



Developing Mountaineering Ireland's Vision for the Future of Ireland's Mountains

Report on member consultation process October – November 2016

1. Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland's mission (below) commits the organisation to being a voice for Ireland's mountain areas:

Mountaineering Ireland exists to represent and support the walkers and climbers of Ireland and to be a voice for the sustainable use of Ireland's mountains and hills and all the places (coastline, crags, forests) we use.

To be more effective as that voice, in summer 2016 Mountaineering Ireland initiated a consultation and policy development process with the following objectives:

- to agree Mountaineering Ireland's vision for the future of Ireland's mountains;
- to develop a strong policy statement about the importance of Ireland's mountains;
- to empower Mountaineering Ireland members to be a voice for Ireland's mountains.

Mountaineering Ireland members were encouraged to attend one of six regional meetings held during autumn 2016. This report summarises the key findings from that series of meetings.

A draft vision and policy statement emerging from this process will be developed and shared with members for further input early in 2017.

2. Context

Mountain areas are a major element in Ireland's landscape, providing defining geographic features and some of our most beautiful scenery. The prominence of uplands within the landscape means that changes to the upland landscape are highly visible and may impact indirectly across a wide area.

Compared with our neighbours in Scotland and Wales Ireland has a very limited area of mountain land. 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. There include significant aspirations related to tourism, pressure from an ever-widening range of recreation activities, developers seeking space for renewable energy developments, and growing awareness that upland management can play a role in carbon storage and flood prevention. The primary land use across most of Ireland's upland areas is farming, yet those extensive farming systems are in crisis and hugely dependent on direct payments. It is arguable too that mountains have an inherent value, and that there may be merit in keeping them the way they are now. Clearly all these expectations can't be met.

The future of Ireland's mountain areas is determined by national policy, very little of this policy has been developed specifically for upland areas and it tends to be sectoral rather than balancing the environmental, social and economic considerations that are all relevant to the sustainable management of the uplands.

While Mountaineering Ireland cannot determine the future for Ireland's mountains, there are frequent opportunities to influence policy. There is also scope for Mountaineering Ireland at a national level, and members at a local level, to work with others towards a positive future for Ireland's mountains and their hinterland.

Before Mountaineering Ireland engages with other organisations to make a case for Ireland's mountains, it is important to first clarify Mountaineering Ireland's own vision for the future of these areas. That was a central reason for this consultation process.

3. The consultation process

Mountaineering Ireland members were encouraged to attend one of six regional meetings held during autumn 2016:

South east – Thursday 20th October, Springhill Court Hotel, Kilkenny

West – Monday 24th October, Menlo Park Hotel, Galway

North west – Wednesday 26th October, Central Hotel, Donegal town

North east – Wednesday 2nd November, House of Sport, Malone Road, Belfast

East – Thursday 3rd November, Irish Sport HQ, Blanchardstown, Dublin

South west – Monday 7th November, Oriel House Hotel, Ballincollig, Cork

The meetings were facilitated by Mountaineering Ireland's Hillwalking, Access & Conservation Officer with assistance from Mountaineering Ireland Board / Access Conservation Committee members and other staff. All meetings followed the same general format. In total 143 members participated, with representation from 48 member clubs and a number of individual members.

The meetings were participative with members initially invited to say in one or two words what makes Ireland's mountains special. A short video was shown in which well-known

Mountaineering Ireland members provided their own perspective, examples of these are provided below:

Ursula MacPherson (Mountaineering Ireland Board member & Director of Gartan Outdoor Education & Training Centre, Donegal) - <http://tinyurl.com/j328nks>

Pat Ewen (Member of Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Committee) - <http://tinyurl.com/zg53y9j>

To help Mountaineering Ireland members see the changes that are happening in Ireland's mountains, a few photographs were shown from the region. These also highlighted the role members could play in protecting the areas we rely on for our activities, and got people thinking what these areas will be like in the future if current trends continue.

