



**West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy:
response from Mountaineering Ireland to briefing
document for pre-draft public consultation**

December 2013

1. Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland welcomes the strategic approach being taken through the preparation of an Outdoor Recreation Strategy for the West Region. While there has been considerable development in this sector, particularly within the last decade, there is great merit in adopting a strategic and co-ordinated approach at a regional level. Mountaineering Ireland is broadly supportive of the objectives and outcomes outlined in the briefing document.

The west region provides a rich variety of recreation opportunities on land and water. From Mountaineering Ireland's perspective, this region, particularly counties Galway and Mayo, holds very special importance for walkers and climbers. People from all over Ireland and further afield are drawn repeatedly by the wild and beautiful landscapes of the west which provide a counterbalance to the busyness of everyday life, as well as opportunities for contact with nature and physical challenge.

Mountaineering Ireland agrees that there is scope to increase the social, environmental and economic benefits that flow from outdoor recreation activity in the west. Maintaining a focus on the needs of the local population will significantly enhance these benefits, particularly in terms of community spirit and health benefits. A recreation facility that is not attractive enough for locals to use it, is not going to draw tourists to an area. The corollary is that active participation by local people fosters a culture of outdoor activity which makes an area more attractive to visitors with an interest in outdoor activities. Local clubs have a valuable role to play in supporting ongoing participation in outdoor activities.

To achieve the potential benefits in this sector, it is vital that the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy is underpinned by a commitment to environmental sustainability as well as recognition of the need for investment in infrastructure, communications and recreation management.

This submission sets out Mountaineering Ireland's view on what we consider to be the key issues in order to best develop, enhance and promote outdoor recreation in the west region. Mountaineering Ireland is also willing to contribute to the further stages in the development of this strategy in the early part of 2014.

2. Mountaineering Ireland

Mountaineering Ireland is the representative body for walkers and climbers on the island of Ireland. Mountaineering Ireland is recognised as the National Governing Body for the sport of mountaineering by both the Irish Sports Council and Sport Northern Ireland. The term mountaineering refers to a wide spectrum of activities that includes walking, rambling, hillwalking, rock and ice-climbing, bouldering and alpinism. Mountaineering Ireland has over 11,500 members, comprising 161 clubs and approximately individual members (October 2013).

The work of Mountaineering Ireland includes:

- Representing the interests of walkers and climbers;
- Providing a comprehensive range of services to members;
- Improving and securing access to Ireland's mountains, hills, forests, crags, and coast;
- Promoting conservation and responsible use of the upland environment;
- Encouraging safe practice and promoting skills and leadership training.

Mountaineering Ireland is an active contributor to many national organisations involved with the management of outdoor recreation including: Comhairle na Tuaithe (the national body with responsibility for outdoor recreation); the National Trails Advisory Committee (which provides guidance to the National Trails Office); Leave No Trace Ireland (established to promote responsible outdoor recreation), and various initiatives to support and improve standards in the delivery of adventure activities.

3. The key issues

Mountaineering Ireland considers the following to be the key issues in order to best develop, enhance and promote outdoor recreation in the west region:

3.1 Protection of landscape and natural environment

The quality of the natural environment in the west is a key element in the region's attractiveness to participants in outdoor activities; there is need therefore for future plans to respect and protect that environment. Ireland has a very limited stock of undeveloped land, and we are already making both large and small changes that cumulatively are using up our wild landscapes at an alarming rate. Facilities to support recreation activity, such as the creation of new trails or the erection of marker posts, can result in suburbanisation of wild landscapes. Mountaineering Ireland urges those involved in developing the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy to maintain a focus on *enhancing opportunities* for outdoor recreation, rather than *developing facilities* for outdoor recreation. A great deal of outdoor recreation activity does not rely on built facilities, indeed built facilities can detract from the integrity of the recreation experience.

While the uplands may appear rugged in character, these areas are inherently fragile and susceptible to damage from increased usage through trampling and other impacts. Due to the growth in the popularity of hillwalking and other outdoor recreation activities, once-faint hill paths have evolved into worn and muddy lines, with the worst damage on blanket peat and steep ground. In 2012 Mountaineering Ireland launched the Helping the Hills initiative to advocate a considered, quality approach to erosion management and to ensure that interventions do not detract from the character of the upland environment. See www.helpingthehills.ie for further details.

Extensive blanket bog and higher rainfall make the hills of the west more susceptible to erosion. Although numbers are still relatively low, path erosion is becoming more evident at

points in the Twelve Bens, the Maumturk Mountains and on Mweelrea. Significant damage could result from directing large numbers of people towards the uplands and other fragile environments. As the natural environment is finite in its extent and inherently fragile, all actions within the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy should be proofed for their impact on the natural environment and wild or semi-wild landscapes.

