



## Mountaineering Ireland Access & Conservation Forum 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2019

Final report 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020



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# 1. Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland held its first Access & Conservation Forum at Irish Sport HQ in Dublin on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2019. This was effectively the launch event for a new Access & Conservation Network within Mountaineering Ireland.

## **An Access & Conservation Network – why, what, benefits?**

The purpose of Mountaineering Ireland's 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 Access & Conservation Network is made up of a sample of people already involved in different ways in Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation work.

Having a network like this should strengthen Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation work and improve the geographic reach of our activities. The network should also be of support to those who represent Mountaineering Ireland on other organisations.

## **The Access & Conservation Forum 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2019**

The objectives of Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Forum were:

- To inform members of Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Network and to improve understanding;
- To develop a sense of belonging to the network and to foster connections within the network;
- To identify shared concerns and to help inform Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation work in 2020 and beyond.

The Forum was attended by 47 people who had travelled from all corners of the country, the majority of these were Mountaineering Ireland members (a similar number of people were interested but unable to attend on the day). The format for the event 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 with guidance from new committee member Noel Caffrey ([www.linkedin.com/company/the-2c-company](http://www.linkedin.com/company/the-2c-company)).

## **About this report**

The comments and suggestions in this report provide a record of input received from participants on the day. All outputs from the Forum will be considered by Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Committee and will be used to inform future work plans, within the framework of Mountaineering Ireland's current strategic plan.

People reading the report are encouraged to view, and share, photographs of the various wall charts and comments sheets from the Access & Conservation Forum which can be accessed through this Dropbox link - <https://www.dropbox.com/home/A%26C%20Forum%202019%20-%20Storyboards%20etc>

## 2. Overview

Overall the Access and Conservation Forum was an extremely positive event, active engagement by participants generated a buzz which lasted throughout the day. The event also demonstrated enthusiasm for the formation of Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Network.

### 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, including challenges to the relationships between visitors and the host community, and challenges to the natural environment which supports this activity.

Participants in the Forum identified a range of solutions to respond to these challenges, principally:

- Proactive management of outdoor recreation activity, guided by a strategic approach which recognises both the benefits of this activity and potential problems, supported by a suitable framework at national level and local level;
- The need to underpin the social and economic benefits of outdoor recreation with an investment in the management of outdoor recreation, and 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 all aspects of recreation development and management;
- The need for Mountaineering Ireland to build public and 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 with two questions on access. The results of the poll, which was conducted by secret ballot, are shown below:

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

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

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

## 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 also 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 can 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. It is important that recreation is built into any future ecosystem services payment. Mountaineering Ireland will feed this into consultation on Ireland's next Rural Development Programme and also discussions about supports for land management in Northern Ireland post-Brexit.

### **Responsibilities**

The responsibility of hillwalkers and climbers towards the places where we do our activities was a recurring theme throughout the Forum. This theme embraces taking responsibility for our own actions, especially in relation access and relations with landowners, respecting the natural environment and being conscious of making a contribution to the host community.

While there appeared to be reasonably good awareness of our responsibilities, there was a strong sense that more needs to be done, to translate awareness into action, and to engender acceptance of this responsibility amongst other Mountaineering Ireland members and the wider outdoor community. To be effective in this area, Mountaineering Ireland may require additional expertise and capacity in communications.

### **Quality outdoor experiences**

The 'What Makes a good Day Great' session focused on capturing the characteristics of quality of outdoor recreation experiences. The results from the Forum 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 that the future development of outdoor recreation in Ireland recognises and protects the attributes that provide people with positive outdoor experiences.

## Relationships

It was evident from many of the discussions that achievement of Mountaineering Ireland's objectives in relation to access and protecting the mountain environment is dependent on relationships. Many suggestions were made in relation to improving relations with policymakers, other outdoor sports, environmental organisations, the tourism sector, farmers and their representative organisations, and others. Looking after key relationships takes time and this may have implications for the future allocation of resources within Mountaineering Ireland.

## Actions for 2020

Towards the end of the Forum participants were asked to say what actions they believed should be done over the next 12 months. The key actions raised were;

- Pursue the indemnity arrangement promised for Mountain Access Areas
- Raise conservation knowledge amongst Mountaineering Ireland members
- Contribute to the effective working of Comhairle na Tuaithe
- Continue to pursue the Mountain Access model of open access
- Cooperate with other recreational users of the hills
- Raise awareness of the holistic value of the upland environment, tie this into the climate change agenda
- Develop relationships with influential groups with a shared interest, e.g. Fáilte Ireland
- Look at how to fund recreation – impacts need to be paid for
- More people counters to provide more baseline data
- Car parks and infrastructure to control access points
- A more rounded / integrated approach to managing upland areas
- Get political – support members to lobby politicians on our key issues
- Revisit the Helping the hills initiative in a broader sense to develop the skills base
- Mountaineering Ireland to recruit a Marketing and Education person to get messages out to a wider audience

A full list of written responses is included in Appendix 1.

## Conclusion

The initial Access & Conservation Forum was successful in its objectives of bringing the Access & Conservation Network to life, informing network members and securing feedback from network members on Mountaineering Ireland's work in the areas of access and conservation. The Forum was supportive of the current direction of Mountaineering Ireland's work in these core areas, although it did highlight the need for greater activity in a number of aspects.

The Access & Conservation Committee will process this report, use it to inform work plans for 2020 and beyond, and share it with relevant stakeholders. The committee will also consider what technical platform is best to support the continued development and operation of Mountaineering Ireland's Access & Conservation Network.

