

Mountaineering Council of Ireland

Environmental Policy Documents

(Revised spring 2003, approved at MCI Council Meeting 17/5/2003)

The Irish upland environment is limited in physical extent and very fragile in its nature. Our upland areas are frequently subject to use and development pressures inappropriate to their character. Some protection exists for areas designated as Special Areas of Conservation, Natural Heritage Areas or National Parks, which should be extended where feasible. To promote the protection of all Irish upland areas the MCI has developed policies, agreed with its members, upon which to base responses and action in relation to unwelcome developments.

In recent years the number of participants in hillwalking and mountaineering activities has increased substantially. This in itself can be a source of stress to certain upland environments. Consequently, responsible use of the uplands by recreational visitors is fundamental to our policies. The other key objectives of the policy are the importance of valuing and protecting our upland landscape and ensuring sustainability of local communities. These policies are supported by the practical advice in the MCI's Good Practice Guide for Walkers and Climbers.

Scope:

The scope of these policies extends to land above 300m and associated 'wilderness' or semi-wild landscapes; crags, quarries and other climbing areas; sea cliffs, hills and other areas frequented by MCI members; access to these areas. Only five percent of our island exceeds 300m in elevation and this we define as Uplands. Some one-tenth of the Irish uplands are higher than 500m, in general these are the Mountain areas.

Aims of these policies:

- To conserve the areas within our scope and their flora, fauna, archaeology and heritage
- To ensure reasonable access for responsible recreational users
- To cooperate with reasonable, sustainable and appropriate development in these areas.

Each of the following policy sheets describes one of the principal matters of environmental concern to MCI and sets out the Council's policies in relation to that issue:

- Access
- Footpath Erosion
- Organised Events in the Mountains
- Agriculture
- Forestry
- Transport
- Built Development
- Litter, Waste & Illegal Dumping

Policy Implementation

The MCI will –

- Promote the enjoyment, protection, wise and safe recreational use of the Irish uplands
- Lobby for and co-operate with National Policies of amenity area conservation
- Consult with club committees in the relevant areas as issues arise
- Encourage clubs to publicise and discuss issues
- Seek to promote discussion and awareness of issues
- Seek to influence public opinion on issues as appropriate
- Work towards a management policy for planned areas agreed between all interested parties
- Co-operate with appropriate groups in Ireland and abroad to exchange information and work for common aims.

MCI Environmental Policy

Access

All land in Ireland is owned, either by private individuals or State bodies. Recreational users do not have a legal right of entry to land. The great majority of rural landowners have for many years made access to the Irish countryside available and this welcome has been long appreciated by generations of Irish mountaineers. However access is at the discretion of the landowner, who may prohibit entry or withdraw consent without prior notice to recreational users. While the public is normally given access to State land including National Parks and Coillte property there is no right of entry to these lands either. This situation contrasts with that which obtains in most other parts of Europe, where varying degrees of public access to land are formally defined.

MCI recommends prior consultation with landowners, but this is not always practical. It is thus difficult for walkers in the Irish uplands to be confident that their entry to private land including commonage will not be challenged. A further difficulty is the scarcity of agreed access pathways or of public rights-of way, which is in particular contrast with the extensive network of rights-of-way in Britain. Division of commonages, intensification of agricultural use and increased private forestry development has made access to the uplands physically more difficult. The Occupiers Liability issue, an increase in the number of leisure users, and failure by a few recreational visitors to respect the reasonable requests of farmers have all contributed to a change in attitude on the part of a minority of landowners.

MCI is working to reverse this decline in available access through agreement with landowners and rural communities and through bodies such as the Irish Uplands Forum. In Northern Ireland we anticipate improvements linked to legislation being introduced in other parts of the United Kingdom. Any initiative in this regard for the Irish Republic must be founded on the goodwill of landowners. MCI accepts that landowners have legitimate concerns in regard to liability issues and is working to clarify these issues. It is an MCI objective that a national code to govern recreational access be agreed between all stakeholders in a spirit of partnership. The role of Local Consultative Forums should be central to the achievement of this objective.

Policies

The principal access aim of the MCI is reasonable access for responsible users.

