



Access & Conservation



Ruth Hanniffy, Biodiversity Officer with Sligo County Council, talking with participants on the Environmental Walk at the recent Autumn Gathering about the importance of ecological corridors in our countryside.

Help improve recreation experiences and protect the mountains



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Mountaineering Ireland is encouraging and supporting members to input to new County Outdoor Recreation Plans

Readers of the *Irish Mountain Log* will appreciate the immense benefits to be gained from spending time outdoors and how this activity supports our social, mental and physical health.

The development of **County Outdoor Recreation Plans**, a process that is now commencing in many counties, aims to extend these benefits across society in a way that is sustainable. More than 20 counties have committed to developing an outdoor recreation plan over the coming months.

You can help ensure these plans bring positive changes by participating in the consultation for the county where you live and/or in the county where you do most of your hiking or climbing.

The preparation of County Outdoor Recreation Plans is a vital action within *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors: Ireland's National Outdoor Recreation Strategy*, led by the **Department of Rural and Community Development** in partnership with **Sport Ireland**. The new county plans should ensure that investment in outdoor recreation is strategic and aligned with local needs.

This is a key opportunity for local Mountaineering Ireland clubs and members to highlight what would make your recreation experiences better and to share positive examples that you have seen in other places.

In addition to developing new facilities, it's also important to identify where maintenance or upgrade of existing amenities is needed, and where sensitive landscapes should be protected. Your knowledge of Ireland's outdoor places can really add value to this process.

The County Outdoor Recreation Plans are being developed through a collaborative process, led by the local council, the local development company or by the local sports partnership. In most cases consultants have been engaged to support the process, especially the public consultation aspect. As participants in outdoor recreation may travel from outside the county to avail of cliffs, caves, mountains or other amenities, the process should be inclusive of both the local community and those that regularly visit the area.

A **County Outdoor Recreation Committee** will be established to oversee the implementation of the plan, and each

What is outdoor recreation?

Activities that take place in the natural environment, such as walking, canoeing, mountain biking, orienteering and wild swimming. Passive enjoyment of the outdoors is also included. A list of relevant activities and further details are included in the **National Outdoor Recreation Strategy**.

county should also form a **Stakeholder Forum** to give all interested people and organisations, including clubs that are active in the county, an opportunity to have their voice heard and to receive updates on what is happening in the county.

Things to look out for...

If you're completing a survey or participating in consultation on a County Outdoor Recreation Plan, here are some points to keep in mind:

- **Walking** should be a key focus. The **Irish Sports Monitor** shows that recreational walking is the most popular physical activity for the population in Ireland, with 69% of the population walking regularly

in 2023. **Fáilte Ireland's** research shows very strong demand for hiking amongst both domestic and overseas visitors.

- Ensure that **maintenance** is considered. The development of County Outdoor Recreation Plans could focus a lot on new infrastructure. Highlight where maintenance and upgrade of existing infrastructure is needed. Also, could recreation opportunities be enhanced by connecting existing trails?
- Try to identify the **unintended consequences**. For example, where new or additional **parking** is suggested, would that cause damage to sensitive terrain through increased footfall? In rural areas, car parks should use design and materials that fit into the landscape.
- Watch out for a tendency to rely on **signage**. In the wrong place it can detract from the landscape and people's recreation experiences. Signs should be located in car parks, on forest tracks, but not on the open mountain. Providing an agreed and annotated digital route could be a good alternative to putting waymarking in place on the ground.
- Focus on what is **best for the place**. People are drawn to wild and natural places, yet our stock of undeveloped landscape is reducing all the time. Developments for recreation and tourism should protect the landscape and natural environment.
- **Recreation management** needs more than infrastructure. Having people on the ground to engage with visitors can enhance people's experience and is more effective than signage. Also, online information is valuable so that people can choose a suitable location and be properly prepared for their activity.
- **Collaboration** should take place with neighbouring counties. This is particularly relevant where a mountain range straddles county boundaries.



Photographs: Natalia Pocolujko (main photo), Helen Lawless (walkers)



Trish Kane, Outdoor Recreation Officer in Sligo (one of six pilot officers in this role), with Helen Lawless (Mountaineering Ireland) and Deirdre Lavin, CEO Sligo Sport and Recreation Partnership, at a workshop about County Outdoor Recreation Plans during Mountaineering Ireland's Autumn Gathering in October.

Checklist for County Outdoor Recreation Plans

Check your county's outdoor recreation plan for the following:

- A succinct five-year plan that identifies priorities in the county.
- Aligns with the vision, mission and objectives of *Embracing Ireland's Outdoors*.
- Actions based on six themes: **Leadership; Environment; Awareness; Opportunities; Infrastructure and Access; Expertise**.
- Clear structures for future management of outdoor recreation in the county.
- Structures should include a Stakeholder Forum.
- Actions should include development of a community trail plan for the county (a community trail may be a short, looped walk from a town/village, or a linear route that connects a community to local outdoor spaces, or a trail that connects two different communities).

Find out more

Check www.mountaineering.ie for more information and an update on the County Outdoor Recreation Plan process in each county. Mountaineering Ireland will be hosting **Zoom meetings** to share information on County Outdoor Recreation Plans - details will be included on our **website** and in the monthly Mountaineering Ireland **e-newsletter**.

In the meantime, please email helen@mountaineering.ie or phone the Mountaineering Ireland office if you have any queries. ■

www.bit.ly/CORP-plans



Trails and hillwalking

The routes we follow as hillwalkers are sometimes referred to as **'trails'**, yet they are different in character to the trails on the **National Trails Register** - available through getirelandactive.ie. While there aren't strict definitions, it's probably best to think of 'trails' as waymarked routes, established with the agreement of landowners and where there is a trail management organisation in place. Such trails are mainly below a height of 300m.

Popular hillwalking routes, even where wear lines or erosion scars may have developed on the hills, are usually based on informal access, without any measures in place to address erosion or other issues.

In some places, such as Croagh Patrick and Errigal, **stakeholder groups** have been formed to address erosion on damaged routes through the building of mountain footpaths.

The **Mountain Access Project** (MAP), currently in place in the **MacGillycuddy Reeks**, provides a mechanism for the management of access across a busy mountain area with the agreement of landowners in the area. This model of managed access is due to be expanded to a small number of additional mountain areas in 2025.

The creation of a MAP area could be an action within some **County Outdoor Recreation Plans**. Read the guidelines for the development of a Mountain Access Project and get in touch if you think this might be relevant to your area.