### 3. Mountaineering Ireland's strategic objectives in relation to access and conservation

Mountaineering Ireland's Strategic Plan provides the framework within which the Access & Conservation Network will operate.

The Vision in Mountaineering Ireland's current Strategic Plan (2018-2021) is:

***Our vision is that hillwalkers and climbers will become more skilled, self-reliant and informed, that access will be improved, and that our mountain landscapes will be valued and protected.***

Two of the five Strategic Pillars in this plan are directly relevant to the Access & Conservation Network, the strategic objectives are shown below, along with key aims:

Strategic objective:

**To strive for improved and assured access for responsible hillwalkers and climbers**

Aims:

- Lobby for completion of the indemnity arrangement for Mountain Access Areas and assist the wider roll-out of this project
- Contribute to the effective coordination of the growing outdoor recreation sector
- Seek recognition of the recreational enjoyment of land as a valid landscape use
- Work to secure a right of access to publicly-owned lands for responsible recreation

Strategic objective:

**To be a voice for the protection of mountain landscapes.**

Aims:

- Strive to ensure that mountain landscapes will be valued and protected as environmental, cultural and recreational assets
- Work with other interested organisations to tackle upland path erosion
- Engage with the relevant authorities regarding development proposals that may impact adversely on the mountain environment
- Empower members to be more active in protecting access and the mountain environment

Mountaineering Ireland's Strategic Plan is available on our website, see:

[https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/2018626164825\\_3e174fc0.pdf](https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/2018626164825_3e174fc0.pdf)

## 4. The history of access and conservation in Ireland's uplands - and what can we learn from it

Forum participants, working in two separate groups, put on a wall chart with a date line a large number of factors which they saw as relevant to the development of today's situation as regards uplands access and conservation. There was an initial discussion on learnings from this. The following is an attempt to summarise the main lines (the sheer amount of content reported did prompt a suggestion for a more complete and validated history, but that is beyond the scope of this report).

1. The roots of today's situation are deep. The historical experiences of loss of land may explain the strong attachment of landowners to their land and the established respect for private property rights. The access regimes developed in other countries may not have much relevance to Ireland.
2. The number of people engaged in outdoor recreation in the uplands has been growing. Up till the 70s or so, landowners met walkers, mainly local, with bemused smiles. Now it is often groups of city folk, in clubs or with commercial guides. Internet-based maps, track-sharing, challenge lists, meet-ups attract many individuals. Most of the country is accessible for a weekend of outdoor recreation. The potential economic benefit of this growing activity is recognised by many local community groups. Historically landowners have received no direct economic return.
3. Conservation and environmental protection have become big issues for many upland farmers, particularly via the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the EU Habitats Directive. Recreational users of the uplands are ready to act responsibly and Mountain Meitheal is active but concern about the impact of intensive footfall on the hills is not widespread. However, for some highly-used places (e.g. Diamond Hill, Mourne, Wicklow Mountains), there has been some preventive and repair work, some of good quality, some less so. Mountaineering Ireland's work on Helping the Hills focuses on achieving high quality interventions. More generally, Mountaineering Ireland is encouraging appreciation of the differing capacities of our mountain environments to accommodate recreation and our responsibilities as hillwalkers and climbers.
4. The development of a national network of long-distance and looped trails has progressed. In the 2008 Walks Scheme, the IFA succeeded in its push for payment for farmers, in this case for maintenance of trails crossing their lands. An earlier payment for new access via the EU's CAP (REPS1) was disallowed by the EU in 2002, sparking threats from the affected farmers to block trails through their lands. Standards and insurance for trails have been established nationally and Fáilte Ireland actively markets trails, but there is little strategic planning of the network.
5. As regards roaming in the uplands, there has been no Oireachtas interest in creating a right to roam, despite Keep Ireland Open pressure from 1995. In 2004, the Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution put paid to the argument advanced by farmers that a Constitutional amendment would be needed before enactment of any access legislation. In 2007, a Legal Experts group set out some concepts which could shape a bill, but there was no follow through in the Oireachtas. There was no political mobilisation around the 2007 Labour Party Bill put forward by Ruairi Quinn, nor around the 2013 Dowds Private Member's Bill. Decisions about access, about balancing rights and responsibilities, have been left

to the Courts. The line set by Minister O Cuiv with the establishment of Comhairle na Tuaithe in 2004 has been firmly on voluntary agreements on access, negotiated and managed at local level, with an indemnity incentive provided by national government. Two pilot Mountain Access projects were launched in 2009, a toolkit was developed in 2015, but the indemnity has not yet been delivered, to the ire of those involved in the pilots. Comhairle na Tuaithe was set up to deal with access to the countryside, with participation from farmer, tourism and recreational interests essentially. Many see its brief and participation as too narrow.

6. In Northern Ireland, the Access to the Countryside Order 1983 sets out roles and responsibilities. However, it has not been used very actively and is now under review by Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA). Mountaineering Ireland is actively involved and has made two substantial submissions in response to this review.

7. The long-term evolution of the countryside is driven by a variety of factors, notably the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and planning decisions. Sustainable upland farming communities are far from certain, looking forward. The strengthening focus in the CAP on ecosystem services and more flexible, results-based approaches, may help. Upland stakeholders, including recreational interests, have organised themselves in fora at local and national level, around their own issues. Effective access to the countryside is part of a sustainable future for the uplands.