3.2 Engagement with landowners

Most of the Irish countryside is privately owned land, including upland areas and marked walking routes. As there is no legal right of entry to private land, recreational users depend on the goodwill and tolerance of landowners. Although the vast majority of landowners continue to allow access, increased numbers, commercial activity provision, the promotion of challenge events or walking festivals, and the publication of routes (online or in the print media) all have the potential to over-stretch the goodwill we rely upon. It will be important in the development of the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy to acknowledge the ownership of land and to engage with private landowners, perhaps through the main farmers' representative organisations.

At national level, responsibility for outdoor recreation and access to the countryside rests with Comhairle na Tuaithe, which is supported by the Rural Recreation Section of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government (based in Ballina, Co. Mayo). In 2005 Comhairle na Tuaithe agreed a set of access parameters, which were later embedded as principles underpinning the National Countryside Recreation Strategy (DCRAGA, 2006, p.17). These principles provide a useful and important guiding framework for development of the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy.

One of Comhairle's initiatives to achieve greater certainty regarding access is the Mountain Access Project, which is currently being piloted in two areas, Binn Shléibhe near Clonbur, Co. Galway and the MacGillycuddy's Reeks in Co. Kerry. The Mountain Access Project seeks to secure access to a defined area through the voluntary agreement of all landowners, by agreeing entry points with the landowners, providing any necessary parking, stiles etc, providing clear information to recreational users and indemnifying landowners against any claims that might arise from recreational activity on their land. While this model has the potential to provide a solution to the difficult issue of access, the two pilots need to be completed and its feasibility needs to be tested in other upland areas. Mountaineering Ireland urges the establishment of a Mountain Access pilot on one of the main mountain areas within the west region during 2014, possibly in Connemara or south Mayo.

A National Indemnity Scheme to indemnify all private landowners against claims from recreational users has been agreed in principle by the State Claims Agency, but unfortunately its roll-out has been delayed due to staff shortages within the Rural Recreation Section. Mountaineering Ireland has appealed to Minister Hogan for this delay to be resolved early in 2014.

3.3 Encouraging responsible recreation

Outdoor recreation delivers a host of positive benefits for participants and rural areas; however there is also the potential for adverse impacts on the natural environment and the host community. Examples of such impacts include obstruction of narrow roadways with parked vehicles, damage to fences, littering, disturbance of livestock by dogs and the introduction of invasive species to lakes and rivers.

Leave No Trace Ireland was established in 2006 by a number of organisations with a shared interest in promoting responsible outdoor recreation. Leave No Trace is based on an education programme which helps people understand the impact of their activities and make better choices when they use the outdoors. See www.leavenotraceireland.org.

Advocating responsible recreation is a key issue for delivery of the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy. Mountaineering Ireland recommends the adoption of the Leave No Trace message and engagement with Leave No Trace Ireland to develop communications to address any concerns regarding recreation activity in the region.

There is a tendency amongst those promoting their area for outdoor activities to gravitate towards large outdoor activity events. While such events can attract media attention, they are expensive to arrange and need to be well-planned and well-managed so as to avoid negative social or environmental impacts. Fáilte Ireland is currently leading a Comhairle na Tuaithe project to develop guidelines for the organisation of outdoor activity events such as adventure races, walking festivals, charity cycles etc. Planning well in advance, choosing routes on robust terrain and applying the Leave No Trace approach will help prevent adverse impacts from large events.

Given the sensitivity of the natural environment in the west, and the reliance on the goodwill of private landowners, it is Mountaineering Ireland's recommendation that communicating responsible outdoor recreation should be a key theme within the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy. This should also be reflected in the values that underpin the branding of the region.

3.4 Co-ordinated implementation

Mountaineering Ireland understands that the West Regional Authority will cease to exist in May 2014. It will be important in developing the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy to consider how the strategy will be delivered. It is clear that the local authorities have a key role, but as identified in the briefing paper there are many other relevant stakeholders.

Mountaineering Ireland would like to see some arrangement for integrated management and ongoing co-ordination perhaps through an Outdoor Recreation Steering Group across the counties of Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. The Rural Recreation Officers employed by Forum Connemara, South Mayo and Roscommon Integrated Development Company have valuable experience to contribute and should be involved. Local Sports Partnerships, Coillte, the National Parks & Wildlife Service and Fáilte Ireland all have a role to play, but the insight provided by participants in outdoor recreation activities is also vital. Mountaineering Ireland

would be prepared to arrange a briefing meeting for local affiliated clubs and facilitate a process to nominate a representative(s) to a steering group to guide implementation of the strategy.

Governing bodies and clubs have a wider role to play in supporting participation in outdoor recreation activities. Enthusiasts within governing bodies and clubs provide low cost access to outdoor activities and provide a conduit for transmitting positive values to new entrants to their sport. The strategy should include acknowledgment and some support for the role which governing bodies and their affiliated clubs fulfil in enabling participation in outdoor recreation.

3.5 Maintaining standards

Outdoor recreation or adventure activities are based on managed risk-taking. While values such as adventure and self-reliance are fundamental, the development of appropriate skills helps to ensure enjoyable, safe and sustainable participation in outdoor recreation activities. Mountaineering Ireland, and the other national governing bodies for adventure activities, have over decades developed the training and award schemes which provide an enabling framework to support continuity and growth in the sector. Within mountaineering, these training schemes include Mountain Skills, Mountain Leader and Lowland Leader for walking, and the Single Pitch Award for rockclimbing. The West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy should consider how skills development will be nurtured amongst participants, leaders and commercial providers of outdoor recreation activities within the region.

