

# ‘Seize the day’

Let’s shape the future of Ireland’s outdoors, writes Mountaineering Ireland board member and chair of the Hillwalking Committee **Brian Kennan**

The fresh air in our lungs, the inspiring views from a summit, the camaraderie of a shared climb – these are the experiences that define us as hillwalkers and climbers. And now, more than ever, we have a powerful opportunity to protect and enhance these experiences for ourselves and future generations. Ireland’s **National Outdoor Recreation Strategy 2023-2027** is a landmark achievement, and the momentum behind it is growing.

As the *Irish Mountain Log* has highlighted, the Covid-19 pandemic sparked a renewed appreciation for the outdoors. People flocked to the hills, appreciating the connection with nature. This surge in outdoor activity underscored the vital role our mountains, trails and crags play in our physical and mental wellbeing. The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy, aptly titled **‘Embracing Ireland’s Outdoors,’** builds on this, setting a clear vision for the future of outdoor recreation in Ireland.

The strategy prioritises responsible recreation, protection of the environment, and collaboration among stakeholders. For us hillwalkers and climbers, it offers a greater voice in the decision-making processes that affect our sport.

Mountaineering Ireland has been actively involved in shaping this strategy from the outset. **Helen Lawless**, our Access and Conservation Officer, has been instrumental in advocating for Ireland’s mountains and the needs of walkers and climbers, leveraging her extensive network and expertise to ensure our perspectives are heard. But Helen can’t do it all alone. This is where our 16,000-strong membership comes in: you can make a difference.

## Why your voice matters

The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy provides a framework for action at both national and county levels. Each county is developing its own outdoor recreation plan, reflecting the objectives of the national strategy, yet tailored to its unique landscape and community needs. These county-level plans are where the rubber meets the road, where your local knowledge and passion can have the greatest impact.

Think about the hills you frequent, the crags you love, the access issues you encounter. Your first-hand experience is invaluable. By participating in the consultation processes, you can:

- **Communicate what’s special about Ireland’s mountains.** What draws you there? What do we need to protect in these places?
- **Highlight access challenges.** Are there key areas where access for hiking or climbing is restricted? Do you see behaviours that could affect access – eg, irresponsible parking or people with dogs?
- **Advocate for maintenance and sustainable development.** Are there popular routes where erosion should be addressed? Are there opportunities to enhance recreational opportunities by connecting existing trails while protecting sensitive habitats?

“You can help shape a future where all aspects of mountaineering thrive”



Brian Kennan on the Spinc ridge overlooking Glendalough valley

## Taking action

### How you can get involved

You might be thinking, “I’m not a policy expert. What can I really contribute?” But you don’t need to be a specialist to make a difference. Here’s how you can get started:

- **Stay informed.** Visit Mountaineering Ireland’s website for updates on the National Outdoor Recreation Strategy and county-level consultations.
- **Get involved.** Participate in the consultation process in your county or in the counties where you walk or climb. Attend public meetings, submit written feedback, and make your voice heard.
- **Join the conversation online.** Share your thoughts and concerns on social media, participate in online forums, and connect with other mountaineers in your area.

## The future is in our hands

The National Outdoor Recreation Strategy is a significant step forward for outdoor recreation in Ireland. But its success depends on the active participation of all stakeholders, including you. By engaging with this process, you can help shape a future where all aspects of mountaineering thrive, where access is protected, and

where our wild places are cherished for generations to come.

Let’s seize this opportunity to make a lasting impact and ensure that these mountains remain a place of adventure for years to come. ■

► For more on County Outdoor Recreation Plans and how you can get involved, see *Access & Conservation*, page 52.

**AUTHOR:** Brian Kennan is an active hillwalker who enjoys walking, mostly in Wicklow. He is a member of the **Irish Ramblers Club**. Brian is on the board of Mountaineering Ireland and is currently chair of the Hillwalking Committee.