

## **Executive Summary from MacGillycuddy Reeks Mountain Access**

### **Development Assessment** *(from final draft report, December 2013, this may be amended in the final report, due early February 2014)*

The development assessment for the pilot MacGillycuddy Reeks Mountain Access Project (MAP) aimed to assess the potential for structured permissive access to the Reeks uplands and to identify the most appropriate management structure to ensure the sustainable management of the integral environmental and cultural heritage of the Reeks, while providing long term clarity on permissive recreational access to the mountains.

An intensive consultation process was conducted through Summer 2013, which aimed to identify the concerns and aspirations of key stakeholder groups, in particular those of the landowners. Additional consultations were held with local community groups, commercial recreational entities and recreational users, as well as the responsible local and statutory authorities. The process identified a range of concerns and suggestions for remedy of legacy issues. In all, consultees realised that 'business as usual' was not an option given the lack of clarity on access and potential for ongoing misunderstandings among stakeholders. A number of supportive partners for the MAP were identified, most notably the landowners themselves, but also a number of community actors, recreational interests and the key agencies and decision makers.

An early review of a selection of management partnerships in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and England, was conducted to identify sustainable models of management and partnership in practice, the most likely success factors to achieve this, and also potentially, pitfalls to be avoided. Following this review and taking on board strategic lessons, the most appropriate model was selected, to be called the **MacGillycuddy Reeks Mountain Forum**, while providing clear priorities under an agreed strategic action plan.

The environmental heritage of the MacGillycuddy Reeks uplands is exceptional, but is potentially threatened by anthropogenic and recreational pressures. However, low impact activities based on environmental understanding of SAC/ SPA/ NHA designations, and planning requirements, could be considered and explored with relevant farming and recreational organisations, and in terms of the adjacent Killarney National Park. Provision for appropriate infrastructure to manage and enhance the visitor experience, while protecting the environmental integrity of the Reeks is essential.

The long term needs and funding requirements of the project were assessed by SLR: an early voluntary management model could evolve gradually towards a more permanent management structure such as registered charity, based on the shared vision and commitment of the members of the management partnership. Strong leadership is essential to achieve the objectives.

The study aimed to deliver a well-founded but ambitious Mountain Access assessment report, based on best practice and our combined experience in dealing with mountain access issues.

The study proposes a forward-looking 5-year Strategic Action Plan with scheduled timelines to promote the outstanding natural and cultural heritage of the MacGillycuddy Reeks as a sustainable recreational destination, while retaining its environmental integrity.

### ***Key Conclusions:***

The MacGillycuddy Reeks is one of Ireland's leading outdoor recreational destinations. The lands are 100% privately owned, which is unusual in the context of other uplands areas reviewed. Unlike many British and European countries, Ireland does not have a dedicated network of publically owned upland paths, and all recreational access to the uplands in Ireland, except in publicly owned lands such as national parks and forests, is dependent on permissive access and goodwill of private landowners. Various schemes have been attempted in lowland (<300m) farms to support permissive access, such as the Walks Scheme (now closed) to maintain certain approved trails such as The Kerry Way, which tracks across private lands in the southern foothills of the MacGillycuddy Reeks.

The key lessons from the Development Assessment are as follows, which have been harnessed in developing the proposed model.

The proposal in this report for a participative **MacGillycuddy Reeks Mountain Forum**, based on a shared vision among landowners, community, recreational users, enterprise and the public partners, will provide for a long term socio-economic framework for the sustainable development of the catchment, centred on the environmental conservation of the Reeks Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA) and protection of the core asset.

An ***Integrated Management Plan***, with a linked ***Conservation Management Plan***, will be required to provide the framework for all actions.

It is proposed that a ***representative partnership***, comprising panels of elected stakeholders sourced from a range of stakeholders (landowner/ public/ private/ community/ recreational), will work to an agreed Strategic Action Plan to achieve measurable targets. A small Steering Group is proposed, supported by representative and flexible Working Groups. The members must focus on organisational vs. sectoral interests, to ensure the success of the overall initiative. Good leadership will be key to achieving this.

A ***shared vision*** and core principles must be established at the start, to provide a sound basis from which the proposed Forum can grow. It is in all stakeholders' interests to foster this vision and use it to resolve matters arising. Landowners must be at the core of decision making; thus the Forum will need excellent and ongoing landowner engagement and a relationship management process. It will be necessary to bring all issues and problems to the Forum table to find resolutions in a spirit of constructive debate.

