



Mountaineering Ireland's response to consultation on Coillte's BAU Strategic Plans – May 2020

Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland, as the national representative body for walkers and climbers, with over 14,000 members, represents the largest recreation user group of Coillte forests. We also have a role in representing the interests of non-affiliated hillwalkers and climbers, and the wider recreational walking community. The vast majority of Mountaineering Ireland members gain benefit from recreation on Coillte lands, and there is considerable potential to enhance their experiences in the period 2021-2025, and into the future.

There may be ways too in which Mountaineering Ireland members can support Coillte's work. Mountaineering Ireland already has a very positive working relationship with the recreation team within Coillte, we would be keen in the period ahead to build on this and possibly expand the relationship to get more Mountaineering Ireland members involved in their local forests.

Our consultation response is presented in three sections:

1. Recreation
2. Forest and land management
3. Stakeholder engagement

1. RECREATION

- a. Coillte is rightfully seen as a leader amongst statutory bodies in Ireland in terms of its recreation policy and recreation management. However, with continued growth in outdoor recreation activity, additional investment will be needed to maintain this status, to manage increased activity and also to maintain the recreation infrastructure that is in place on Coillte lands. The recent commitment by the Department of Community & Rural Development to develop a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, through Comhairle na Tuaithe, is welcome and should bring a focus onto the need to support Ireland's growing outdoor recreation sector. Coillte's involvement in the strategy development process is acknowledged and appreciated.
- b. The new BAU strategic plans should recognise that Coillte's contribution to recreation extends way beyond its 260 recreation sites and 3,000 kilometres of marked trails. All Coillte forests are used in some way for recreation, by specific interest groups such as hillwalkers, orienteers, runners and birdwatchers but, most importantly, by local people and family groups.

- c. Coillte also plays a very significant role in facilitating access to the uplands. Of the 1,500 or so summits of any significance in Ireland, that are included on the MountainViews.ie website, around 40% are principally accessed through Coillte (or Forest Service NI) lands. Many less well-known summits, particularly lower local ones, can only be reached through Coillte forestry.
- d. Consultation amongst Mountaineering Ireland members has helped us to identify what makes a quality outdoor recreation experience; on the whole, there is a strong link between the quality of the natural environment and the quality of experience enjoyed. While solitude, peace and quiet and the weather all featured, most of the feedback related to the physical and natural environment – including open spaces, unobstructed horizons, absence of manmade features, the flow of water, natural rock features, lack of litter, a variety of plants, sightings of birds and other wildlife. Enjoyment of many of these attributes can be enhanced through forest planning and management. For example, current felling is re-opening vistas in mountain areas; slight adjustments in re-planting would allow some attractive views of mountains and across valleys to be retained.
- e. Members have also asked that archaeological sites be respecting during harvesting and re-planting. In the past trees were planted up close and in some cases on top of sites. Our understanding is that a minimum unplanted area of 15 metres around the monument is now required; this is welcome. Respect should also be accorded to ruins, old field walls, and other non-archaeological heritage features within forestry, and to hill summits that are within forestry which should be left unplanted if possible.
- f. Against a backdrop of increasing participation in outdoor recreation activities, Covid-19 has brought unprecedented levels of participation in recreational walking, running and cycling. Research from Northern Ireland*shows that many of those who have engaged in outdoor activities during the Covid-19 period expect to spend more of their free time in the outdoors when restrictions are eased. This will place further demands on Coillte’s recreation infrastructure and its recreation team.
- g. Mountaineering Ireland appreciates Coillte’s very significant involvement in the Dublin Mountains Partnership (DMP) and we are supportive of current DMP plans to increase capacity to deal with growing recreation activity in this area, to support the volunteer ranger programme and to engage in outreach and environmental education.
- h. A need for greater parking capacity is also visible in the Wicklow Mountains, particularly in the Pier Gates area. The security of parked vehicles is a concern for hillwalkers and climbers. Discussion on these issues has started through the Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Committee and Mountaineering Ireland looks forward to working with Coillte and other stakeholders on this in the period ahead.
- i. Mountaineering Ireland hosts the Get Ireland Walking programme, an initiative co-funded by Sport Ireland and Healthy Ireland to promote sustainable physical activity as a pathway to positive mental health. People’s walking experiences are more positive when off-road and in green space where nature is abundant. Nature-based programmes have been shown to be lifechanging for people, the Woodlands for Health Programme, a walking intervention for clients of mental health services is an exemplar of this. This programme started in Wicklow through Charlie Burke of Coillte, currently, there are over almost a dozen counties conducting the programme with further expansion expected in 2020. Environmental attributes support the success of the programme – through selection of accessible routes, having a bench where walkers can rest and converse, and space for lunch improves opportunity for social interaction. Participants on these programmes have returned to walk in the woodlands after the programme, using woodland walking as a mechanism to help manage their own mental health.