### **Additional notes from the facilitator of the second History group:**

**The Push and Pull of Policy** - the appearance of Ireland's uplands and the life that is found there has and is being driven by EU policy. Headage payments drove an explosion of sheep-breeding in the 1970s (first CAP in 1962); the designation of lands of environmental significance under the Habitats Directive in 1992; the Birds Directive in 2009 strengthened legal restrictions on the destruction (including burning) of bird nesting habitat; the 'new' importance of the role of the uplands, especially peatlands, in water management and flood mitigation through the Water Framework Directive (first cycle 2000); the latest restructuring of the CAP in 2015 sought to average out area-based payments meaning that in 2019 every eligible hectare in the Republic of Ireland could bring the farmer a minimum of €110 and an average of €266 (driving a desire to make almost every hectare eligible and a stimulus for a raft of new commonage plans); in 2016 new money and new thinking through the European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs) see farmers getting paid to produce nature outcomes; 2020 and the future is (or could be) public money for public goods, the burning question - is recreation a public good?

**A voice for the places we love (two examples of many):** In 1992 Mountaineering Ireland (then the Mountaineering Council of Ireland) worked with others to oppose (successfully) the proposed Luggala Interpretive Centre, so as to preserve the integrity and quality of the mountain environment, this also brought about an important change to planning legislation. 2013 saw Mountaineering Ireland involved in the campaign (successful) to dissuade the Government from selling off the harvesting rights to Coillte forests, this could have resulted in private investors outside the State having control over public lands that support extensive recreational activity.

**Promote understanding and responsible action:** Outdoor Centres – getting out there, passing on skills and instructing instructors. Tiglin 1972, VEC's and OEC's from 1975, Tollymore 1989; 2004 Mountaineering Ireland was part of working group that brought the Leave No Trace programme to



d) Can one person from Comhairle take responsibility for lobbying / interfacing with DRCD to progress the implementation of legislation?

### **Re-structure Comhairle / Effective running of Comhairle na Tuaithe (3)**

Because:

Re-structure or expand Comhairle to an Outdoor Education Committee

Restructure Comhairle na Tuaithe to be more representative of all outdoor recreationists

An overall national outdoor recreation strategy is urgently required

Outdoor recreation needs an over-arching central body – e.g. a countryside recreation agency to:

- liaise with local communities
- Fáilte Ireland
- local authorities
- Rural Recreation Officers

Actions:

- Remedial action to address erosion
- Access issues
- Trail development
- Go for expertise, environmental best practice

### **How to fund recreation**

Because:

- Recreation is not 'free', impact needs to be paid for

### **Install more people counters to get good baseline data on numbers of recreational users**

Because:

- Required to push argument for projects

### **Develop more local infrastructure (car-parks, shuttle buses)**

Because:

- Access points need to be controlled

### **Access**

#### **Get a TD to bring a Private Members' Bill similar to what is proposed in NI**

Because:

- It brings clarity, potentially reduces conflict.

## **Access problems and solutions are largely local**

Because:

- Better connectivity with walkers and local upland stakeholders, support IUF

## **Lobbying & Relationships**

### **Lobbying – Get political (2)**

Because:

- a) Mountaineering Ireland needs to support members with lobbying TDs
- b) Prepare a dossier for members to engage with politicians pre-election

### **Develop links with influential bodies (IFA, Failte Ireland)**

Because:

- To improve political support

### **Failte Ireland to be an educated partner with Mountaineering Ireland and other upland stakeholders, not just tourist interests**

Because:

- Share messages about good trail use
- Influence their infrastructural and other projects
- Preventable bio impacts and conservation

### **Connect with Fáilte Ireland**

Because:

- Fáilte need to be more engaged with conservation
- Input to their marketing info

### **Co-operation with other recreational users of the hills**

Because

- Bigger, stronger voice

## **Communications & Education**

### **Raise awareness of the value / importance of upland environment**

Because:

- Need broader support

### **Educating all users**

Because:

- All users have an impact

### **Mountaineering Ireland Marketing & Communications Officer**

Because:

- Mountaineering Ireland is currently preaching to the converted, the message needs to reach a wider audience, it will be slow.

### **Conservation & Environment**

#### **Raise the issue of conservation with our own membership and with wider community including statutory bodies**

Because:

- To avoid mistakes such as Mahon Valley track and Cuilcagh

#### **Develop appropriate infrastructure to cope with increased footfall on the hills**

Because:

- Footfall on the hills has increased dramatically and will increase further

#### **A kick-start to Helping the Hills**

Because:

- Its intentions have stalled

#### **Promote sustainable use of upland environment**

#### **Get involved in the climate change agenda by raising awareness of the holistic value of upland environment**

#### **Single agency to coordinate hill issues, need funding**

## 6. Storyboard summaries

This section provides an account of what was raised by participants on the day in response to a set of eight storyboards. Information on selected topics was presented on a series of wall charts to which participants added their comments and suggestions. Discuss at each storyboard was facilitated by a member of the Access & Conservation Committee.

### 5.1 Access - legislative approaches

The fundamental question for many Forum participants was what **national framework, legislative or otherwise**, is necessary or likely to be effective in maintaining or improving access. For some, access is worked out locally, with landowners, and sometimes in community-based partnerships. Others focused on the improvement of Comhairle na Tuaithe (e.g. involve INHFA) and the national framework, notably the indemnity scheme, which should support it. Some thought that Comhairle is too narrowly focused on access, which can be polarising, that it should deal more broadly with outdoor recreation. An Executive driving body for outdoor recreation is needed at national level. Some went further, seeing land, resources, environment, climate as providing drivers for cooperation today (eg carbon credit concept). Some thought we should be lobbying the EU, on the cultural as well as the agricultural side, more than national government.