- The MCI supports the principle that there should be access to open country for the purpose of recreation. The MCI will campaign for agreed access to mountains, crags, the coast and other areas visited by MCI members and other responsible recreational users.
- When local access problems arise the MCI will, where possible, enter into discussions with the landowners/occupiers. The MCI and its members will at all times seek to develop and maintain good relations with landowners. The assistance of local affiliate Clubs is vital to the achievement of these objectives
- The MCI will co-operate with landowners and State bodies to provide access routes. We consider that expenses reasonably incurred by landowners in the provision of recreational access should be compensated.
- The MCI is opposed to further unnecessary fencing of open land, as it hinders access and is obtrusive.
- Where restrictions on access are required for conservation or other reasons the MCI will work to ensure that reasonable balance is achieved between access and conservation requirements.
- The MCI will work to preserve existing rights of way and paths.
- The MCI will maintain a database detailing reported access difficulties.
- Guidebook writers should ensure that any access route they publish is acceptable to the landowners over whose property it passes.

MCI Environmental Policy

Footpath Erosion

Upland footpath erosion is caused largely, but not exclusively, by hillwalkers. The increasing use of quads, scrambling bikes and mountain bikes makes matters worse. Intensive use of upland areas, especially of peatland, can exceed the carrying capacity of the terrain and progressive deterioration occurs. Trampling – which is exacerbated by large numbers – is a primary cause of vegetation loss, the early stage of erosion. Erosion can be caused very swiftly, but may take decades to fix. Upland areas within easy reach of large urban populations are most vulnerable, but this is also a worsening problem in less popular areas.

MCI members should take responsibility for conserving upland footpaths. Active participation in voluntary repair work is strongly recommended to all members.

Policies

- Clubs are encouraged to strongly advise their members to follow the guidance of the MCI's Good Practice Guide for Walkers and Climbers (*available on the MCI website or from the MCI office*).
- Clubs and walking groups need to be aware of the excessive impact that large numbers of people can generate and should adopt a responsible approach by minimising group sizes, particularly when walking on peaty uplands. Ideally group size should be less than 10 people, but should not exceed 15.
- The MCI will actively promote low impact use of the uplands, to members and other users, through appropriate communications programmes.
- Walking groups are asked to avoid badly eroded routes, particularly following periods of heavy rain.
- MCI will seek government support for upland trail repair and maintenance.

Recommended measures for the management of areas subject to erosion

- **Use of Alternative Routes**
Where paths are very heavily used with resultant damage, paths could be closed for repair and alternative paths indicated.
- **Restoration**
MCI members and clubs are strongly encouraged to participate in low-impact remedial trail maintenance work under competent guidance and to repair erosion damage in areas which they regularly use. Active maintenance is strongly encouraged for reasons of both conservation and safety. Any work carried out should strive for minimum impact on the essentially wild character of the uplands and the quality of the walking experience.
- **Minimum Impact**
Constructed footpaths are a last resort, though one which has been reached in certain Irish areas. The materials and route should be in keeping with the nature of the area. Techniques used should pay heed to the conservation needs of an area, be fully informed by best practice and have regard to the visual impact.
- **Monitoring the Problem**
MCI supports ongoing monitoring of tracks and footpaths in upland areas as a means to better trail management. The MCI will assist its members and voluntary groups such as Mountain Meitheal with path surveys and the development of a database to record findings.
- **Publications**
Where possible, guide book writers should omit mention of routes through eroded areas. Advice on the responsibilities of walkers to reduce their impact on vulnerable terrain should always be included.

MCI Environmental Policy

Organised Events in the Mountains

The MCI recognises the social, community and financial value and increasing popularity of organised walks, walking festivals, charity walks and challenge events in the mountains. The MCI believes the current level of such activities is environmentally unsustainable and recommends that 'best practice' principles are adopted by event organisers.