- j. Information points along waymarked routes in woodlands provide reassurance and promote self-efficacy for vulnerable population groups, individuals and families. Mountaineering Ireland believes that information boards and additional waymarking of routes within forests (including forests not designated as recreation sites), would be of huge benefit to Woodlands for Health participants, but would also encourage greater engagement with Coillte forests, and increased physical activity, amongst local populations.
- k. Get Ireland Walking is currently finalising a communications strategy with national partners. The Get Ireland Walking team and Mountaineering Ireland would both welcome an opportunity to work with Coillte on shared use of trails and communicating this to users. With more off-road cycling enthusiasts using the forests and trails for recreation, dangers can arise when walkers and/or families are using the amenities at the same time. Mountaineering Ireland understands that cycling off designated trails is not permitted under Coillte bye-laws, however this is happening, and there are locations where shared use could be safe. This could be achieved through a communications plan including signage at sites and use of modern communication platforms and apps. It has separately been suggested that Coillte should consider putting in walking paths alongside MTB / cycle tracks, with the example given of dual cycle / walking routes in Canada.
- l. Mountaineering Ireland wants to compliment Coillte on its support for the development of the Miners' Way route in Wicklow, and particularly how it cooperated with the local community and others to deliver this project, similarly Tyndall Mountain Club in Kilkenny have reported their positive experience of working with Coillte on the Heritage Council adopt-a-monument project at Brandon Hill. Other sites where members praised Coillte's work in relation to facilitating recreation included Gougane Barra Forest Park in Co. Cork and Clonbur Woods in Co. Galway.
- m. Concern has been expressed to Mountaineering Ireland in relation to development proposals for Ballyhoura including a café which it is feared could undermine cafés in three local villages, one within 2km of the trailhead. This could affect Coillte's relations with neighbouring communities. Small tourism and service businesses in rural areas face greater challenges than ever post Covid-19.
- n. Damage to fragile upland environments from irresponsible recreational use of off-road vehicles remains a concern to Mountaineering Ireland members in many parts of the country, most notably in the Dublin / Wicklow border area, at other locations in the Wicklow Mountains, the Galtee Mountains, the Ballyhouras, and in parts of Co. Donegal. These vehicles often gain access to the uplands through Coillte forests. Mountaineering Ireland expresses its thanks to Coillte for work carried out in Wicklow to prevent access by off-road vehicles, and also notes the welcome addition of signage with graphics to complement the Coillte bye-law signage. While not wishing to see our forests cluttered with signage, the new graphic sign is much more effective in conveying that off-road vehicle activity is not permitted. Further cooperation by Coillte personnel with the Gardaí and National Parks & Wildlife Service is likely to be required to bring this activity under control.
- o. Mountaineering Ireland appreciates that Coillte operates an open access policy for walkers and pedestrian users, however, as became evident in 2012-2013 when the Government was considering the sale of Coillte's harvesting rights, this does not provide the public with certainty of access to this land into the future. One of Mountaineering Ireland's key strategic objectives is to strive for improved and assured access for responsible hillwalkers and climbers. Within that, our aim is to work to secure a right of access to publicly-owned lands for recreation.
- p. Mountaineering Ireland notes the aim in the previous BAU plans to 'maximise revenues from licenced use of Coillte land', and that Coillte has since updated its policy on Recreational Permits and Licences. It is Mountaineering Ireland's position that those who work commercially in the provision of outdoor

recreation have a significant responsibility to those whose land they conduct their business on to ensure that a positive relationship exists and to avoid any burden or nuisance on the landowner. However, the outdoor activity sector is characterised by seasonal and part-time employment and low pay levels. In that context, Mountaineering Ireland's current policies do not support any additional rates on outdoor activity providers other than those that the State demands in taxation and by way of any future national regulation of activity providers. Many walking festivals are run on a not for profit basis by voluntary community groups to promote local tourism. Also, training providers and walking guides often use Coillte forestry for a short time to access the hills and it's not clear if they would be affected. This is an area Mountaineering Ireland would like to discuss with Coillte.