A **balancing of rights and responsibilities** is at the core of any effective framework. Participants reviewed the debate and progress so far on access to the uplands, particularly on legislation. Keep Ireland Open was established in 1995 with a right to roam at the top of its agenda. In 2004, an Oireachtas Committee on Private Property and the Constitution put paid to the argument advanced by farmers that a Constitutional amendment would be needed before any access legislation. In 2007, a Legal Experts Group argued that the Constitution allows legislation imposing restrictions on property rights as long as it has a **valid social purpose** and strikes a **fair balance**. The Legal Experts Group concluded that a legislative scheme which requires that those exercising a right of public access behave responsibly and take proper account of the interests of others and the state of the land would achieve a fair balance. Farmers protested vigorously, mainly on grounds of attack on property rights, and there was essentially no follow through by Comhairle na Tuaithe, much less by the Oireachtas. There was no political mobilisation around the 2007 Labour Party Bill put forward by Ruairi Quinn, nor around the 2013 Dowds Private Member's Bill.

Decisions about balancing rights and responsibilities in the countryside have been left largely to the **Courts** (notably Weir-Rodgers 2005, Wall v. NPWS 2017). The **1995 Occupier's Liability Act** has proven effective in protecting land occupier interests.

The line on access set by Minister O Cuiv with the establishment of Comhairle na Tuaithe in 2003 has been firmly on, **not rights but voluntary agreements** on access, negotiated and managed at local level, with an **indemnity incentive** provided by national government. Two pilot Mountain Access projects were launched in 2009, a toolkit was developed in 2015, but the indemnity has not yet been delivered, to the ire of those involved in the pilots. Is the lack of an indemnity scheme holding back the development of

cooperation on access across the country? Many Forum participants felt it probably was. Farmers argue they need to be confident about liability, especially in today's claims culture.

Some participants felt that the issue of **money**, payment to landowners, is still fundamental. Farmers argue they need to see some direct benefit. The 2008 Walks Scheme allows payment for maintenance of waymarked ways crossing private lands.

Some argued that the concept of **common good** has not been brought enough into the access debate so far.

## 5.2 Wall v NPWS Judgement

A Circuit Court judgment in April 2016, in which a Dublin woman was awarded €40,000 for injuries sustained in a fall on a boardwalk section of the Wicklow Way, sent a shockwave through Ireland's outdoor recreation community and raised concerns amongst landowners. The basis to the case was the higher duty of care on landowners and occupiers in relation to structures that are provided for use primarily by recreational users. The Circuit Court award was appealed to the High Court by the National Parks & Wildlife Service (the landowners) and overturned in February 2017 with a strong judgement that emphasised the responsibility of walkers for their own actions. As this case presented a significant threat to continuity of access for all who enjoy Ireland's outdoors Mountaineering Ireland provided assistance and evidence to support the appeal.

### **Key points from discussion:**

- The hillwalking community recognises the significance of this 2017 High Court ruling and greatly appreciates Mountain Ireland's active involvement in the case.
- The case should give reassurance to other landowners; and it is vital that the outcome of the case be widely publicised.
- The case highlights the importance of a national indemnity scheme.
- Most Irish landowners are willing to engage positively on access for responsible recreational users. However, their genuine concerns regarding the potential for litigation must be recognised and addressed. We believe that if working access schemes were in place they would be widely supported by landowners.
- Local or regional indemnity schemes are an important stage along the way to a more comprehensive approach (such as a national indemnity). It is recognised, however, that a more comprehensive solution would require a legislative basis to address issues such as: responsibilities of recreational users, responsibility for structures, rights of landowners, rights of recreational users, etc.
- There is chronic underfunding of our national parks. NPWS should consider new ways of funding trail maintenance such as ringfenced pay parking similar to Scotland.
- The Wall case should act as a wake-up call that we should plan our trail interventions better in line with the Helping the Hills Guiding Principles. Are the railway sleeper boardwalks common throughout Wicklow best practice? Mountaineering Ireland should continue to promote best practice interventions.

- It was noted that following the case the standard of auditing and maintenance of trails in our national parks has substantially improved.
  - We need to find common cause with group/bodies with more political clout than us such as IFA or Fáilte Ireland.
  - A sustainable solution on access should be a win-win for recreational users and landowners.
  - There is limited awareness of the access issue at government level. Mountaineering Ireland members should use the opportunity of the forthcoming election to highlight the issue.
  - We need to promote a better appreciation of the full public value of our wild places (natural capital, wellbeing, health, carbon sequestration, etc) to support our arguments on access and conservation.
- For more information on the Wall v NPWS Wicklow Way case see:  
[https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/20174128345\\_f3787411.pdf](https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/20174128345_f3787411.pdf)

### 5.3 Mountain Access Project

Participants discussed Comhairle na Tuaithe’s pilot Mountain Access Project, first introduced in 2009, which is being trialled at Binn Shléibhe near Clonbur and in the MacGillycuddy Reeks. Progress with the project has been hampered by delays in delivery of an indemnity arrangement for participating landowners. In considering the Mountain Access Project participants raised many questions, some of which are answered in the draft toolkit to support the roll-out of the Mountain Access Project (see link below), but many of which need to be borne in mind in the further development of the Mountain Access Project.