Policies

Where MCI members or affiliated clubs organise such events or are requested to assist in a local or charitable event they should:

- Examine the environmental impact – particularly erosion – of any route proposed.
- Take into account the level of use of the area (an area that has little activity throughout the year will recover better from the impact of one large event than an area that is subject to heavy use on a regular basis).
- Where proposed routes traverse protected areas (SAC, NHA etc.) or National Parks consult with Park Management, Duchas or the appropriate management body.
- Take measures to limit the number of participants in the event (e.g. by using pre-booking).
- Consider alternative event formats with reduced impact on vulnerable terrain.
- Vary the route e.g. arrange a number of different walks in the area; change the route from year to year.
- Consider scheduling the event for later in the year to avoid damage during the peak growth season.
- Use the event to increase awareness of environmental issues in the uplands.
- Promote the MCI's Good Practice Guide for Walkers & Climbers to all participants.
- Ensure all litter and markers are removed after the event.
- Afterwards examine the damage caused by the event and seek solutions to minimize this if future events are planned.
- Aside from environmental concerns, carefully consider all safety aspects involved in bringing participants to remote places. This is particularly important for events involving inexperienced walkers, or where there is a time pressure on participants.

MCI Environmental Policy

Agriculture

For many centuries the predominant use of Ireland's uplands and mountain valleys has been for agricultural purposes. The character of our upland landscape derives from such use. In recent times landowners in Irish upland areas have faced increasing problems in maintaining farm family income. MCI is appreciative of these current difficulties, and also of the necessity of conserving the quality of the upland environment. We consider that the traditional extensive methods of production are deserving of financial support and that community development including appropriate recreational use can be integrated in a sustainable land use policy for upland regions.

The uplands are limited in their capacity for agricultural development. For many years traditional methods of agriculture produced an environmental balance. This was rapidly lost in recent decades when stocking rates were unsustainably increased and urgent remedial actions were then required. Such problems arise when agricultural policies ignore the fragile nature of the uplands. The development of sensitive areas should respect their biological limitations.

It is considered that the creation of Upland Area Partnerships (involving agricultural, statutory, community and recreational representatives) can be the key to the optimum development of these areas. If the potential of sustainable recreation is embraced this can offset reductions in traditional agricultural income. The role of landowners as custodians of the rural heritage should continue to be compensated by measures such as the Rural Environment Protection Scheme. MCI supports reforms to such schemes to ensure the sustainability of rural communities.

Policies

- The MCI will co-operate with upland landowners, government agencies and others involved, to develop sustainable upland uses for the benefit of farmers and rural communities. These may include the provision of appropriate recreational access. Where provision of such access involves loss or expense to landowners MCI considers that appropriate recompense should be allowable. Retention of the character of sensitive landscapes should be an objective of all development. Criteria set for grants and permissions should be appropriate to the capacities of each land area involved. Necessary measures for access, land improvement and enclosure should respect traditional landforms.
- MCI recognises the special value of plants, animals and cultural artefacts in certain upland areas. Where the preservation of these is important we consider that government agencies should consult with affected landowners and agree fair recompense for any loss of income arising from compliance with EU or national directives.
- The MCI recognises the right of farmers to erect fences for agricultural purposes. However fencing of traditionally open high areas of rough grazing and the fenced sub-division of private commonage seriously detracts from the quality of the upland environment and should be kept to a minimum. Fences on hill access routes should incorporate stiles to facilitate access and prevent damage.
- MCI will promote the acceptance and use by all its members of the MCI Good Practice Guide for Walkers and Climbers, the IFA Farmland Code of Conduct and the Northern Ireland Countryside Code.

MCI Environmental Policy

Forestry

MCI recognises the positive contribution well-managed forests can make to the rural economy. Properly planned and landscaped forests can enhance the amenity value of the landscape and increase opportunities for recreation and access.

Ireland has little remaining natural forest. Most forests are relatively recent plantations. Forestry is set to become an ever larger component of the landscape with national objectives to increase land under trees. Forestry development cannot be based solely on commercial considerations, but must take environmental, amenity and social issues into account. MCI welcomes Coillte's achievement of Forestry Stewardship Council certification as a positive development in recognising these requirements.

Plantation forestry can be visually intrusive, detracting from the wilderness quality of the uplands. Existing wildlife habitat can be affected, and rivers and lakes may suffer acidification from conifer forests. Forestry roads have in the past been insensitively placed, making them monotonous for the walker and detracting from the wilderness nature of some areas.

