

## ACCESS & CONSERVATION



Helen Donoghue, Chair of the Access & Conservation Committee, addressing the Access & Conservation Forum last November

# ACCESS & CONSERVATION NETWORK

Mountaineering Ireland has successfully launched its new Access & Conservation Network. **Helen Lawless** reports

**T**he purpose of Mountaineering Ireland's new **Access & Conservation Network** is to allow members around the island to feed into policy development, submissions, or specific projects, without the commitment of being on Mountaineering Ireland's **Access & Conservation Committee**.

The network is made up of a sample of people already involved in different ways in Mountaineering Ireland's access and conservation work. The network should strengthen this work and improve the geographic reach of our activities.

A special forum to launch the network was held on Saturday, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, at Irish Sport HQ, Blanchardstown, Dublin. It was attended by 47 people who had travelled from all corners of the country (a similar number of people were interested but unable to attend on the day).

The format for the day was highly interactive, with a lot of discussion in small groups. Information on selected topics was presented on a series of wall charts to which participants added their comments and suggestions.

The event was designed and facilitated by members of Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Committee, under guidance from new member **Noel Caffrey**. Active engagement by participants generated a buzz which lasted throughout the day.

## Challenges and solutions

Much discussion centred around how increased recreational activity in Ireland's upland and coastal areas is in many respects a positive development but how it also presents challenges. Participants identified a range of solutions to respond to these challenges, principally:

- The need to underpin the social and economic benefits of outdoor recreation with an investment in the management of outdoor recreation;
- Appropriate investment to mitigate the impact of increased activity on the natural environment;
- The need for a better balance between the rights and concerns of property owners and the responsibilities of recreational users;
- The need to establish and promote standards of good practice and to build expertise in recreation development and management;
- The need for Mountaineering Ireland to build political support for investment in hillwalking and climbing and outdoor recreation generally.

## Poll on access

At the start of the forum attendees participated in a short poll on access. The results are shown below:

### 1. What is your view on the current state of access versus five years ago?

	Votes		Votes
Much worse	0	A little better	11
Worse	9	Better	1
A little worse	11	Hugely better	0
The same/no change	13	Don't know	1

It is notable that across five years, which in terms of access is a short period, 20 participants believed the situation had got worse, against 12 believing it had got better.



Access & Conservation Committee member Orla Prendergast outlining Mountaineering Ireland's Helping the Hills initiative on upland path erosion



## 2. How confident are you that access will improve in the next five years?

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	No change	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5
0	0	3	9	9	2	13	7	2	0	0

There was almost a 50/50 split in response to this question, with 22 people confident that the situation will improve and 23 not confident of improvement, which is a cause for some concern.

## Opportunities

A sense of opportunity permeated the forum. Participants identified growing recognition of the **health benefits** of outdoor activities and greater appreciation of the **natural environment** as creating a positive context within which Mountaineering Ireland could pursue the solutions identified above.

Ireland's upland areas are **vital natural assets**. At a time of climate crisis, and with traditional hillfarming in serious decline, there could be a new, valuable role for upland farmers in improving the natural resilience of our upland landscapes. More sustainable management of upland areas would enhance the provision of vital public goods, such as water supply, flood attenuation and carbon storage. Mountaineering Ireland will feed this into consultation on future supports for land management.

## Responsibilities

The assumption of responsibility by hillwalkers and climbers was a recurring theme. This embraces taking responsibility for our own actions, especially in relation to access and relations with landowners; respecting the natural environment; and being conscious of making a contribution to the host community.

While there is reasonably good awareness of these responsibilities, there was a strong sense that more needs to be done to translate awareness into action, and to engender wider acceptance of these responsibilities.

To be effective in this area, Mountaineering Ireland may require additional expertise and capacity in communications.

## Quality outdoor experiences

One session focused on capturing the characteristics of quality of outdoor recreation experiences. The results demonstrated a strong link between the quality of the natural environment and the quality of experience enjoyed. Mountaineering Ireland will advocate for further research on this linkage as it is important to protect the attributes that provide people with positive outdoor experiences.



Participants in Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Forum

## Relationships

It was evident from the discussions that achievement of Mountaineering Ireland's objectives in relation to access and protecting the mountain environment is dependent on a variety of relationships. Looking after key relationships takes time, and this may have implications for the future allocation of resources within Mountaineering Ireland.

## Suggested actions

Towards the end of the forum participants were asked to say what actions they believed should be a priority over the next twelve months. These included:

- Pursue the **indemnity arrangement** promised for Mountain Access Areas;
- Raise **conservation knowledge** amongst Mountaineering Ireland members;
- Help to achieve the effective running of **Comhairle na Tuaithe**;
- Continue to pursue the **Mountain Access** model of agree access;
- Develop the skills base for dealing with **upland path erosion**;
- Cooperate with **other recreational users** of the hills;
- Develop **relationships** with influential groups with a shared interest, e.g. Fáilte Ireland;
- Raise awareness of the value of the **upland environment**, and tie this into the **climate change** agenda;
- Seek a more rounded or **integrated approach** to managing upland areas;
- Look at how to **fund recreation**: impacts need to be paid for;
- Get **political**: support members to lobby politicians on our key issues;
- Recruit a **marketing and education** person to get messages out to a wider audience.

## Conclusion

The event was successful in bringing the Access & Conservation Network to life, informing network members and securing feedback on Mountaineering Ireland's work in the areas of access and conservation.

Participants were supportive of the current direction of Mountaineering Ireland's work in these core areas, although it did highlight the need for greater activity on a number of aspects.

All outputs from the forum will be considered by Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Committee and used to inform future work plans within the framework of Mountaineering Ireland's current strategic plan.

A more detailed report of the 2019 Access & Conservation Forum is available on [www.mountaineering.ie](http://www.mountaineering.ie) ■



Jim Sheehan, Aine McGill, Phil Fitzpatrick and Anne Brindley engaged in discussion on the future of Ireland's mountains