#### **Feedback from participants:**

- Mountain Access Project (MAP) is a good idea.
- Collaborative approach is positive
- Co-operative structure is good.
- Access is not a priority with government.
- How do you incentivise landowners?
- What is the actual function of MAPs?
- Nationally the MAP is rudderless.
- It is really community driven – and demand driven?
- Demands a huge amount of voluntary work and energy. Not always possible.
- Different personalities, different polices.
- No framework to progress it nationwide – who do you go to?
- It is place-specific – is it needed everywhere, or only in some areas?
- If an area is designated as an MAP, this can be transformative. But is this a good or bad thing.
- Should MAP be rolled out nationwide, or is it better kept for suitable areas?
- Perhaps reserve it for problematic areas?
- Lightweight model needed as well.
- Needs a permanent staff to drive a national scheme.

- What is the feedback from users of MAPs?
- Does it translate into real economic gain? Increased bed nights, shops, etc.
- How do we prioritise each MAPs area?
- Is the current model transferable to different areas?
- Is it sustainable long-term?
- Is the move in rural areas towards increased recreational use rather than farming?
- Diversification of economic sources.
- No progress possible without clarity on Indemnity.

#### Comhairle na Tuaithe

- CnaT function and remit needs to be re-defined, it needs a future-proof mandate
  - What is the composition of CnaT?
  - Should CnaT have commercial recreational users on the board?
  - Needs additional permanent staffing to operate efficiently and there needs to be continuation of plans when Civil Servants change
  - Needs support from Sport Ireland – administrative work.
  - What incentives are there for farmers with CnaT?
- For more information on how the Mountain Access Project could work see:  
[https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/20191212172859\\_5c8dd6fa.pdf](https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/20191212172859_5c8dd6fa.pdf)

## 5.4 Future of Ireland’s Mountains and Upland Areas

Ireland’s mountains inspire, shape and enrich the recreation experiences enjoyed by hillwalkers and climbers. Ireland has a limited amount of mountain land and the quality and special character of these places is being altered all the time by changes in land use, including changes associated with recreation activity. Following an extensive consultation process with members, in 2017 Mountaineering Ireland agreed its vision for the future of Ireland’s mountains and uplands areas - **that Ireland’s mountain landscapes will be valued and protected as environmental, cultural and recreational assets.**

Forum participants were asked how this vision might be realised; the responses have been grouped under a number of headings below:

#### **Policy Involvement/Lobbying Suggestions**

Turn the “What are the Barriers” listed into **Opportunities**

- **Lobby** at EU level to have farm payments that are linked to good environmental practices and social good

Resolution to **Indemnification** issue for landowners

- Recognition of farming as a way of life – part of our **cultural heritage** and EU funding to preserve this heritage

**Water Framework Directive (WFD)** are there aspects of the Directive that could be useful for the **Irish Uplands Forum** in the management of water and the uplands, for mutual and societal benefit?

Need ways to address the **Insufficient Enforcement** in relation to damage done to **SACs, SPAs and NHAs**

**Lack of incentives for landowners** to protect sensitive environmental areas

A **Recreational Management Strategy** is required for the Uplands (nationally and locally)

- Would encompass resources for recreation infrastructure e.g. car parks, shuttle buses, hard access tracks at the start of walks
- People on the ground have ownership of the project and outcomes, and outcomes linked to payments, like EIPs e.g. SUAS or like BurrenBeo

A **Renewable Energy Strategy** for Ireland is required which protects the uplands

Lobby for increase in **public ownership** of uplands

**Lobby** TDs and local authorities to emphasise the value of the uplands e.g. as carbon sinks, for water quality and management, for native forestry

- Mountaineering Ireland to provide **template documents for lobbying** ahead of General Election

### **Trails/Pathways**

Honey-pot hills – **sacrifice these e.g. Croagh Patrick, Diamond Hill, Errigal etc.**

- Have sustainable paths/tracks on these to attract the many, in the hope that wilder hills will be preserved
- Make a specific set of mountains/summits **National Monuments** as part of our heritage
- Re-ignite “**Helping the Hills**” initiative
- Explore ways to avoid/reduce footfall
- Consider **pathway network** e.g. New Zealand have paths, stay on them to preserve the surrounding landscape, similarly South American system

**Decommission**, or close, unsustainable (and unsuitable) trails e.g. Knockclugga (Knockmealdowns), Cuilcagh Summit on Ulster Way

**Centralisation of route planning** for way-marked trails

- Ensuring local consultation in all plans
- Adhering to Sports Ireland Trails Guidance
- Confining to publicly owned lands

### **Co-operation Opportunities**

Strengthen co-operation with **conservation NGOs**, e.g. Irish Peatland Conservation Council (IPCC)

- Build links with **Fáilte Ireland** to educate on responsible use of the hills in Ireland

“Managed **re-wilding**”

- Support initiative to re-wild mountains
- Address issues of invasive species
- Utilise the attribute that re-wilded landscapes are more resilient

## Personal Responsibility

**Sacrifice** is ours to make as recreationalists

- Think about our use of the mountains, perhaps we need to sacrifice something for their conservation
  - We have a personal responsibility to the hills we enjoy
- To read more about Mountaineering Ireland's Vision for the Future of Ireland's Mountains and Upland Areas go to:  
<https://www.mountaineering.ie/accessandenvironment/EnvironmentalPolicy/default.aspx>

## 5.5 Helping the Hills

Mountaineering Ireland's started the Helping the Hills initiative in 2012 to advocate a considered, quality approach to addressing the path erosion problems emerging in Ireland's upland area and to ensure that interventions do not detract from the character of the upland environment. Mountaineering Ireland hosted a conference on this topic in Wicklow in 2012 and a one-day seminar in Dublin in 2013. In 2014 the Helping the Hills Guiding Principles for the Management of Upland Path Erosion was adopted by Mountaineering Ireland, following consultation with members and other relevant organisations.