State forests have traditionally been open to the public; access to private plantations is at the discretion of the landowner. Forests can provide a useful access corridor to the uplands, however trees at certain stages of growth can form impenetrable thickets, while clear felling can leave areas almost impassable for years, making access for walkers difficult. Large amounts of rubbish sometimes remain following forestry work.

Policies

- MCI supports the protection of all remaining natural and semi-natural forest, including adequate measures for the removal of invasive species.
- The MCI view is that sensitive upland areas – blanket and raised bog, heather moorland – should not be planted.
- Where forests already exist or are proposed in upland areas and mountain valleys, the MCI recommends a detailed forest plan should be drawn up to ensure they fit in with the surrounding landscape, increase bio-diversity and facilitate recreational use.
- Forests should be managed in accordance with Sustainable Forest Management principles.
- Forestry roads should be sensitively designed, with minimal impact. Roads should be designed with due regard to vistas and views for recreational users. The MCI urges forest companies to investigate alternative extraction methods that reduce the need for extensive road networks. Forest roads should be categorised for different types of use. Where roads are no longer needed for harvesting, consideration should be given to 're-classifying' these routes for walking or cycling only, with measures taken to limit vehicular access. 4WDs, all-terrain vehicles and other off-road vehicles sometimes use forest roads to access upland areas. Effective barriers should be erected to keep out unauthorised vehicles.
- Routes through forests can be a valuable means of access to higher ground. MCI acknowledges the value of such routes and is committed to working with Coillte to identify and maintain popular access routes. Where possible, walking routes through forests should avoid forest roads.
- Forestry benefits from a high level of public investment, in the form of grant aid and tax breaks and therefore MCI encourages the Forest Service to make the provision of access routes a condition for grant aid to private forestry in the uplands and intervening valleys.
- Felling licences should take environmental impact into account and impose conditions to minimise environmental degradation. Replanting with native species should be permitted in all felling licences.
- MCI encourages forest owners to exert more control over contractors (possibly a litter bond) to ensure rubbish is removed when work is completed.

MCI Environmental Policy

Transport

Mountaineers need transport to get to within walking distance of the hills. At present, public transport does not meet needs in remote areas, therefore walkers and climbers must rely largely on private transport. MCI recognises the negative impact of heavy car use in remote areas. Increasing traffic reduces enjoyment of remote areas and leads to pressure for more car parks and improved roads. Inconsiderate parking by recreational users can block access, causing serious inconvenience for local residents and the emergency services.

Policies

- MCI encourages members to car pool as much as possible to reduce car numbers and parking problems. Member clubs are asked to consider hiring buses as an alternative, however please note the recommendations on maximum group size contained in the Footpath Erosion policy.
- MCI is committed to working to resolve traffic and parking problems as they arise e.g. by liaison with landowners and local authorities.
- The Irish uplands should be protected from excessive or insensitive transport developments.
- All road works and car parks in upland areas should be constructed to minimise environmental impact.
- Provision of better public transport in remote areas is supported.
- MCI will support appropriate park and ride schemes in areas where volume of traffic and / or car parking demand exceed capacity.
- MCI members are urged to follow MCI's Good Practice Guide for Walkers and Climbers with regard to parking etc.

Off-road vehicles

The off-road use of motorised vehicles e.g. quads and scramblers has increased greatly. Hill and forest tracks facilitate access for vehicles, which then get used off road in inappropriate places. MCI recognises that upland farmers may use such vehicles for necessary agricultural purposes. Off-road use of vehicles damages sensitive environments, leaves scars on the landscape and worsens erosion. Local residents, recreational users and wildlife are affected by disturbance.

In Northern Ireland it is illegal to have a motorised vehicle more than 100 metres from a public road without the landowner's permission. MCI will encourage local authorities in the Republic of Ireland to introduce bye-laws protecting upland areas within their jurisdiction.