2. FOREST AND LAND MANAGEMENT

- a. Mountaineering Ireland welcomes the formation of Coillte Nature. As Ireland's largest public landowner it is very positive that in this time of climate and biodiversity crisis, Coillte has embraced its responsibility to show leadership by demonstrating transformational change in land management on the ground. The Dublin Mountains Makeover provides an excellent, high-profile flagship project for Coillte Nature.
- b. Mountaineering Ireland supports Coillte Nature's three objectives of creating and restoring biodiverse habitats; managing these for ecological and recreational value and maximising the ecosystem services they provide.
- c. While recognising that approximately 20% of Coillte's estate (90,000 hectares) is already managed for biodiversity, Mountaineering Ireland would like to see an emphasis on improving ecological practice and the delivery of ecosystem services across the entire Coillte estate.
- d. Sustainability has to be a key principle underpinning all of Coillte's new BAU plans – to quote the Coillte website: 'good forestry is all about sustainability'. However, care for the environment is not always evident on the ground, particularly during felling, when it's not unusual to see litter or oil containers lying around. Although environmental assessments may be carried out ahead of felling, it is unclear how much influence these have on environmental practice during felling. Recently we have been made aware of concerns about the possible impact of felling operations on wildlife (including red squirrels) at Castlemorris, Co. Kilkenny where harvesting has been ongoing since 2016.
- e. Mountaineering Ireland would like to see a better system for managing public access during felling, possibly with 'no entry' signage positioned close to the area being felled, rather than at the forest entrance, thus giving the impression that the entire forest is closed. It would be preferable to have temporary signage (only in place when harvesting is taking place, rather than signage left in place for many months). As some people have become so familiar with these warning signs that they ignore them, a more dynamic system might work better for all.
- f. Mountaineering Ireland members from many parts of the country have expressed a desire to see an end to clearfelling, it is hugely disruptive to the forest environment, the visual impact is dreadful and informal recreational routes (which may be heavily used) are often obliterated in the felling process. This is one of the reasons Mountaineering Ireland is so welcoming of the Dublin Mountains Makeover.
- g. Where there is clearfelling in a Coillte recreation site, and the intention is that replanting will include native species, it would be good if a paragraph could be included on felling notices saying what species will be replanted, possibly supported by some local PR activity. This might soften the blow for regular forest users when there is clearfelling of forests with a high degree of recreation activity.

- h. In light of the national climate and biodiversity emergency declared just over a year ago, Mountaineering Ireland believes that Coillte's new BAU strategic plans should include restructuring of some forests in each BAU to introduce more species diversity, as forests with a mixture of species are more resilient to disease, better for wildlife and provide better quality recreation experiences. This could be linked with actions to improve ecological resilience, protect water quality, improve carbon storage and reduce flood risk. Future plans should also include targeted actions to control invasive species, most notably rhododendron which continues to spread in certain Coillte properties and suffocates biodiversity as well as making it difficult to get through the forest.
- i. On the plus side, Coillte should do more to tell the story of what it's doing already. Many Mountaineering Ireland members are surprised to learn that 20% of Coillte's land is managed for biodiversity, it would be helpful if there was an accessible map showing which forests are being managed in this way. People generally would be unaware of the changes being made by Coillte to support biodiversity (e.g. in relation to pesticide use). The impact of the Woodlands for Health programme also deserves to be shared, and the high number of archaeological sites that are within Coillte's care goes largely unnoticed.
- j. Where windfarms are developed on Coillte land Mountaineering Ireland would like to see better landscaping of windfarm roads, and the planting of native trees or hedgerows alongside roads. Actions such as this would help to ameliorate both visual and ecological impact of such developments. Note: this comment should not be interpreted as acceptance of windfarm development. While Mountaineering Ireland is supportive of the principle of sustainable, renewable energy, inappropriate developments can industrialise upland landscapes and detract from the quality of the experience enjoyed by recreational users. Proposals need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, with respect to factors such as scale, prominence and landscape setting. Mountaineering Ireland thanks Coillte for notifying us of proposals for windfarms in upland areas and asks that this process continue under the new BAU plans.

3. STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- a. Up to a few years ago Mountaineering Ireland was represented by local members on six of Coillte's eight Social & Environmental Panels. The Social & Environmental Panels, some of which worked quite well, were disbanded and replaced in 2019 with an annual BAU Operational & Consultation Meeting. Some BAUs provided very short notice of their consultations which didn't help in terms of getting local Mountaineering Ireland members engaged. Mountaineering Ireland believes there should be some mechanism for people who are interested in what's happening in the forests in their area to be kept up to date and to have some sense of involvement. While our concern is primarily with recreational users, this is also likely to be an issue for local communities. The Covid-19 crisis and the widespread adoption of Zoom meetings, webinars etc could perhaps be of assistance in developing a new consultation model, crucially it should facilitate some degree of participant involvement, rather than simply being a reporting exercise. That said, occasional email updates would be useful between interactive sessions.
- b. It seems there have been significant organisational and personnel changes within Coillte over the last few years, this makes it difficult for the public to know who to contact. It would be helpful if an organisational chart could be made available on the Coillte website and key contacts sent to registered stakeholders (perhaps as part of an email update).

- c. Members have also reported that they find the Coillte website difficult to navigate, it might be helpful to make the Recreation Map directly accessible from the homepage, or at least to include the word 'Trails' or 'Recreation' under the 'Our Forests' tab.
- d. It was good to see that during Phase 1 of the Government's *Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business* Coillte car parks were free-of-charge to all those who live within 5km. The principle of a preferential parking rate for locals using Coillte forests is something that should perhaps be considered on an ongoing basis.
- e. Finally, a member has asked Coillte to consider marking Covid-19 by planting forests in memory of the deceased, where people could sponsor a tree, similar to the Millennium Forests project. We would be grateful if you would give this due consideration.

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* Outdoor Recreation NI survey - <http://www.outdoorrecreationni.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Engaging-with-the-Outdoors-during-COVID-19-Lockdown-in-NI-Report.pdf>