



Laragh / Glendalough Tourism and Land Use Plan

**Response to Public Consultation Issues Paper from
Mountaineering Ireland**

February 2011

1. Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland (MI) welcomes the preparation of a tourism and land use plan for Laragh / Glendalough, and the Council's commitment to sustainable management of the area. Glendalough's dramatic natural environment is finite and vulnerable. Forward planning is wise and necessary, given the area's role as Wicklow's premier tourist destination and also the focal point of outdoor recreation activity in Wicklow.

MI represents the largest recreation user group in the Irish uplands – the hillwalking and climbing community. MI is recognised as the National Governing Body for the sport of mountaineering by both the Irish Sports Council and Sport Northern Ireland. The term mountaineering refers to a spectrum of activities that includes hillwalking, rock climbing, rambling, bouldering and alpinism. MI currently has 10,500 members comprising 145 clubs and over 1400 individual members. The Irish Mountaineering Club which owns a hostel (known as the IMC hut) at Glendasan, is an MI member club and has contributed to this submission.

In early medieval times pilgrims walked over the hills to Glendalough; people have continued to journey across the Wicklow hills, seeking solace, challenge and pleasure. Walking considerably exceeds any other activity as the most popular form of physical activity undertaken in Ireland (Curtis and Williams, 2002). The Glendalough Valley is a honeypot for walkers, with the Wicklow Way, St. Kevin's Way, the National Park's nine walking trails, and the surrounding hills that offer multiple routes for independent hillwalkers.

The Laragh / Glendalough area has been a key location for rockclimbing since the early 1950s. Today, it is also a hub for bouldering, a newer branch of climbing based on short, technical climbs. The Irish Bouldering Meet takes place in Laragh / Glendalough in March each year.

This submission provides comments and suggestions in response to many of the issues and questions set out in the Issues Paper (January 2011).

2. Land Use

2.1 Future Development of Laragh and Glendalough

- Protecting and respecting the natural and cultural heritage of Laragh / Glendalough must be absolutely fundamental to the future development of the area.
- MI strongly recommends that a steering committee be formed to enable better co-ordination in the development and ongoing management of Laragh / Glendalough. This committee should be made up of statutory and non-statutory representatives, including the local community. Statutory members should include Wicklow County Council, Wicklow Mountains National Park (WMNP), the Office of Public Works (OPW) and Coillte. Non-statutory representation should include local residents, local tourism interests and communities of interest such as mountaineering that have a strong connection with the area.
- As highlighted in the Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Strategy (2009) there is a need to better balance the concentration of recreation visitors across the county. The development of recreation infrastructure at the other hubs identified in that strategy – Roundwood, Rathdrum and Blessington – will relieve some of the visitor pressure that currently focuses on Laragh / Glendalough. Implementation of the Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Strategy should be a priority for Wicklow County Council.
- This planning process should be informed by all available information regarding the motivation and movement patterns of visitors to Laragh / Glendalough. A literature review should be done to gather studies carried out WMNP, OPW, Wicklow County Council, Wicklow Rural Partnership, Universities and Colleges etc.

2.2 Stimulating Employment

- MI advocates the development of broadleaf woodland and associated crafts to enhance the natural environment and increase local employment in the green economy. The replacement of conifer plantations with broadleaf woodland, as opportunities arise, would greatly improve biodiversity and also offer the prospect of employment and long-term revenue generation. With existing and additional broadleaf woodland, there is an opportunity for Laragh / Glendalough to become established as a centre of expertise in woodland management, skills and practices.
- New social employment schemes may provide an opportunity to form a path-works team to be trained and work under WMNP guidance on the repair and construction of walking

trails in the Laragh / Glendalough area. This would allow local people, currently without work, to gain valuable skills, while helping to address the path erosion in the Glendalough valley.

2.3 Retail Provision

- There is scope for a shop in the area to have an outdoor section (with umbrellas, basic rain gear, hiking socks, maps, walking poles, camping fuel etc). A dedicated section, or shop, will draw in the many walkers and outdoor enthusiasts in the Laragh / Glendalough area. Such shops are common in Snowdonia, the Lake District and other areas frequented by walkers.
- It is believed that 1 million or more visitors come to Laragh / Glendalough each year. These visitors should be presented with more retail opportunities, particularly to purchase local artisan foods and crafts. If the current monthly market at the Brockagh Centre could run each week, this could play a greater role, however quality signage and better promotion would be required to draw people into the Centre.

