



Helping the Hills

Helen Lawless describes how Mountaineering Ireland's Helping the Hills initiative is moving forward and appeals for your help in expanding our understanding of how Ireland's mountain paths are changing

Many of you, particularly those who have been active on the hills for ten years or more, will have noticed the deteriorating condition of popular paths in Ireland's upland areas. Although mountains such as Carrauntoohil, Croagh Patrick and Errigal spring to mind first, paths have emerged on most of our hills. Due to a combination of factors, but primarily human impact, the loss of vegetation and soil on some of these paths is resulting in the growth of wide and deep erosion scars.

This change in the landscape detracts from the quality of the experience we enjoy as recreational users on the hills. There are other implications too. In heavy rainfall, soil from eroded paths washes into mountain streams, affecting water quality and adding to the cost of water treatment.

Concern that we should respond appropriately to the emerging issue of upland path erosion prompted Mountaineering Ireland to arrange a two-day *Helping the Hills* conference in Glendalough in September 2012 (see report in *IML 104*, pages 8-11). The

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Stone-pitching on Helvellyn in the Lake District, a mixture of aesthetics and engineering, with all work done by hand. This path carries approximately 100,000 people each year.

Glendalough conference raised awareness of the challenges facing the mountain environment and highlighted the work being done in Ireland to address the problem of upland path erosion. Having a number of British delegates with us helped us to draw on the experience of dealing with this issue in neighbouring countries.

At the end of the two days there was a strong consensus that *Helping the Hills* should continue as an initiative to advocate a considered, quality approach to erosion management. Mountaineering Ireland envisages that *Helping the Hills* will evolve to become a network of people and organisations sharing experience and knowledge in the use, management, funding and repair of upland paths.

Study visit to national parks in England

In September 2013, Mountaineering Ireland arranged the first *Helping the Hills* study visit, to learn from erosion control and recreation management experience in the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. Representatives from the Irish Uplands Forum, Mountain Meitheal South East, Mountain Research Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the National Trails Office, SLR Consulting, South Kerry Development Partnership and Mountaineering Ireland came together in our twelve-member study group.

Lessons from the Lake District

In the Lake District, our hosts were **Fix the Fells**, a partnership between six

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Richard Fox (from Fix the Fells) (second left) on Helvellyn with study visit participants Jeremy Smith and Darragh O'Sullivan from the National Trails Office and Dr Mary Tubridy, Irish Uplands Forum.



Study group at Malham Cove in the Yorkshire Dales (left to right): Mike Dixon, volunteer with Yorkshire Dales National Park; Cathryn Hannon, National Parks and Wildlife Service; Patricia Deane, South Kerry Development partnership; Dr Mary Tubridy, Irish Uplands Forum; Helen Lawless, Mountaineering Ireland; Jeremy Smith, National Trails Office; Deirdre Lewis, SLR Consulting; Máire Ní Mhurchú, Mountain Meitheal South East; Alan Hulme, Yorkshire Dales National Park; Leonard Floyd, National Parks and Wildlife Service; Mike Maunsell, Mountain Research Ireland. **Photograph:** Jack Bergin/Mountaineering Ireland

organisations, which maintains 200 miles of paths in the Lake District National Park (www.fixthefells.co.uk). Through two rounds of Heritage Lottery Funding, supplemented by donations and volunteer time, the project has had an annual budget of £600,000 for the last ten years for path repair and maintenance, and public awareness work. The Lake District National Park gets almost 15 million visitors each year, 56% of whom go walking on the hills.

On Helvellyn's northwestern ridge, the study group saw different generations of stone-pitching, and learned about the techniques involved and the cost of this work.

In keeping with the national park's 'wilding' policy, there is less intervention higher up, with drains built to stabilise natural aggregate paths. Volunteers are involved in regular maintenance work such as drain-clearing, which reduces the need for major capital projects.

On the broad shoulders approaching Helvellyn's summit, the montane habitat is protected by containing people on subtly defined lines, through the scattering of rocks to mimic the appearance of naturally-occurring stony areas. This light-touch technique, known as 'stone scatter,' is combined with re-seeding using a special grass mix. Some of the stone used is from unwanted 'marker' cairns that are removed regularly from the mountain by the Fix the Fells team. All the work we saw

on Helvellyn was done by hand.