For the remainder of the meeting participants worked in smaller groups to address the following questions:

1. What changes have you noticed on the mountains?
2. How can we protect Ireland's mountains?
3. What are the key challenges facing Ireland's mountains and how can they be addressed?
4. What is our vision for Ireland's mountains in 2040?

At each meeting, the outputs from this work were recorded on flipchart pages, these are summarised in the following sections of this report. Photographs of all the pages can be viewed here: <http://tinyurl.com/zejcjto>.

4. What's makes Ireland's mountains special?

Participants in the consultation were asked to identify, in one or two words, why Ireland's mountains are special to them. The graphic below shows responses that came up three times or more, with the most popular responses in a larger font and appearing more frequently. A full list of the responses is shown in Appendix 1.

The responses show how Ireland's mountains contribute to making people's lives better, with natural beauty, landscape and wildness major elements in what makes people's mountain experiences special. It is notable that 'peace and quiet', 'escape' and 'solitude' are all prominent, indicating these are qualities which Mountaineering Ireland should seek to protect.

The words 'wildness' and 'wilderness' came up repeatedly with members commenting that Ireland doesn't have true wilderness, that we don't have deserts or big empty spaces, but that the mountains are Ireland's wild places.

This insight into members' perceptions provides valuable direction, as well as many words and phrases which should be helpful in drafting a policy statement to communicate the importance of Ireland's mountains.

More signs	5	Negative feel
Windfarms	5	
Inappropriate access improvements	3	
Memorials	3	
Co-operation with government bodies	2	
Increased commercial activity	2	
Uncontrolled dogs	2	
Advertised	1	
Burning of the hills	1	
Clear-felling	1	
Damage to natural objects	1	
Eagles	1	
Leave No Trace not followed	1	
Less respect	1	
Maintained paths	1	
More education about mountain heritage	1	
More forestry	1	
More marked routes	1	
More Mountain Leaders	1	
More respect	1	
More youth interest	1	
Noise	1	
Unhappy landowners	1	

6. The challenges and how to protect Ireland's mountains

Participants worked in small groups to consider what could be done to protect Ireland's mountains, and to identify the key challenges and how these could be addressed. As there was overlap between these two questions the suggestions which emerged from the two groups, across all six meetings, have been compiled below under a number of themes. These have not been edited, beyond omitting or combining points which were duplicated.

THEME	HOW TO PROTECT IRELAND'S MOUNTAINS
Policy and advocacy	Prioritise mountains
	Statutory mountain landscape policy
	Get political support, make mountains an agenda item
	Co-ordinated strategy to look after the uplands
	Support to landowners for protection and enhancement of wild environment
	Policy for location of wind turbines, factor in cumulative impact and consultation with interested parties
	Change of legislation ref Wicklow Way case
	Funding needed

	Planning policy for uplands needs to be stronger and respected
	Taoiseach to appoint a Senator for the mountains
	Influence decisions early
	Decide how much tourism development we allow and where, each development decreases the amount of wild mountain land
	Designate 'wild land areas' as in Scotland
	Push for a Stormont all party working group on the uplands
	Build understanding that mountains are not places for mass tourism
Education and awareness	Educate on respect for mountains and conservation value of wild places
	Spread the word that uplands in good condition are good for society
	Communication – Understanding – Respect
	Education at all levels - members, youth, paid guides, wider public
	Greater awareness of environment, habitats & wildlife
	School walks to educate children – but not to become challenge events
	Use social media to promote good practice – create a new normal
	Respect for all users
	Education at key locations
	All clubs to have Environmental Officer to help train and educate
	Educate clubs on how to reduce impact of club walks
	Get people to join clubs
	Young people's mountain experiences need to be fun, not an endurance test
Management and Regulation	Don't make it easier to access difficult places
	Keep the wilderness aspect where possible / Don't sanitise
	More low-level trails to take pressure off the area above 300m
	More public ownership & national parks
	More Rangers
	AONB management plans
	Restrict numbers on charity / mass events
	Legislation
	Regulation and enforcement to address damage by quads and scrambler bikes
	Principles of sustainable development
	Learn from past mistakes – and successes too!
	Learn from best practice in other countries
	High quality infrastructure
	Proper stiles (with farmer agreement)
	Protect water from pollutants / rubbish
	Stop dumping – name and shame
	Identify threats & show how these can become opportunities

