

MUCH TO BE LEARNED FROM EXPERIENCE AT CUILCAGH

In 2017, Cuilcagh Mountain became the focus of media attention due to traffic congestion and parking problems. This was the outcome of a long series of management decisions which, often with unintended consequences, have progressively changed the mountain. This article provides the background to this and highlights some of the issues that can arise when mountains experience an upsurge in popularity. **Helen Lawless** reports.

Cuilcagh Mountain (665m) is the highest point in counties Fermanagh and Cavan, rising above an extensive swath of blanket bog that is arguably the wildest landscape in Northern Ireland.

During the winter of 2014/2015, a wooden boardwalk was constructed on the mountain to protect the blanket bog from the impact of walkers. The boardwalk was within Cuilcagh Mountain Park, which is part of the **Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark** and managed directly by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

The situation on Cuilcagh has a complex back-history. In the early 1990s, the blanket bog on the northern side of Cuilcagh was degraded by mechanised peat-cutting. Funding for blanket bog restoration was secured under the EU LIFE programme. In the mid-1990s the blanket bog was successfully restored with funding secured under the EU LIFE programme. An existing track at Legnabrocky was extended to facilitate restoration of the bog and shepherding. This gravel track stretches roughly 5km southwards from the road.

With the creation of the Cuilcagh Mountain Park in 1998, a marked walking route was put in place along the gravel track, across the boggy approach and up to the summit of Cuilcagh. This route became part of the Ulster Way in the late 1990s. A Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) report from 2003 noted the existence of the Ulster Way on Cuilcagh and specifically mentioned that any increase in tourism and recreational



Mountaineering Ireland President Paul Kellagher pointing out litter alongside the Cuilcagh boardwalk to local journalist Rodney Edwards. Note the handrails and the incongruity of this structure in the mountain landscape.

activity could have implications for the montane heath habitat on the summit of the mountain.

In 2008, the Legnabrocky route up Cuilcagh and the descent to Florencecourt were designated part of the 33km **Cuilcagh Way** and new marker posts were put in place. The decision to waymark and promote a route on Cuilcagh appears to have been a key factor in the challenges that would follow. The impact of trampling became visible where walkers following the marker posts on the Legnabrocky route were focused along boggy ground.

In response to this impact, it was subsequently decided to lay a plastic mesh across the bog to prevent further damage to this **Special Area of Conservation (SAC)**. Partly due to conservation restrictions on how the mesh was laid, and partly due to gradient, in many places the mesh was unpleasant and hazardous to walk on. Consequently, hikers walked *alongside* rather than *on* the mesh, resulting in erosion from the trampling and

concentration of water flow.

The route was closed for a period while various options were investigated by the Geopark, including getting advice from Scotland. Early in 2013, a Scottish path builder developed a specification for a stone-pitched and gravel path. Fermanagh District Council had reservations about the stability of this path on the steep slope and the NIEA was concerned about loss of habitat in the construction of the path. Hence the decision was taken to build a boardwalk.

In February 2014, Fermanagh District Council, on behalf of the Geopark, applied for planning permission to construct 1.6km of boardwalk across the blanket bog with 450 steps, complete with handrails, up the scarp to a height of over 600 metres on the edge of the summit plateau of Cuilcagh.

Concerns with the proposal

Mountaineering Ireland wrote to the Geopark and met the management team on-site to outline a number of concerns with the proposal. These included the



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visual impact of the boardwalk on the landscape, that the structure was out of proportion to the modest degree of erosion on Cuilcagh and that, through increased usage, it could exacerbate impacts on the summit plateau, as has in fact proved to be the result.

The Planning Service concluded that no environmental assessment was required for the proposed boardwalk. NIEA appraised the application, concentrating on aspects of natural heritage which have legal protection, and despite the vulnerability of the habitat on the summit plateau concluded the proposal was acceptable. Landscape and visual impact were not considered. Planning approval was granted in early April and construction started in August 2014.

The impact of social media

In April 2017, a video of the boardwalk under the title of the *Stairway to Heaven* went viral on social media, reaching 1.4 million views in three weeks. This contributed to 3,500 people visiting Cuilcagh in the four-day period over the Easter weekend, greater than the total number of visitors for all of 2013. Surveys show that a high proportion of visitors turn around at the top of the boardwalk.

The sudden popularity of Cuilcagh exerted severe pressure on local residents, on the local road network and on the Geopark management team. The Geopark had to employ a security firm to manage the traffic, especially for four weeks in the summer when the landowner at the start of the Legnabrocky track closed the car park, which is on his land. Geopark staff also worked at weekends providing advice to visitors and collecting litter. The parking situation improved in late August when



Although the timber was treated with a darker colour, it has weathered to create an unnatural and highly visible line on the landscape.

the landowner reopened the car park and started to charge £5 per car for parking.

A visit in September 2017 by **Paul Kellagher**, the honorary President of Mountaineering Ireland, who lives near Enniskillen, and Mountaineering Ireland's Hillwalking, Access & Conservation Officer, **Helen Lawless**, showed that while management attention had been focused lower down, the fragile habitat

on the summit plateau was clearly under pressure.