We looked at a narrow 'reversal' path between Langstrath and Stake Pass in the Borrowdale area, where the original path, an old packhorse route, had become badly gullied. A reversal path is created by removing the surface organic soil and mounding up the mineral soil from beneath to create a firm path surface with a drain alongside. The new path, which ascends a steep slope in a series of



'A lot of skill is applied to keep managed paths as natural-looking as possible'

sweeping bends, was built partly by machine, with hand-work in the same style on the steeper sections. While the path didn't look particularly natural, it was a considerable improvement on the wide scar that had been there. Here, as on most of the paths in the Lake District, a large proportion of the work and investment was in remediation of the landscape.

In an area of blanket bog at Stake Pass, the group saw a 'floating' path, where sheep's-wool was used as a sub-base to prevent a gravel path sinking into the peat – a technique that the Mourne

Heritage Trust is now using to help stabilise the mobile granite sand of paths in the Mourne.

The Fix the Fells team emphasised that the priority in all their path-work is retaining the beauty of the Lake District Fells through erosion control. While some of their work may make life easier for walkers, path-work is very rarely carried out for the purpose of making a path safer to walk. A lot of care and skill is applied to keep managed paths as natural-looking as possible.

Richard Fox, Operations Co-ordinator with Fix the Fells, advised the study group to learn from the mistakes made by others over the last forty years. He stressed the benefits of working in partnership, to help secure funding and share knowledge. He recommended the setting of a standard for upland path-work in Ireland through the early agreement of a set of guiding principles.

Lessons from Yorkshire Dales National Park

In the Yorkshire Dales, the group visited Pen-y-Ghent and walked part of the Three Peaks route, very heavily used and particularly popular with charity fundraising events. We chose the Yorkshire Dales for the study visit because of its proximity to the Lake District and because its heather moorland and blanket bog are broadly similar to what we have in Ireland.

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National parks in Britain are based on a different model to Ireland's, with private land and tenant farmers within the national park area. In the Yorkshire Dales National Park, 95% of the land is in private ownership. The Three Peaks project team outlined the access situation in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, where there is a good network of public rights of way as well as *de facto* routes (routes with a tradition of unchallenged use, but no legal right). Following the introduction of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act in 2000, there is now a legal right of access across 62% of the park, mostly on the open, higher ground. The Yorkshire Dales National Park staff work closely with the landowners; 85% of the park area is covered by environmental management agreements, which reward the farmers and landowners for managing the landscape.

In 1987, the Three Peaks area had the most badly eroded paths in the UK. Through continual investment, things have improved. Large flagstones salvaged from the floors of disused textile mills from the heyday of the Industrial Revolution have been used to provide a durable path surface on many paths on peat. On the study visit we gained valuable lessons from seeing some

sections of path which are clearly not working and evidence of poor workmanship in places. Close supervision is essential to maintaining the quality of work. Unlike the Lake District, where most of the path-work is done by retained teams, in the Yorkshire Dales contractors do the bulk of the work.

The group walked a new section of path completed in November 2012 to bypass the infamous Black Dubb Moss, which had been the last remaining stretch of eroded bog on the Three Peaks route. We heard about light-touch approaches to prevent the need for major path repair. On one section of the Wainwright Coast to Coast Walk (Nine Standards Rigg), erosion is reduced by directing people to one of three route options depending on the season.

National parks in England have suffered

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Flagstone path on Pen-y-Ghent in the Yorkshire Dales National Park. Large flagstones don't sink into the peat and they provide a durable path surface which allows re-growth of the vegetation on either side.

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Descending from Helvellyn Lower Man, walking towards White Side. Erosion has been controlled here by placing stones and re-seeding on the right-hand side of the path to contain people on a narrower line.

repeated budget cuts under the current government. In the Yorkshire Dales, revenue from ten national-park car parks (c£500,000 per annum) is vitally important for looking after the path network. Volunteers play an important role too, achieving added value through doing work that the national park doesn't have resources for. We met one of the volunteers, Mike Dixon, who told us about his work in regularly assessing routes, checking signage, gates, *etc*, and keeping drains clear.