The suggested ***5 year Strategic Action Plan*** proposes defined and measurable targets, linked to broader conservation principles and sustainable land management. As well as immediate land

issues, the focus should be on broader rural development and enterprise opportunities for the benefit of all communities residing in the shadow of the Reeks. The agreed strategic plan should link to clear national targets and directives, which will help to guide local decision making. It is suggested to keep the overall work programme simple at the start to allow the group to evolve and to set targets that it is comfortable with. Many 'wise heads' who were involved in establishing previous upland partnerships advised to be 'realistic', and to prove the Forum's ability to deliver before thinking about expansion.

In legal terms, it is suggested to move progressively from an unincorporated **voluntary management group** to registered **charitable status**; this will allow the Forum to grow at a realistic pace and to then move ahead as early wins are 'won' and confidence and momentum are built.

**Core funding supports** will be required from a mix of public sources at the outset through DECLG, SKDP, Kerry County Council and Fáilte Ireland in a spirit of co-financing partnership. All reviewed models of mountain partnerships retained sustained public support throughout their histories. Supports from other sources for project specific purposes such as the Heritage Council or Lottery funds may also be sought, as well as philanthropic donations - without adequate human and financial resources it will be difficult to 'make it happen'. A range of revenue raising measures are proposed in this report including establishment of 'Friends of the Reeks', modest car tolling, capitation levies for major challenge/ charity events; annual permitting of commercial guides; and a range of merchandising measures.

The review of other models for upland management makes it clear that the proposed **Forum can be an agent of enormous positive change** in reversing socio-economic decline by using the natural assets of the Reeks to stimulate sustainable economic activity, both for landowners and other micro- to small enterprises. It is recommended that a new system to support recreational access to the uplands, such as payments for path maintenance; tailored training schemes in farm-related recreational tourism and/or dedicated agri-environmental schemes be investigated for MacGillycuddy Reeks uplands into the future.

There must be a clear and central focus on maintaining the core asset, the mountains, to the **highest environmental standards**. Any proposed works must be assessed in relation to the Integrated Management and Conservation Plans respectively, and screening for appropriate assessment may be required. Linked to this will be engagement of the landowners and harnessing of fully trained Landowner and Volunteer corps to help deliver the strategic targets. Path maintenance and erosion control measures will be needed to stabilise many of the highly eroded paths; this can be carried out by a cadre of highly trained landowners, meeting best practice in peat and scree management. The conservation of the uplands is requisite and while the Forum will aim to encourage recreational tourism, it must be managed, and in particular, high impact events will require to be managed by the Forum. Such management measures may include pre-booking and levying of a capitation fee on each participant to manage environmental impacts and resource the maintenance works.

The MacGillycuddy Reeks are one of the great iconic outdoor destinations in these islands. The

Forum should work to create and deliver an ***integrated outdoor recreational experience*** to the highest standards. It is currently unclear how many recreational users are accessing the Reeks on an annual basis ; the figure of 25,000 cited in the terms of reference for this study are likely to be a major underestimate. It is requisite that ongoing data gathering (via gate counters) and systematic analysis of visitor information is undertaken, so that future planning may adequately provide for visitor numbers. This could be achieved with assistance from Tralee IT adventure tourism student research.

A well-honed communications plan is proposed for adoption by the Reeks Mountain Forum, to ensure that clear and positive internal and external communications are adopted from the outset. The landowners involved in the Mountain Access Project are to be congratulated for their participative approach and resolve to find long term solutions to sustainable management of the MacGillycuddy Reeks.

### **Recommendations:**

It is strongly recommended that the proposed pilot ***MacGillycuddy Reeks Mountain Access Project*** be activated as soon as possible, based on the results of this study and on the suggested Strategic Action Plan.

The ‘early’ wins’ in the suggested Strategic Plan should commence in late 2013 by appointment of an Interim Chairperson. The full Forum should be convened in early 2014. A full Chair can be appointed after c. 9-12 months by the functioning Reeks Mountain Forum and Working Groups.

It is recommended that the process be as representative and participative as possible, allowing the organisation to evolve organically, while within the overall framework of an Integrated Management Plan and Conservation Plan for the Reeks.

It is recommended that requisite resources be committed by the public partners, where feasible, to ensure that the pilot Mountain Assess Project is delivered in a timely fashion. This model, if successful, could be rolled out to similar upland areas in Ireland to provide long term assured provision for recreational access while allowing landowners to actively participate in decisions pertaining to their lands.

The landowners of the MacGillycuddy Reeks have engaged actively in the consultative process and are to be congratulated and thanked for their positive commitment and constructive suggestions throughout. It is recommended that landowners expectations are met and not ‘dashed to the ground’ after their exceptional engagement with the MacGillycuddy Reeks’ pilot Mountain Access Project.