Collaboration	Strategic partnerships with relevant stakeholders
	Collaborate with landowners
	Partner with legislators and policy-makers
	Discussion with farmers and other clubs that use the mountains
	Link between Council Planning sections & Mountaineering Ireland
	Better links between Councils, tourism bodies & nature conservation authorities
	National guidelines and local partnerships to prevent conflict from commercial guiding and activity provision
Landownership and farming	Remember hills owned by farmers
	Respect landowners' property rights
	Farming knowledge in areas
	A lot of undergrazing
	Clear ownership responsibilities
	Protect biodiversity
	Re-direct farm payments to reward care for the environment
Access	Manage the access issue
	Guarantee access to all uplands
	Control litigation – at your own risk
	Personal responsibility, national indemnity scheme
	Acquire access through agreement, dialogue and respect
	Mediate with landowners
Erosion control	Path repairs / sustainable paths on popular mountains
	Sensitive erosion control measures in vulnerable areas
	Spread the load, more information, more alternatives
	Encourage people to visit a wider range of places / summiteering
	Work groups - Mountain Meitheal
Practical action by clubs and members	Walk on harder ground & stick to paths
	Considered route choice
	Clubs to be more flexible where terrain is damaged
	Restrict numbers on club walks (have small groups)
	Report quads & bikes – need to be stopped
	Report dumping using 'see it, say it' app
	Pick up litter (bring bags on walks and do an annual clean-up)
	Take photos and send grid refs of damaged areas
	Protect biodiversity
	Car-pooling



Participants at the Regional Meeting in Kilkenny

7. A vision for the future of Ireland's mountain areas

Participants were asked to identify their vision for what Ireland's mountains would be like in the year 2040 if all the challenges identified were addressed. The groups were encouraged to develop a vision statement that was inspiring, clear and concise. The vision statements from the six regional meetings are below (due to large numbers in Cork there were two groups working on this). Where numbers are included below these show how people voted on the night; due to time constraints not every group had the opportunity to vote.

In 2040 Ireland's mountains will be:

- Valued and protected as a social, economic, cultural and environmental asset
- Resourced by government
- Managed through a collaborative approach

In 2040:

- More cooperation and collaboration between landowners and land users (21)
- Develop a way of raising national responsibility and respect for wild areas (e.g. more place-based learning; more nature/civics in schools (14)

- More low-level trails, that are maintained (11)
- A stronger voice for Mountaineering Ireland who can have real clout and influence local / national government (to generate more funding, protection carries a price) (7)
- More regulation of organised events to achieve sustainability (3)

Vision for 2040:

- Partnership between farmers and recreational users (7)
- Freedom of access (5)
- Policy / legislation for access (3)
- Mountains are a really valued resource (3)
- Improved education and awareness (2)
- Mountaineering Ireland to be more proactive rather than reactive with local authorities(2)
- Appropriate paths in appropriate places (2)
- Increased numbers of walkers (1)
- Respect for environment and landowners (1)
- Evidence-based policies

In 2040:

- Expand Reeks initiative in order to align the interests of farmers and recreational users (11)
- Sustainable source of recreation (10)
- Creation of more national parks (9)
- More government intervention (8)

In 2040 Ireland's mountains will be:

- Open to all (2)
- Preserved (1)
- Used responsibly (6)
- Their biodiversity sustained (2)
- & protected at State level (14 - *as this came at end people may have been rating the overall statement as there were two separate pages for people to vote on*)

In 2040 Ireland's mountains will be:

- As natural as possible
- Education and training to enable sustainable use
- Use managed through agricultural schemes, tourism policy etc
- Quiet and peaceful
- All users will be consulted – walkers, bikers, farmers

In 2040 Ireland's mountains will be:

- Accessible - open access, joined-up policy, partnership, incentives to landowners, access legislated by agreement
- Conserved through education
- Celebrated - education about public engagement, wild status
- Managed – balance, understanding the wild, mainstream, younger
- Left natural - signage policy

8. Conclusions and next steps

Feedback at the end of the consultations indicated that people found the meetings informative, and they were glad to see care for Ireland's mountains on the agenda. Recurring closing comments from participants ranged from the need to engage youth with the mountains, to the necessity for stronger policy to deal with windfarms.

There are many challenges facing Ireland's upland areas, including how to reconcile increased usage with protection of the environment. As more and more people go into the hills, the natural environment and the landscape will change. Achieving a balance between access and conservation will require investment and policy change; securing political support will be essential to achieving those aims.

The scope for collaboration with upland landowners and other organisations that share an interest in Ireland's mountains was identified at a number of the meetings, as was the desire to see Mountaineering Ireland being more proactive by lobbying for Ireland's mountain areas. The valuable contribution which Ireland's mountains make to the health and wellbeing of our population, and the many other benefits which society gains from these areas, should be helpful in making a case for why Ireland's mountains are special and worthy of protection.

Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Committee is working with the outputs from the consultation process to develop a draft vision for the future of Ireland's mountains and a policy document on the importance of these areas. These will be discussed by the Board of Mountaineering Ireland at its meeting in late January and with members at Mountaineering Ireland's AGM and Spring Gathering in Kilkenny on Saturday 4th March 2017. Additional information will be published on www.mountaineering.ie before that date.

These six meetings have provided valuable direction to the Board of Mountaineering Ireland and its Access & Conservation Committee.

Mountaineering Ireland extends sincere thanks to all the members who participated in these regional meetings.

Appendix 1 – Responses to ‘What makes Ireland’s mountains special for you?’

Word / phrase		Other phrases included in this
Peace & Quiet	18	Tranquillity / silence
Natural Beauty	15	Wild beauty / rugged grandeur / beauty of nature
Wildness or Wilderness	14	
Escape	12	Respite / mental freedom
Landscape & Scenery	11	Stunning views / varied landscape / picturesque
Space	10	Uncluttered vistas / openness / uninterrupted space
Camaraderie	9	Social / friendship
Accessibility	7	Near & free / close
Challenge	7	
Solitude	7	Can avoid the crowds / isolation / low usage
Freedom	5	
Connection with Nature	5	Learn from nature
Biodiversity	4	Wildlife / nature
Remoteness	4	
Deceptive	3	
Fresh air	3	
Fun	3	Enjoyable
No light pollution	3	
Therapeutic	5	Relaxation / transformative
Relatively few tracks	3	Trail-free
Adventure	2	
Changing light	2	
Compact	2	
Education / outdoor classroom	2	
Exercise	2	
Inspirational	2	
Part of our heritage / natural heritage	2	
Personal development opportunity	2	
Stillness	2	
Vulnerability	2	
24/7 365	1	
Access special	1	
Achievement	1	
Bare	1	
Beauty of mountains & sea together	1	
Changing weather	1	
Contrasting colours	1	
Diversity	1	
Elemental	1	
Emotive	1	
Expand horizons	1	
Generosity	1	
Happy place	1	

Height	1	
Hillwalking sport enablement	1	
Important habitats	1	
In the moment	1	
Memory	1	
Personality	1	
Precious	1	
Recreational space	1	
Relatively undeveloped	1	
Sensual	1	
Sloshing around in water	1	
Spectacular	1	
There a long time	1	
Uniqueness	1	
Unspoiled/ purity / pristine	1	
Wonderment	1	



Voting on Vision statements at the Regional Meeting in Cork (photo: Jan van Soest)