### Key points from discussion:

#### Best Practice in Upland Path Work

- Criteria - What is appropriate in a specific landscape/habitat? Ensure experts / best practice criteria applied at an early stage.
- Important to clearly define good practice and have examples/case studies regarding path construction and local consultation and engagement (Croagh Patrick seen as an example of good practice). Dept of Rural & Community Development and County Councils need to be engaged on this and agree to set national standards.
- EU Habitats Directive can sometimes be over interpreted regarding path development leading to anomalies/issues. Needs to be a willingness to trial solutions that are locally appropriate.
- Local involvement and giving something back to the local area by walkers identified as key message.
- Training and employment for local people in path building and maintenance identified as important to success of projects. Critical need to build a pool of expertise locally and nationally in upland path construction.
- The success of alternative enterprises for local community/farmers who engage with outdoor recreationists through running car parks, providing coffee /tea and camping/glamping needs promotion.
- Case studies and research highlighting the range of benefits of outdoor recreation for local area and for wider society would be very beneficial.
- The uplands are associated with many ecosystem services such as:

- Cultural ecosystems services - recreation/spiritual/ aesthetics
- Regulation ecosystems services - biodiversity/carbon sequestration/climate regulation/water filtration

These ecosystem services are often not fully appreciated/understood.

### **Creating Awareness**

- How do we encourage people to stay on trails and avoid path widening or creating new trails? We need to increase awareness of fragility of upland soils, especially when wet. The projected long-term increase in frequency and intensity of rainfall and flash flooding in Ireland means this will become an even greater problem in the future.
- Path Condition Survey - is there a baseline for this or a current snapshot recording underlying grounds, i.e. peats or mineral soil? (Note: surveys based on Scottish methodology for Amber Survey)
- Wicklow Uplands Council plan to do some survey work of paths next year. This will raise awareness of the erosion/damage on the paths and helps prioritise sections of paths for repair/construction and maintenance.

### **Volunteer Involvement**

- Suggestion we get mountain rangers employed to protect and restore upland habitats as has happened on the Glen River Trail on Donard.
- The work of Mountain Meitheal was praised. Potential for involvement of Men's Sheds in path building.
- Automatic visitor counters to record numbers using particular mountains / paths is needed in order to access funding for path construction and to prioritise trails in need of remedial work. Possibility of using volunteers to manually record this information also mentioned. A Citizen Science approach.
- Potential for volunteer rangers in popular areas to help with advice for walkers and monitoring usage/behaviour. This seems to work well in the Dublin Mountains and on Snowdon.
- Large pool of potential volunteers are available but need training/coordination/management.

### **Rural Recreation Officers**

- Rural Recreation Officers - need to substantially increase the number employed. RROs can help in all aspects of trail design and maintenance but currently they are spread too thinly.

### **Funding Path Repair and Maintenance**

- Noted that path construction is seen as expensive, but in comparison to building and running swimming pools by County Councils for example, the cost of trails is comparatively low.
- Maintenance versus building / capital budget less of a problem. A long-term maintenance budget needed for upland paths but often not allocated.

- A need for more automatic trail counters to provide accurate usage figures to help support funding application for path work.
- Suggestion that corporate sponsorship for tracks/paths to pay for the work or as carbon credits?

➤ For more information on Mountaineering Ireland's Helping the Hills initiative visit:

<http://www.helpingthehills.ie/>

## 5.6 Protecting the Mountain Environment

Participants considered three examples of Mountaineering Ireland's work to protect Ireland's mountain environment:

- Responding to an unauthorised, bulldozed roadway in the Mahon Valley, Comeragh Mountains;
- Objection to application for Northern Ireland's largest windfarm at the heart of the Sperrins Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
- The removal of yellow arrows spray-painted along the Cooley Mountains to mark the route for an event.

**Key points that came out of the discussion were:**

### **1. Mountaineering Ireland should make better use of its national network**

- Mountaineering Ireland members on the ground are the eyes of the organisation.
- The Mountaineering Ireland office has a role as a communication facilitator – need to liaise with and educate local Mountaineering Ireland members.
- Time is often tight with planning issues, it was recognised that Mountaineering Ireland makes an effort to contact local clubs, clubs have a role in raising awareness amongst their members.
- This works both ways, the involvement of a national organisation brings credibility to local concerns.

### **2. Aim to prevent issues rather than report them afterwards**

- Members to contact Mountaineering Ireland when they hear about something in their area.
- Raise awareness of possible issues, explain the concerns.
- Needs to be done sensitively, sometimes there are good intentions but poor execution.
- Encourage good practice by highlighting positive examples.
- Mountaineering Ireland to liaise with local authorities, funders and event organisers.
- Mountaineering Ireland's Event Guidelines should be sent to all charities.

### **3. Work with others who share similar concerns**

- Network with other recreation bodies that have an interest in mountain/cliff/coastal areas, including MountainViews.
- Cooley project a great case study - involved local farmers and other recreation interests.
- Link with An Taisce to find out about planning applications that might present a problem.

