

[illegible]

One could argue about what is upland and what is a mountain, but it is worth reflecting that only 5.88% of Ireland's land area is over a height of 300m and just 0.35% lies above the 600m contour. This limited area is expected to fulfil an ever-widening range of expectations. Then consider that most of Ireland's upland areas are privately owned, either individually or as commonage (where a number of people have shares). How do we reconcile the growth in

The graphic above, and the comments in the side-panel, convey a sense of the different possibilities and opportunities. We also include here one member's personal vision, described as a mountain journey in 2030.

*"At some point we will have to address the philosophical and practical question: who owns the uplands? With all their potential for the sustenance of the emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing of all the people of this island, as well as being the homes and workplaces of the local and indigenous communities, the uplands have taken on a wider importance on a national level which must be addressed. The Book of Kells or the Tara Brooch do not belong to any one person or group or institution...morally they belong to all the people of Ireland." – **Pat Ewen** (member of Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Committee)*



## Ireland's upland landscapes reflect the evolution in hillfarming activity



# A journey to the hills in 2030 AD

*The future look of our mountains and our recreational use of them has a spectrum of possibilities. Here is one vision of the future, imagined by Vincent McAlinden*



I've travelled this way before and I recognise the sharp turn that marks the quiet lane leading to the back of Slieve Mor.

Sean pulled the minibus over and wished me a fine day. He left his shepherd's crook down a few years ago and now works part-time, driving the community transport bus. He says the new park-and-walk car park built behind the local shop and post office has been a roaring success.

It is a partnership between the community development group, the shop owner and the National Outdoor Office to collect in the majority of the visiting cars and then disperse the occupants by minibus. Sean recommended a bacon buttie and a local pint in the bar next door; if I could get off the hill before closing.

The new edition Explorer map series has a new set of legends that take a bit of getting used to, but I am curious to see how the maintained trails marked on the map have fared over the winter. The digital version contained within the Outdoor Access App updated itself from the minibus Wi-Fi with current land management notices, including a call to report sightings of some freshly fledged golden eagle chicks, the location of a couple of new stiles and a contact number.

The owners of two touring bikes hitched to the trailhead sign ask me to explain the handshake logo. "It represents the partnership between the landowners, the community and recreational users working together for the mutual benefit of the mountain and rural dwellers," I reply. They are glad to read of a permitted campsite close by, complete with a hand-pumped water filter and compost toilet.

The density and shepherding of domestic grazing animals has been such that there is now more heather on the hill and sporadic specimens of rowan, holly and hazel can be found under the 400m contour. In the confines of gullies and riverbanks the elusive juniper plant is almost plentiful.

I'm watching the intricate play of sheep and sheepdog across the valley. It turns out to be Sean's nephew on the silent whistle. He is one of three commonage shepherds who between them keep a dozen farmers' sheep and cattle moving throughout the hill – using teeth and hoof to achieve an agreed heathland habitat outcome. The paucity of financial return from meat produced from upland grazing means that this type of habitat management has replaced traditional grazing practices – farming for nature more than farming for food.



Plastic piling can be used to block ditches and restore bogs

The Mountain App has a note to explain that moorland drainage ditches on Slieve Mor were blocked in 2020 [in Vincent McAlinden's imagined future] to help heal the peat and lock up carbon – as much as all the trees in Killarney National Park! The app also mentions that the local town of Boher hasn't been flooded since the big storms of 2018.

Further up amongst the crags and far from frequent footfall, I am conscious of the eyes of the fastest mother on earth soaring above, so I make a point of skirting away from the ledges she has left. Just below the summit, I meet a small group of young people on their Gaisce Silver expedition. They are doing a simple survey of the biodiversity on the summit plateau and are proud to tell me that their

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Upland streams account for over 50% of Ireland's river network

results will contribute to the management plan for the mountain as part of a community science initiative. I am also pleased to hear that the award itself has been rejigged to allow exploratory day loops from serviced campsites, rather than the old march across the hills hobbled by weighty packs.

I spot the silhouette of a red deer stag high on the ridge; his nostrils search and find me and he disappears with his hinds in tow. I wait and watch to see if the deer reappear in the distance; they do not. I cannot be disappointed: the setting sun now lights up the mosaic of textures and shades that give me a chance to reflect why I came up here in the first place.

The map indicates that the river I have followed down is just outside the group water scheme catchment, so a quick dip will be on the cards. My route ends with a crossing of one of those new stiles and an agreed access line through two fields to a farmhouse which doubles as a Mountain Access Point (where community transport vehicles can collect walkers and take them back to the car park). It is here that I re-join my three nephews – they've just spent half a day bouldering on the sandstone exposure at the back of the farmyard, and the other half helping the local shepherds gather sheep! A connection forged from the beginning of the local Mountain Access Project here in 2018. Suitably whacked, we are all keen to find Sean and that promise of refreshment.

**Footnote:** Species-specific (e.g. Hen Harrier) conservation schemes popular in the 2010s were reviewed in the 2020 reform of EU nature and agriculture policy. The current Slieve Mor Upland Scheme (in common with all rural support payments) matches the drawdown of funds with progress towards an agreed ecosystem status. My recent journey to Slieve Mor shows that this attempt to marry the holistic benefits which society obtains from the uplands with an economic return to the area certainly seems to be bearing fruit.

► **Vincent McAlinden** grew up on a farm outside Kilkeel, Co Down, where going to the mountain wasn't thought of as recreation. He has spent the last sixteen years teaching environmental education in the Mourne. He discovered mountaineering while at Queens University and has climbed, run and skied in mountains around the world ever since. He has served on the boards of Mountaineering Ireland and Leave No Trace Ireland. He believes strongly in promoting the responsible enjoyment of Ireland's mountains ■

## What do you want to see for the future of Ireland's mountains?

This article is a first step. Over the autumn we will hold a series of regional meetings for Mountaineering Ireland members to develop and contribute to a conversation about the importance of Ireland's upland areas and what future we want to see for these areas. Details will be published on the Mountaineering Ireland website and in the autumn issue of the *Irish Mountain Log*.

► In the meantime, we challenge you to look at the mountains with new eyes, to observe and understand the changes that are happening, and to email your vision for the future of Ireland's mountain areas to [mountainfutures@mountaineering.ie](mailto:mountainfutures@mountaineering.ie).