2.4 Flooding

- Laragh / Glendalough was severely affected by flooding in January 2010 and September 2010. Indications are that such severe weather events are becoming more common. This must be factored into planning; lessons should be learnt from countries that have been subject to flooding. WMNP may be able to draw on the experience of other national parks, particularly with regard to the challenge flooding poses for trail infrastructure.

2.5 Infrastructural deficiencies

- Many of the roads leading to Laragh / Glendalough have been badly affected by the last two severe winters. The regional and local roads throughout the Wicklow uplands are vital for tourism and affect the quality of life for Wicklow residents. There should be continued focus on repairing road surfaces and preventative drainage work.
- The walking trails in Laragh / Glendalough valley have also been damaged by the weather, this in combination with high visitor numbers, is putting strain on Coillte and WMNP's limited resources, leading to further environmental impact and detracting from the visitor experience. The existing trail infrastructure in Laragh / Glendalough requires skilled workers (see 2.2) with some funding for materials.
- Building on Laragh / Glendalough's existing trail infrastructure to develop a network of off-road walking / cycling routes in the Laragh / Glendalough area would improve the visitor

- experience and visitor safety, and result in people spending more time and money in the area. There is a particular need in Wicklow for family-friendly off-road cycling trails. This could in turn stimulate employment in bike hire and maintenance.
- MI acknowledges the need to keep walking routes off road wherever possible, however options should be explored to bring the Wicklow Way through the village of Laragh, perhaps linking with the Green Road. Provided the route is pleasant and not circuitous, this should increase the local economic benefit from the Wicklow Way and enhance the visitor experience.
 - There is potential for a beautiful off-road walk linking Laragh to Rathdrum on the eastern side of the Avonmore river. The scope to develop this route as a greenway (dual walking and cycling route) should be investigated as it would link into the rail network at Rathdrum.
 - The directional signage towards Glendalough should be reviewed; signage to Glendalough from west Wicklow (Blessington) and other areas could be improved.
 - The Laragh / Glendalough area and the Wicklow uplands generally continue to have a poor broadband internet service and poor mobile phone signals. This is frustrating for visitors and local residents and is a constraint to enterprise in the area.

3. Tourism

3.1 The way forward

- The World Tourism Organisation expects 'experiential' tourism - which encompasses ecotourism, nature, heritage, cultural, and soft adventure tourism, as well as sub-sectors such as rural and community tourism - to grow more quickly than other tourism sectors over the decade ahead. Ecotourists in Europe typically travel a lot, stay longer, have a high level of education, come from a higher income bracket and are middle-aged to elderly. Laragh / Glendalough has the natural attributes to capitalise on this trend, provided the resources of the area are developed and managed sustainably.
- As mentioned under 2.1, there is need for a steering committee, or other mechanism, to enable co-ordinated management of Laragh / Glendalough between statutory bodies and the community.
- The Wicklow Way and St Kevin's Way represent significant elements of Laragh / Glendalough's tourism and recreation infrastructure. Targeted promotion of these routes, and

- improved services on the ground for walkers, could improve the value these routes deliver to Laragh / Glendalough.
- Laragh / Glendalough has a strong mining heritage, the development of a mining heritage centre in the area, to display artefacts and tell the mining story, would enhance the offering for visitors. MI stresses that this centre should not be at the disused mines in Glendasan, it should be part of, or close to, other visitor facilities in the valley.

3.2 Tourism facilities

- Laragh / Glendalough would benefit from having a well-managed, serviced campsite for use by backpackers and campervans.
- Laragh / Glendalough already provides opportunities for people with disabilities to access our natural and cultural heritage. Due to the gentle gradients in the valley floor, the infrastructure already in place, and the understanding that is being built up in WMNP, Laragh / Glendalough could establish itself as an 'accessible' destination for people with mobility issues, however this will require further capital investment.