Those involved in preparing the strategy should also be aware that the State, through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, is currently looking at establishing a register of activity providers.

3.6 Need for investment

There is a commonly held perception of outdoor recreation activities as being 'free'. The sustainable development, enhancement and promotion of outdoor recreation in the West Region will require significant investment, and not just investment in marketing and facilities. While 'facilities' may be required in places, capital investment will be required to protect the natural environment from the impact of recreational activity, e.g. to repair eroded upland paths. There will also be need for current investment in areas such as recreation management.

4. Specific suggestions

Mountaineering Ireland wishes to make the following suggestions at this point. Additional suggestions will be provided in the further stages of the preparation of the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy.

4.1 Suggested change to objectives for strategy

Given the inherent vulnerability of the outdoor environment and the risk-based nature of outdoor activities, Mountaineering Ireland recommends that the objective 'Promotion, education and raising awareness to increase participation' be amended and re-focused to 'Promotion, education and raising awareness to increase responsible participation'.

4.2 Low-level trails, trail links and trail maintenance

The development of low-level looped walks, suitable for families with young children, within easy access of towns and villages should be a priority within the strategy. The Irish Trails Strategy highlighted that people who have access to trails increase their activity on average by 44% (ISC, 2007, p.17).

In Co. Galway, the focus of investment in recreation development has been towards Galway city and west Galway, as a result, east and south Galway have lagged behind in terms of provision of trails and other recreation facilities. There is both need and potential for walking routes in proximity to the towns of Loughrea, Gort, Portumna, Ballinasloe and in the scenic area of the Slieve Aughty hills.

The Leenane Killary Fjord Adventure Hub Feasibility Study (Murphy, 2013, p.17) identified the scope to improve recreation experiences and increase opportunities for physical activity by linking existing trails, connecting with villages and taking sections of trail off-road. Taking a similar approach across the region could add considerable value with relatively little investment.

There should be no investment in trail development without a clear plan for the ongoing management and maintenance of the route. Some well-established routes, e.g. Tóchair Phádraig, from Ballintubber Abbey to Croagh Patrick have fallen into disrepair.

4.3 Flexible management

Greater flexibility in the management of existing facilities could improve opportunities for outdoor recreation, while not necessarily within the scope of this strategy, the climbing wall at NUI Galway is under-utilised due to issues with regard to management.

Climbing walls provide a first step towards the world of outdoor mountaineering. Climbing walls can make very efficient use of capital funds, especially where the facility is incorporated into existing buildings. The size of the wall should depend on the budget available to build and maintain it, and the demographics of the locality. Such a facility could have a bouldering wall, a roped wall or both. Examples of schools with existing walls can be found in St. Brendan's College, Killarney, Co. Kerry, and St. David's CBS, Artane, Dublin 5. An example of a community centre incorporating a climbing wall can be found in Upperchurch, Co. Tipperary.

4.4 Activity providers network

There may be more activity providers in the west than at first seems obvious. Many operate as sole-traders, working on a part-time and/or freelance basis, often without a website or other promotion. If the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy could foster networking

between activity providers, providers may identify opportunities for collaboration, cross-selling, joint marketing, learning networks etc, thereby strengthening the sector.

5. Closing comments

The great diversity and rich quality of the landscapes of the west of Ireland deliver outstanding recreation experiences. There is undoubtedly scope to improve opportunities for participation in outdoor recreation in the west region, and to increase the visibility of the activities that are already available, but any growth strategy must be underpinned by a commitment to good practice, care for the natural environment and sustained investment.

The strategic and co-ordinated approach of the West Region Outdoor Recreation Strategy is welcome. Mountaineering Ireland looks forward to receiving further communications on this project and contributing to the development of the strategy in the early part of 2014.

6. Further information

Mountaineering Ireland would be happy to elaborate on, or discuss, any of the ideas contained in this submission.

Please contact:

Karl Boyle (Chief Executive Officer)

Mountaineering Ireland, Irish Sport HQ, National Sports Campus, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15.

Telephone: 0 1 6251115

E-mail: karl@mountaineering.ie

Website: www.mountaineering.ie

7. References

DCRAGA (2006) *Comhairle na Tuaithe National Countryside Recreation Strategy*, published by the Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, available online:

<http://www.environ.ie/en/Community/RuralDevelopment/NationalRuralDevelopment/ComhairlenaTuaithe/>

ISC (2007) *Irish Trails Strategy – promoting and developing activity in the Irish Outdoors*, published by the Irish Sports Council, available online:

http://www.irishtrails.ie/National_Trails_Office/Publications/Trail_Development/

Murphy, H. (2013) *Leenane Killary Fjord Adventure Hub Feasibility Study*, published by Irish Leisure Consultants.