



Principles to guide the management of path erosion in Ireland's upland areas

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Context

Ireland's mountain areas are our largest expanses of semi-natural habitats, a huge natural asset, which we have a duty to protect for future generations. Due to Ireland's wet climate and peaty soils, continued growth in a range of recreational activities is damaging and degrading many of our mountains, with wide erosion scars becoming more common.

Drawing on similar work in Great Britain, Mountaineering Ireland has developed principles to guide the management of path erosion in Ireland's upland areas. Our intention is to advocate a considered, quality approach to erosion management and to ensure that interventions do not detract from the character of the upland environment. We will seek to have these principles adopted by organisations involved in the funding, management and repair of upland paths.

In this context a 'path' means a line that is visible on the ground, which may be manmade, but in most cases has evolved through repeated footfall. This is distinct from developed walking routes that have directional marking, that are often referred to as trails and are typically at lower levels. The geographic scope of these principles is primarily unenclosed hill and mountain land, but also includes other semi-natural areas such as land along the coast. For the purpose of this document these areas are referred to collectively as 'uplands'.

Ireland's upland areas are mainly privately owned land; made up of commonages with multiple shareholders and individually owned land parcels. With the continued growth in outdoor recreation, a mechanism is needed to collectively agree how recreation should be managed. A forum in each upland area for negotiation between landowners, recreational users and other upland stakeholders could address issues to do with parking, disturbance of livestock and upland path erosion, as well as looking at how recreation could deliver benefit to the area. Mountaineering Ireland supports the establishment of local fora with a focus on the sustainable management of upland areas.

Mountaineering Ireland commits to engaging with members to promote responsible and sustainable enjoyment of Ireland's uplands, to build understanding of upland path issues and to encourage members' involvement in efforts to address this and other recreation management issues.

Principles

Communications

1. Management of upland paths should be informed by consultation with all stakeholders, including landowners, recreational users, relevant statutory bodies and the local community.
2. Signage and other communications about upland pathwork should emphasise that the work is being carried out to protect the natural environment.
3. Information on the responsible and sustainable use of upland paths should be available to all users.

Ethos

4. All those who go into the uplands, whether individually or as part of a group, have a responsibility to minimise the impact of their activities on the natural environment.
5. Upland pathwork should be carried out within a coherent and agreed management framework, which establishes the rationale for works, their relative importance and includes a commitment to long-term maintenance.
6. Path repair or construction in the uplands should only be carried out when this is necessary to protect the environment.
7. Any work carried out should strive for minimum impact on the essentially wild character of the landscape.
8. The more remote the path, the more stringently the criteria for path repairs should be applied. This will be a matter of judgment, but in general, the more remote or wild the location, the less acceptable an overly engineered path will be.
9. Those involved in the design, implementation and supervision of upland pathwork should preferably be technically competent and suitably experienced.
10. Private landowners must be involved in decision-making regarding erosion management on their land; however they should not be expected to bear the cost of repairing paths that have been eroded through recreational use.
11. A sustained commitment of resources to upland path management will be sought, so that small scale continuous maintenance can become the norm, with the aim of preventing the need for major repairs.

Practice

12. Pathwork should be of the highest standard of design and implementation, normally using locally sourced materials in harmony with the site. The best or most sensitive solution and quality of work should always be sought, not necessarily the cheapest.
13. Good environmental practice is paramount. Techniques used should protect existing vegetation and cultural remains and the site should be left in as natural a state as is practicable.
14. The addition of intrusive features such as fences, waymarkers and cairns should be avoided.
15. Machines can provide valuable assistance in upland pathwork; however they must be used sensitively and appropriately by a skilled operator. The use of machines should be in accordance with all other principles.
16. It should be an objective in any upland path work to train and upskill local people with a view to establishing a long-term skills and employment base, although it may be necessary to bring in workers with relevant expertise from outside the area.