



Development of a National Outdoor Recreation Strategy

- key issues from Mountaineering Ireland's perspective

Benefits – The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy (and consultation in relation to this) should lead with the very significant benefits that outdoor recreation activities bring – including the health, wellbeing and educational benefits for participants, engagement with the natural environment, local economic benefit and employment in rural areas.

Increasing demand – Participation in many outdoor recreation activities has been growing steadily and increased further during Covid-19. Indications are that the pattern of increasing demand is set to continue. While it is positive that more people are enjoying the outdoors, the growth needs to be planned and managed.

Access – Increased participation in outdoor activities, including a growth in the commercial provision of outdoor activities, is placing greater strain on the goodwill of private landowners, especially in situations where there are no arrangements in place to permit or manage access. Concerns about access are the greatest barrier to the development of outdoor recreation activity. Comhairle na Tuaithe's Mountain Access project is built on solid principles and provides a model for managing access at local level, within a national framework. The merit of the Mountain Access model is being overlooked, possibly due to the delay in addressing the insurance / indemnity question. Upland access solutions must be complemented by improved access at lower levels, particularly through the development of a network of community trails so that people have an easy and attractive walking opportunity close to home, and by access arrangements for other outdoor recreation activities, such as rock climbing, caving and kayaking, and for other purposes such as access to heritage sites.

Quality – The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy should strive to deliver quality outdoor recreation experiences, through an emphasis on establishing and promoting standards of good practice, building expertise in all aspects of recreation management and by maintaining a focus on the user experience.. The path project commencing now at Croagh Patrick provides an example of building capacity, to produce a high standard of work which will protect the natural environment and deliver a quality experience for those using the path. Path erosion is an issue in many upland areas, there is a need to share experience and build capacity to address this.

Environment and heritage – Ireland's natural environment is limited in its extent and includes many places that are physically fragile and susceptible to damage from the impact of recreation. As a nation we have a legal and moral responsibility to protect these places and the species that live there. Similarly, there is a responsibility to respect and protect archaeology and heritage features in the countryside. The sustainable planning, management and promotion of outdoor recreation must take these factors into account.

Behaviour – We need to move towards a position where there is public buy-in to a simple contract - enjoyment of the outdoors comes with responsibility attached. Being responsible means planning your activity, having the skills and equipment you need, engaging positively with the environment and other people. This needs to be promulgated in clear and simple terms through a strong national awareness campaign across mainstream and

social media, backed up by skills sharing and development, plus signage at access points to recreation sites. Governing bodies of sport can support this process by contributing to messaging and rolling out educational programmes, but may require financial support to do so.

Investment – Meeting the increased demand for outdoor recreation in a sustainable way will require investment, not only in recreation infrastructure such as expanded parking and new trails, but in the management of recreation activity, public awareness programmes, intervention to prevent or mitigate environmental impacts and in the ongoing maintenance and renewal of existing outdoor recreation infrastructure. Strengthening and expansion of the Rural Recreation Officer network is key to managing recreation activity. High pressure areas such as Wicklow (which has approximately 2 million people living within an hour's drive) require greater investment in recreation management. Mountaineering Ireland's preference is for State investment to be focused towards small-scale sustainable projects such as walks which are free to access, rather than large-scale tourist attractions.

Legal issues – The new strategy should include a commitment to develop legal mechanisms to balance access for responsible recreational users with effective protections for landowners. Landowners should not be exposed to claims should recreational users be injured on their land; Section 4(4) of the Occupiers Liability Act may need to be amended to address this. Other necessary protections include support for landowners when something goes wrong, education for recreational users, and effective deterrents against irresponsible behaviour, including enforcement. The current lack of a legal framework does not benefit anyone.

National and Local – The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy should clarify responsibilities at national level and set out how the planning and management of outdoor recreation will be reflected locally. Local authorities should have a key role to play in coordinating action and investment, in conjunction with local development companies, all agencies with a role in outdoor recreation in the county and local recreation user groups.

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