Around the top of the boardwalk virtually all the vegetation has been worn away, leaving an area of messy, wet peat stretching almost 50 metres wide. Looking at the damage, Paul Kellagher said: "We have effectively had 10 or 20 years of footfall compressed into a few months. We need a clear and urgent plan to address the continued damage."

Between the top of the boardwalk and the summit, which lies more than 1km to the south-east, the damage is not so obvious as there is less peat. However, the lichens, mosses and heaths that make up the plateau's rare montane heath habitat are trampled up to a width of 30-40 metres in places.

In the Lake District and Scotland, dispersed trampling on popular summits has been addressed through light-touch path work, which subtly guides walkers along a line without the cost or the visual impact of a constructed path.

The current situation

On October 6th, 2017, the Geopark closed the top of the boardwalk and requested visitors to turn back, so as to relieve pressure on the fragile habitat on the mountain. This has been described by the Geopark as a temporary measure, and



Some of the damaged ground in the area at the top of the boardwalk (photo taken September 2017).

UPLAND MANAGEMENT

efforts are continuing to identify both short-term and long-term solutions, which will conserve the habitat while still allowing visitors to enjoy this stunning landscape.

Mountaineering Ireland understands that a fibreglass viewing platform with handrails has been proposed for the eroded area at the top of the boardwalk. With advice from retired upland path manager, **Dr Bob Aitken**, Mountaineering Ireland has instead urged the clearing of residual peat and the use of local rock to establish a more natural, yet resistant 'arrival' platform at the top of the boardwalk. Mountaineering Ireland has also proposed light-touch path definition work to curtail the spread of trampling on the summit plateau, and a concerted effort to inform and educate visitors.

Mountaineering Ireland has made a



Anna Kellagher collecting litter on Cuilcagh summit.

number of site visits to Cuilcagh in 2017 (and over the last six years) and is continuing to liaise with the Geopark and NIEA. The National Parks and Wildlife Service is included too as some of the damaged area is on the Cavan side of the border.

Tourism is like fire

Although the Cuilcagh boardwalk was presented by the Geopark as a conservation measure, almost as soon as it was completed an official sign for the Legnabrocky Trail was in place at the roadside, which indicates that tourism was also an objective.

Over-development of natural landscapes for tourism and recreation through inappropriate trail development,



The spread of walkers on the summit of Cuilcagh is impacting on the habitat; some light-touch path work here might prevent walkers being deflected by the muddy area in the foreground.

as well as unnecessary signage and safety features, diminishes the quality of the landscape and lessens the visitor's sense of escape and exploration.

Commenting on this, Paul Kellagher said: "Cuilcagh was the first mountain that I ever climbed. It has been changed completely in the last couple of years. The creep of tourism infrastructure into mountain areas takes from the wild feel and the sense of adventure in these places. I have given a huge amount of time to introducing young people to walking and climbing; I just hope that we can look after our mountains in a way that will still provide adventurous experiences for future generations."

It is ironic that for many visitors to Cuilcagh their objective is the "Stairway to Heaven" – the structure, rather than the mountain itself. The boardwalk is almost like a conveyor belt; walkers are elevated to a height of over 600 metres without even coming into physical contact with the mountain. Is this lack of contact and connection with the natural environment what we want for people's enjoyment of Ireland's mountains?

Are day trips from Dublin to places such as Cuilcagh, the Causeway Coast and the Cliffs of Moher the kind of tourism that Ireland needs? What benefit do day trips bring to these areas?

The experience at Cuilcagh shows the truth in the oft-quoted line that 'Tourism is like fire: you can cook your dinner on it, or it can burn your house down.' That is even more relevant today with social media fanning the flames to create powerful and volatile wildfires. Other examples of this wildfire effect can be seen at the Dark Hedges in Co Antrim or the Fairy Pools on the Isle of Skye.

Lessons learned

So, what lessons does the Cuilcagh experience teach us for wider management on Ireland's mountains?

- There is insufficient protection for Ireland's wild and scenic landscapes.
- Without due care, interventions to manage the impact of recreation can end up transforming the essential quality of a mountain.
- Even apparently 'sensible' small changes in management can have unintended and unforeseen consequences.
- Social media have the power to generate unprecedented levels of use, drawing in a new cohort of visitors with different aspirations. This could have drastic consequences in fragile natural environments or in areas where there is no formal access arrangement and no management in place.
- The decision to waymark and promote a route up to the top of Cuilcagh was pivotal. Without the boardwalk and its problems, Cuilcagh would have the same wild character that it had 30 years ago.

Mountaineering Ireland is committed to supporting increased participation in outdoor recreation activities. It believes that this can be achieved by well-directed investment in infrastructure, education and recreation management, without adverse impact for the natural environment or local residents.

Mountaineering Ireland's vision for the future of Ireland's mountains is:
That Ireland's mountain landscapes will be valued and protected as environmental, cultural and recreational assets.

FIND OUT MORE:

Read more about the importance of Ireland's mountains and Mountaineering Ireland's vision for these special places:
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