#### **4. Mountaineering Ireland policies should be regularly reviewed and updated**

- Climate change now a major issue, possible conflict in opposing windfarms, Mountaineering Ireland and members need to be well-informed on the pros and cons of windfarms.
- Environmental Impact assessments must be done – important to learn lessons from the Derrybrien windfarm, Ireland is paying daily fines to Europe because of failure to carry out Environmental Impact Assessment.
- Mountaineering Ireland policies need to be updated in light of the climate crisis.

### 5.7 Responsible recreation

In some ways the responsible Recreation discussions on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> November provided a bit of a ‘menagerie’ of comments, ideas, suggestions and just ‘pass the book’ throwaway comments, what follows is an attempt at collation:

1. Most people felt that both they as individuals and Mountaineering Ireland as an organisation tried to act as agents promoting ‘Responsible Recreation’, but fell short. The first issues raised were those of transport to the event, transport to the hills and what both individuals and Mountaineering Ireland was doing re global warming.
2. There was broad comment that Mountaineering Ireland (and the Club Environmental Officers) were not doing enough to promote responsible recreation. Many commented that some Club Environmental Officers made no positive contribution, many felt that Mountaineering Ireland was only speaking to the converted and not getting any message to a wider concerned public. As often happens at such fora, a few went straight to the role of ‘schools’ in promoting responsible recreation, but after careful consideration, many concluded that Transition Year was a valuable but wasted opportunity to publicise Mountaineering Ireland and what it is trying to achieve. Allied to this, a few commented that many club members had no interest in greater environmental responsibility.
3. A few commented that they wanted more environmental knowledge, BUT there was a marked ‘disconnect’ when they were asked about or referred to the ‘RESPECT’ items which are published in the Irish Mountain Log.
4. This led to a recommendation that Mountaineering Ireland should reengage with Leave No Trace Ireland. It was felt that this was a more global approach to ‘responsible use’ and anything else was more piecemeal.
5. A number of respondents maintained that they were very supportive and engaging with local communities, both in terms of positive interaction and financial support...cafes, pubs, shops, etc.
6. It was felt that Mountaineering Ireland needed a marketing/publicity officer or role to attempt to inform a much wider audience than its members. It needed to use some ‘high profile’ celebrity figure and use a ‘bite sized’ approach.
7. And from a personal ‘performance’ perspective, people felt that Mountaineering Ireland was doing enough to ensure that members felt safe, properly equipped and in the hands of competent ‘leaders’.

- Check out the RESPECT articles from the Irish Mountain Log - [https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/20191212174351\\_a7e891c2.pdf](https://www.mountaineering.ie/files/20191212174351_a7e891c2.pdf)

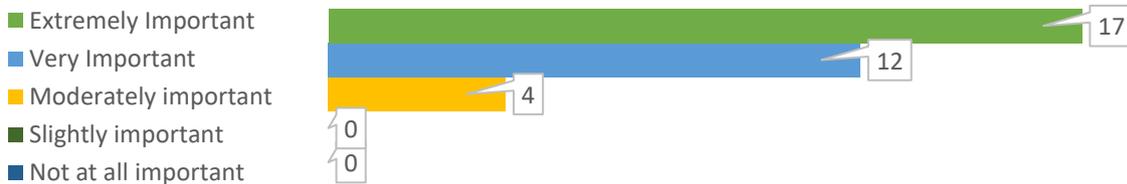
## 5.8 What makes a great day out? What makes a Quality Experience?

This session focused on capturing the characteristics of quality of outdoor recreation experiences. Responses below are exactly as written by participants on the day. These were later grouped and headings added by the facilitator.

1. Create a list of things that helped make your day out in the mountains great:

<b>Not dependent on going to the hills</b>	<b>Dependent on going to the hills</b>
Pleasant company; Company; People; Good company; Good company; Good company; Climbing with friends; Yummy lunch and hot coffee; Escape from daily worries.	Nature; Wildlife; Native trees; No Coniferous trees; Environmental understanding e.g Geology
Challenge / adversity / exhilaration; Exercise; Sense of wellbeing; Hard work; Good unplanned surprise; Achievement; Sense of achievement; Uplifting; Feeling; Fun; Exercise; Fitness.	Fresh Air & Wildness; Getting away to the wild; Stay Dry; Weather; Sunshine
	Isolation; Landscape; Natural places; Scenery; Being on open mountains without tracks; Views
	Accessible starting point & parking; Getting there and getting back; No access worries
	Visiting a new Place; Place

2. How important is the quality of the natural environment to your enjoyment and /or experience whilst Hillwalking or Climbing in Ireland?



3. Consider our 3 working ideas (hypotheses) ... a) b) & c):

3a) The outdoor environment contributes to the outdoor experience. 100% in agreement

3b) There are particular attributes of the natural environment which contribute to the quality of experience enjoyed by those recreating in the outdoors. 100% in agreement

### What specifically is it about the natural environment that helps make your day out great?

<b>The Climatic</b>	Weather; Spotting a rare or unusual weather experience; Weather; Good climate.
<b>Perception</b>	Solitude; Accessibility of nature; Hassle free experiences; Litter free.