3.3 Encouraging visitors to stop in Laragh and stay longer

- All of the above suggestions regarding improvements to visitor facilities in Laragh / Glendalough should encourage visitors to stay longer, another factor in this equation is the welcome visitors receive from the local community. Community involvement in the development and management of Laragh / Glendalough will pay back in terms of local ownership and the quality of the welcome to visitors.
- MI urges those involved in this planning process, and particularly WMNP, to instigate a volunteer ranger service in the Glendalough Valley. The experience of the Dublin Mountains Partnership, and national parks elsewhere, has shown that volunteer rangers can support and complement full-time staff, particularly in providing extra capacity at weekends. Volunteer rangers could engage with visitors and provide them with information, lead guided walks, provide activities for children, educate people about the local environment, advise people on how to Leave No Trace of their visit etc.
- In terms of the food available, better quality and value for money in local hotels would encourage people to stop and stay longer in Laragh / Glendalough. Walkers like hearty, healthy platefuls of food at a reasonable price. The Clachaig Inn (Glencoe, Scotland), the Wasdale Head Inn (Lake District, England) and the Royal Oak Hotel (Betws-y-Coed, Wales) are all packed with walkers in the evenings and provide good

examples of the food and other facilities that appeal to walkers.

- A focus on ecotourism or experiential tourism in general is compatible with getting visitors to stay longer. Laragh / Glendalough has a wide range of possibilities in this area, one small example not mentioned so far is ecotourism associated with the Red Kite re-introduction programme. Programmes such as this have generated significant tourism activity in other countries.

3.4 Traffic management

- Traffic management is a major issue in the future development of Laragh / Glendalough. Connected with this is the need for parking.
- Research for the Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Strategy showed concern about car-parking security to be the single most important issue for participants in outdoor recreation activities. Due to a lack of secure (or even reasonably secure) parking elsewhere in the uplands, the Visitor Centre car-park and the hotel car-parks in Laragh / Glendalough are often filled with walkers' cars by mid-day on Sunday. This displaces other visitors, frustrates businesses and limits the choice of routes for walkers. This is an issue that must be addressed.
- MI recommends that people should be discouraged from taking cars up the Glendalough valley through the measures below:
 - A large car-park and associated visitor facilities including toilets, information centre, cafe and walking / cycling trails should be developed in conjunction with Coillte at Killafin / Trooperstown. As most visitors approach Laragh from Annamoe this would capture people before they reach Laragh. This car-park should be free of charge.
 - A frequent shuttle bus service should run from the Killafin car-park to Laragh, the Visitor Centre, the Monastic City and the Upper Lake. There should be a minimal charge for use of the bus. The service should run every day from Easter to September.
 - There should be a charge for the OPW Visitor Centre car-park and the current charge of €4 for the Upper Lake car-park should be increased as a deterrent to taking cars up the valley. The income generated from these car-parks could subsidise the shuttle bus or path repairs.
 - A second bus service should operate a few times each day at weekends bringing people a) to and from the viewing point at the Wicklow Gap with the option to walk back to Glendalough on St. Kevin's Way and b) over the hills to Glenmalure and

back to Laragh through Rathdrum. This bus should be able to carry bikes, as shown in the photograph below from the U.S.

- The trails network from the Killafin car-park should include an off-road route to Laragh on the eastern side of the Avonmore River with a bridge across the river close to Jackson's Falls. The potential to develop walking and cycling trails on private land in the Trooperstown Hill area should be explored in partnership with local landowners. There may be scope for the funding of such trails under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.



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Fig. 1 – Bus with frame on front to carry two bikes

4. Conclusions

Laragh / Glendalough is an iconic destination for domestic and international tourists. As an area with a rich ecclesiastical heritage, set in a magnificent natural environment, it is vital that the future growth of Laragh / Glendalough is managed in a way that respects and protects the environment, and delivers benefits for local residents. Improved traffic management and investment in trail infrastructure are both essential if the area is to deliver on its huge potential.

The preparation of this plan represents a tremendous opportunity to bring Laragh / Glendalough's diverse stakeholders together to engage in future planning, improve co-ordination and get the balance right between social, economic and environmental

considerations. This is hugely important for Laragh / Glendalough, for Wicklow, and for Ireland.

5. Further information

MI would be happy to elaborate on, or discuss, any of the ideas contained in this submission. Please contact:

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6. References:

Curtis, J.A. and Williams, J., (2002) *A National Survey of Recreational Walking in Ireland*, Dublin:
Economic and Social Research Institute