Ireland members in areas such as reporting damage to paths, assisting with the cost of path repair, carrying out voluntary maintenance work or contributing to local management groups.

Ireland's mountains are valuable and vulnerable: they are vulnerable to the impact of erosion, but also vulnerable to inappropriate interventions to address erosion.

Agreement on a set of guiding principles will strengthen Mountaineering Ireland's mandate and is a step towards developing an Irish approach to the management of upland path erosion.

If you have a passion for the hills, take a bit of time to consider the draft principles, relate them to what you see today on Ireland's mountains and tell us what you would like to see for the future of these special areas ■



Acknowledgments

Mountaineering Ireland would like to thank all of the speakers, workshop leaders, reporters and participants for their contribution to 'Helping the Hills.'

Particular thanks are due to Mountain Meitheal, Wicklow Mountains National Park, Pat Dunne and Coillte for facilitating site visits.

Mountaineering Ireland is also grateful to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government (Rural Recreation Section), Fáilte Ireland and the Heritage Council for funding support.



Shay Walsh (Mountain Meitheal) describes path repair techniques on the Glendalough site visit. Also in picture: Chris Avison, Sean Rothery.

Principles to guide the management of path erosion in Ireland's upland areas

Draft for consultation with members (November 2012)

Ireland's mountain areas are our largest expanses of semi-natural habitats, a huge natural asset, which we have a duty to protect for future generations. Due to Ireland's wet climate and peaty soils, the continued growth in recreational activity is damaging and degrading many of our hills, with wide erosion scars becoming more common.

Drawing on similar work in Great Britain, Mountaineering Ireland is developing principles to guide the management of path erosion in Ireland's upland areas. We will seek to have these principles adopted by organisations involved in the funding, management and repair of upland paths. Mountaineering Ireland also commits to engaging with members to build an understanding of upland path issues and to encourage members' involvement. Mountaineering Ireland now invites members to provide feedback on the draft below.

Ethos

- All those who go into the mountains, whether individually or as part of a group, have a responsibility to minimise the impact of their activities on the upland environment.
- Upland pathwork should be carried out within a coherent management framework, including a commitment to long-term maintenance.
- Path repair or construction in the uplands should only be carried out when it is necessary to protect the environment, and not from the perspective of making it easier or safer to climb the mountain.
- Any work carried out should strive for minimum impact on the essentially wild character of the mountains and the walking experience.
- The more remote the path, the more stringently the criteria for path repairs should be applied. This will be a matter of judgment, but in general, the more remote or wild the location, the less acceptable an obviously engineered path will be.
- Those involved in the design, implementation and supervision of upland pathwork must be technically competent.
- Private landowners should not be expected to bear the cost of repairing paths that have been eroded through recreational use.
- A sustained commitment of resources to upland path management will be sought, so that small-scale continuous maintenance can become the norm, with the aim of preventing the need for major repairs.

Communications

- Management of upland paths should be informed by consultation with all stakeholders, including landowners, recreational users and the local community.



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Walkers on St Kevin's Way, Glendasan, Co Wicklow.

- A Local Forum for the management of each upland area provides a vehicle for consultation, enables more informed management and ensures ongoing communication between stakeholders.
- Signage and other communications about upland pathwork should emphasise that the work is being carried out to protect the mountain environment, that it is not the development of a new trail, nor is it about making the mountains safer.
- Information about the skills and equipment required for safe enjoyment of the Irish mountains should be included in communications about upland path repair.
- The use of waymarks, cairns and other intrusive features, other than those traditionally established on summits and at path junctions, is discouraged.
- Machines can provide valuable assistance in upland pathwork. However, they must be used sensitively and appropriately by a skilled operator. The use of machines should be in accordance with all other principles.
- While it may be necessary to bring in workers with relevant expertise from outside the area, it should be an objective in any upland path work to train and upskill local people with a view to establishing a long-term skills and employment base.

Practicalities

- Pathwork should be of the highest standard of design and implementation, preferably using locally sourced materials in harmony with the site.
- Good environmental practice is paramount. No material won in works should be wasted. Techniques used should protect existing vegetation and cultural remains and the site should be left in as natural a state as is practicable.

Your feedback

Please contact Helen Lawless (at helen@mountaineering.ie or phone 01 625 1115) before Thursday 10th January 2013 to provide your feedback and suggestions on the draft principles.

A final draft will be published early in February with a view to adoption at the Mountaineering Ireland AGM on Saturday 9th March 2013.