<b>The Physical</b>	Horizons; Scenery; Sea views; unobstructed travel; Geology; geology; Ground conditions; Uneroded; Unmodified natural environment; Minimal anthropogenic features; Varied features; Variety; Scenery/ Landscape; Geology; Geomorphology; Less man-made more natural; Remoteness & isolation; Solitude; Wildness; Wildness; Unspoilt; Challenging landscapes; Natural rock features; Natural flows of water; Natural sounds & silence; Sea views without man-made features; Open Spaces; Bogs.
<b>The Living</b>	Bog Asphodel; Birds; Sunwort; Variety of plants/animals; Milkwort; Vegetation; Biodiversity; Spotting a rare species like fir clubmoss or a hare; Wildlife; Mix of native vegetation; Wildlife/nature; Botany; Upland ecology; Mountain species; All birds; All animals; Flora & Fauna – not monocultures; Natural colours of flora.

3c) A reduction in the integrity and natural character of the outdoors will correspond to a reduction in the quality of experience enjoyed by those recreating in the outdoors. 100% agreement

**Recorded below are personal stories from forum participants of instances when their enjoyment was affected by changes in the natural environment:**

	<i>People on the Physical</i>	<i>People on the Living</i>	<i>People on People</i>
<b>By Destruction</b>	Illegal Dumping; Rubbish in the Featherbeds; Plastic turf bags littering rivers on Ben Bulben; Burning affecting air & water quality in Mournes; Unsightly abandoned & burnt out cars; Four Motocross bikes causing scarring coming off Mullaghcleevaun; Cliffs of Moher habitat degradation; Appalling degradation of peatland habitat; Bulldozed trail on Grey Mares Tail; Quad tracks; Burning; Eroded Peat Uplands in Wicklow; Plastic marker posts Buckoogh; Habitat damage and soil erosion spoil experience in what was pristine land; Litter.	Heather flailing in an SAC; Shooting Peregrines; Dog chasing sheep; Clear-felling of forestry; Animals that have been injured by humans (a deer shot but not killed); Destroyed vegetation.	Overcrowding – 25 scouts in one group; Busloads of People; ‘naturalness reduced from overcrowding on Diamond Mountain; Ireland has become too small (more places in easy range of more people; Car burglaries in Comeraghs; Poor user behaviour – Large groups; Charity walks; Playing of loud music.
<b>By Construction</b>	Monavullaghs – mess of TV masts; Yellow Arrows on Cooleys; Boardwalk in Connemara National Park; Cuilcagh boardwalk; Poor choice of path surface – Binion Hill Inishowen; Unnecessary fencing (driven by policy rather than need); Fences with barbed wire and no stiles; Naturalness spoiled by fences – physical obstruction & unsightly	Angular edges to coniferous planting	Recreation in the uplands carries a responsibility; Who should pay and how? Taxes or something new? Maintenance is an ongoing cost.
	Other: Bad Weather; <i>Solvitur Ambulando</i> - it is solved by walking (Diogenes)		

Some concluding comments and further information:

Recent published reports and research have reported large amounts of money (€bn's £100m's) changing hands from the recreational use of the outdoors, equally impressive societal benefits have also been reported<sup>1,2,3</sup>. However, initial scoping (as part of this work) has revealed a dearth of qualitative or quantitative studies linking the quality of the natural environment with the quality of experience enjoyed. It is suggested that policy and practice could be better influenced if quality research results and conclusions were available following refinement on the ideas considered in 3c) above.

Some further information and summary statistics can be found in:

1. European Network of Outdoor Sports BOSS project 2017-2020 (Benefits of Outdoor Sports to Society) - <https://outdoorsportsbenefits.eu/>
2. Assessing the Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation in Northern Ireland, 2019 (report not online yet, separate study from 2013 available here - <http://www.sportni.net/sportni/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Economic-Impact.pdf>)
3. Outdoor Recreation Plan For Public Lands And Waters In Ireland 2017-2021, including Economic Benefit of Outdoor Recreation on public lands - [https://www.coillte.ie/media/2017/06/ORP\\_Screen.pdf](https://www.coillte.ie/media/2017/06/ORP_Screen.pdf)



# Appendix 1: Participant feedback

## What was good / useful today:

### **1. Structure**

- Informal structure and small groups kept everyone focused, got opinions from everyone, ensured inclusivity
- Learning about Mountaineering Ireland and the scope of work
- Meeting people / networking
- Good food
- Everybody very constructive
- Structure of day kept energy and focus
- People felt their views were valued
- Great to have people from Northern Ireland
- Meeting so many different like-minded people starting up the network
- Fresh approach with no Powerpoint
- Everyone had opportunity to make their point
- Very well organised
- Good group interaction on the storyboards and throughout the day
- Exchanging ideas
- History board was useful, but see below
- Good to have free rein
- Great not to have Powerpoint
- Discussion at afternoon stations
- Relaxed and informal groups very good
- Interactive
- Interesting ideas
- Dynamic, flowy
- Structured and organised
- Pre-planning and work put in
- Lunch, refreshments
- Interesting ideas, listening to others
- Respect, no fights
- Varied expertise and backgrounds

### **2. People and networking**

### **3. Other**

## What could have been better / what to change:

- More focused on particular issues
- Outdoor location - example
- Representation(? – writing not clear) of other stakeholders
- Regional roll-out
- More central location, near public transport
- Avoid information overload
- Maybe fewer storyboards and slightly larger groups (6-8)
- History board was a little scattered or disjointed, could be shortened or tightened up

- Morning session should have a facilitator to bring out clarity and avoid disengagement
- 11am quite late start
- Perhaps fewer stations but more time at each