Policies

- Off-road use of vehicles is severely detrimental to the upland environment. The recreational use of vehicles on open uplands should be prohibited. This is best done by use of effective barriers on hill and forest tracks, user education and appropriate bye-laws.
- Provision of designated reserves for quads and scramblers would take pressure off sensitive landscapes. The MCI will liaise with the relevant user groups, encouraging them to promote responsible use to their members and supporting their efforts to secure appropriate areas designated for their activities.
- Tracks that facilitate vehicle access should be removed if no longer needed.
- MCI supports the provision of designated trails for cyclists and will liaise with Cycling Ireland to assist with education of cyclists to minimise damage to upland terrain

MCI Environmental Policy

Built Development

The MCI Built Development policy covers all development work in upland and relevant coastal areas requiring planning permission (other than those categories of activity specifically dealt with in other sections of this document). Development proposals which will erode the remoteness and natural beauty of our landscapes should be critically examined. The extent of wild country in Ireland is rapidly decreasing and MCI considers itself obliged to assist with its conservation.

The MCI does not oppose all development in upland areas, rather it argues that development should be located where it does not destroy the essential character of the undeveloped landscape of the upland and coast. This itself is an increasingly valuable commercial asset to local communities who can utilise tourism and recreation to replace other declining economic activities. The MCI supports appropriate and sustainable development in or immediately adjoining existing settlement and villages.

The following list indicates the type of development which the MCI considers potentially damaging to the essential landscape qualities of our uplands and coast. Proposed developments in the categories listed should be carefully considered by MCI and its members. Where it appears that particular schemes are inappropriate MCI should oppose them through the planning process.

- Quarrying, mining and other extractive industry.
- Communication masts, where these are visually or environmentally significant.
- Wind farms and hydro-electric schemes, where significant adverse impact occurs.
- Waste disposal by landfill or otherwise.
- The construction of dwellings in upland areas.
- Tourist facilities and visitor centres where environmental impact is severe and where community benefit is minimal.
- Power lines if inappropriately sited.
- Large agricultural or industrial buildings, mountain roads.

Developments of the types listed above can impact on the landscape in a number of ways:

- There is a reduction of the amount of wild land and land remote from human activity and roads. This is exacerbated by the requirement to have road access and services to the development.
- Increased noise.
- Impact on flora and fauna and especially on areas of special ecological or scientific interest.
- Pollution.
- Increased vehicular traffic.
- Landscape impact - visual intrusion of man-made artefacts on natural ecosystems.

Policies

The MCI, in consultation with local members, will determine its action on new proposals having regard for:

- The impact in terms of scale, positioning and design on the landscape in which it is proposed to site it.
- The quality of that particular landscape and its ability to absorb the development.
- The usage of the area by climbers, walkers and tourists.
- The economic, social and environmental value of the scheme.
- With regard to dwelling houses, favouring those intended for use by families engaged in agriculture.
- The ecological consequences of the development both in the long term and during construction.
- The reversibility of the development and its impacts
- The reduction in the national stock of undeveloped landscape.

MCI Environmental Policy

Built Development contd.

The MCI will participate in the planning process through its constituent clubs and at national level. This will include the submission of comments in appropriate cases and the making of appeals or related submissions to An Bord Pleanála. Where issues are localised the preferable procedure is for action to be taken through locally affected member clubs and groups. The MCI Executive may assist affiliated clubs with expenses related to planning matters.

MCI Environmental Policy

Litter, Waste & Illegal Dumping

Some recreational users contribute to litter in the uplands. Non-recreational users, both private individuals and commercial bodies, also use remote areas as free and convenient dumping grounds. MCI members are encouraged to share responsibility for reducing litter in the Irish uplands through personal action and reporting incidences of dumping.

Policies

- The MCI strongly encourages its members to adopt the principle of *Pack it In – Pack it Out*. Clubs are urged to promote this principle to all their members. MCI members should strive to leave no trace after a visit to the uplands.
- The MCI encourages members to pick up litter when they see it (always be cautious when handling waste). MCI clubs should consider organising clean-up events.
- MCI members are encouraged to report incidents of dumping, car wrecks etc. in upland areas to the local authority.
- The MCI will lobby government and local authorities to address waste issues, clear up illegal dumping and impose litter fines.