The parting advice from Alan Hulme, Head Ranger in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, was to take a strategic approach to recreation management, with pre-emptive and light-touch work, where feasible, to avoid engineered solutions for as long as possible because of the cost, landscape impact, knock-on impacts on other paths in the area and the heavy maintenance responsibility.

Helping the Hills seminar

The findings from the *Helping the Hills* study visit were shared with a wider audience through a one-day seminar in Dublin on November 14th, 2013.

At the seminar, presentations were

made by a number of those that had participated in the study visit:

- “The environmental sensitivity of upland areas and how this is managed in the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales” – **Mike Maunsell, Mountain Research Ireland**
- “Observations on balancing the protection of sensitive landscapes with recreation and access to state-owned lands” – **Cathryn Hannon, Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht**
- “Lessons from the study visit on the technicalities of erosion management on upland paths” – **Jeremy Smith, Trails Inspector, National Trails Office**
- “The rationale and ethos which guides upland path work” – **Jack Bergin, Access & Conservation Committee member, Mountaineering Ireland.**

Keynote speaker Bob Aitken, past Project Manager, Scottish Mountain Footpaths Project, who has 30 years’ experience of addressing erosion in the mountains, gave his personal perspective, observations and suggestions on principles, priorities and structures for the *Helping the Hills* initiative, and his comments on some of the current issues in Ireland’s mountains. It is well worth watching the video of Bob’s address on www.helpingthehills.ie. You can also find PDFs of the other presentations online.

One workshop considered the formation of a *Helping the Hills* network. It concluded that there is value in having an informal, multi-agency network to share information, arrange study visits, foster skills development and conduct an inventory of eroded paths, to establish priorities and the funding needed for this work.

Two other workshop groups discussed draft guiding principles for upland path-work in Ireland. Based on the input received, a revised set of principles has been produced (they are now on the website www.helpingthehills.ie). The principles express the standard of work expected and provide a useful framework for addressing path erosion problems in upland areas ■

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Reversal path below Stake Pass in the Borrowdale areas of the Lake District; created by removing the organic soil layer and mounding up mineral soil to give a firm path surface with a drain alongside.

HELPING THE HILLS SURVEY

You can make a difference: tell us where the problems are

One strong recommendation from the *Helping the Hills* seminar in Dublin last November was for a baseline survey to establish the extent of the path erosion problem across the island of Ireland. So, we’re now appealing for your help!

We’d like any Mountaineering Ireland member who is aware of a badly eroded hill path or a section of path, to make a simple assessment and submit their findings to a central database. This information will help to build up an overview of the condition of Ireland’s upland paths, and help to identify priority sites where intervention may be needed to protect the integrity of the natural environment and the mountain landscapes we cherish.

You don’t need any special expertise or equipment. If you know of, or come across, a path erosion problem, please report it to us before the end of September 2014. You’ll need to give the name of the mountain/route, a grid reference and two photographs – one an ‘overview’ photo to show the problem in the context of the route, and one closer in to show the condition of the path. We’ll also ask you to record the approximate width of the erosion – a walking pole in your photo can help that – and an

assessment of the depth of erosion. We are creating a simple form on www.helpingthehills.ie to allow members to easily submit records.

Our activities are damaging places that we have a real passion for and it’s time for us to take responsibility. We urge you to contribute to this *Helping the Hills* path survey. Every report we receive will help to build up a national picture of the state of Ireland’s upland paths. This will assist in making the case for funding to care for our upland paths and for recreation management generally. Future surveys will provide an understanding of how path condition is changing over time. A further *Helping the Hills* seminar may be arranged to highlight the findings from the 2014 baseline survey.

Mountaineering Ireland is continuing to engage with relevant organisations seeking adoption of the *Helping the Hills* principles and their commitment to participating in the *Helping the Hills* network. Throughout all of this work we need to consider the private ownership of the vast majority of our upland areas, and the inherent fragility of the upland environment. Hopefully by taking action now we can prevent major damage occurring.

► To contribute to the survey, got to www.helpingthehills.ie and choose Survey2014 tab

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