



Causeway Coast and Glens Outdoor Recreation Action Plan

Consultation response from Mountaineering Ireland

August 2014

1. Introduction

Mountaineering Ireland, as the representative body for walkers and climbers, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of an Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for the Causeway Coast and Glens area. The study area is important to walkers and climbers due to the quality of the landscape and the breadth of opportunities for participating in different aspects of our sport. Development of this action plan is particularly timely with the transfer of powers to the new Causeway Coast and Glens District Council in April 2015.

Outdoor recreation primarily relies on the natural environment rather than developed facilities. People are drawn to wild and beautiful landscapes as a counterbalance to modern life, for contact with nature, and for a physical challenge. As people's lives become busier and more structured, the sense of escape and renewal that comes from connecting with nature is becoming more important to human well-being. Respect for semi-natural landscapes and care for the natural environment should therefore be guiding principles in the development of this action plan.

Improved access to the hills, coast and countryside is the most fundamental need for participants in outdoor recreation activities in Northern Ireland. The growth in outdoor recreation activities is increasing pressure on informal access arrangements; achieving a more sustainable solution must be a priority for Northern Ireland and for the action plan.

This submission has three main sections: Section 3 deals with the importance of the study area for walking and climbing activities; Section 4 addresses current issues; and Section 5 considers opportunities for improvement and development.

Mountaineering Ireland presumes that the Causeway Coast and Glens Action Plan will align with the Vision and Actions in *Our Great Outdoors: The Outdoor Recreation Action Plan for Northern Ireland (Sport NI, 2014)*.

2. Mountaineering Ireland

Mountaineering Ireland is the representative body for walkers and climbers on the island of Ireland. Mountaineering Ireland's mission is to represent and support the walkers and climbers of Ireland and to be a voice for the sustainable use of Ireland's mountains and hills and all the places (coastline, crags, forests) we use.

Mountaineering Ireland is recognised as the National Governing Body for the sport of mountaineering by both Sport Northern Ireland and the Irish Sports Council. 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 1350 individual members (October 2013).

3. Walking and climbing in the study area

3.1 Rockclimbing

Fair Head is Northern Ireland's premier rockclimbing location and reputed to provide the best climbable rock anywhere in Britain or Ireland. The crag stretches for approximately 5km with hundreds of steep routes, many at a height of 100m. Fair Head's reputation and following have grown steadily since the first routes were climbed in the mid-1960s. More recently the extensive boulder field below the crag has drawn people for bouldering (climbing short technical routes without the need for ropes and harnesses).

For the past five years Mountaineering Ireland has hosted an annual climbing meet at Fair Head, which attracts 150 – 180 people for the first weekend in June with a number of participants travelling from other parts of the UK. The event is hosted in co-operation with a local private landowner, who provides space for parking, camping and the use of one of his sheds for talks and slide shows. Mountaineering Ireland provides Portaloos for the event. This event has built considerable goodwill and demonstrates respectful and responsible recreation.

The significance of Fair Head is underlined by the publication in 2014 of the 6th edition of Mountaineering Ireland's Fair Head rockclimbing guide. This attractive publication complements the Fair Head Bouldering Guide published in 2012.

Dunseverick, to the east of the Giant's Causeway has over 80 recorded climbing routes, with many in the easier grades and consequently is a popular area. Some years ago climbing at Dunseverick was banned due to concern about possible impact on nesting birds. This was resolved through negotiation with the National Trust and each spring Mountaineering Ireland reminds climbers of the need to avoid disturbance of nesting birds at this and other crags. Smaller crags such as **Runkerry Point** to the west of the Giant's Causeway, **Ramore Head** close to Portrush and **Garron Point** near Carnlough are all important for local schools, colleges and youth groups.

Ballygalley Head which is four miles north of Larne is important due to its proximity to Belfast. Unfortunately it has been closed to climbing for many years due to liability fears on the part of the occupiers, Ballygalley Golf Club. Mountaineering Ireland is currently engaged in negotiations to secure resumed climbing at Ballygalley.

3.2 Walking

Recreational walking takes place at a huge number of locations within the study area. While the more visible activity is on formal routes such as the Causeway Coast Way, a great deal of activity, particularly amongst walking clubs across the Antrim Hills and the Glens and along the coast, is based on informal or *de facto* access.

As well as being popular with walking clubs, the Antrim Hills are used extensively by Duke of Edinburgh's (DofE) Award groups for expedition training, practice and assessment. The

majority of groups are from schools, youth clubs and youth organisations in the North Eastern Education and Library Board's area but the area is also used by groups from all over Northern Ireland and further afield.

4. Issues which hinder activity

4.1 Landscape and environment

The Causeway Coast and Glens area is a fragile living landscape. The ongoing process of coastal erosion is clearly evident, but the landscape is also sensitive to the pressure of human impacts. There is a very delicate balance between responsible and sustainable recreation, and exploitation through over-use or development, which will destroy the landscape and the experience that attracts people to the area. The undeveloped coastal landscape in the study area is a precious resource which must be managed wisely so as to retain its character for the benefit of future generations.

The landscape and environment at Fair Head are of outstanding quality. Due to the expansive and natural or semi-natural character of the landscape, this is an area which is highly sensitive to change. Any development in the area should be low-key to protect the relatively wild character of the landscape.

Most people would recognise the recent proposal to develop a golf course close to the Giant's Causeway as an unacceptable change to the landscape. However, the cumulative impact of many smaller changes in an undeveloped landscape - the upgrading of a track, a new fence, or an additional sign - is, over time, also significant.

The lack of a legislative basis for Northern Ireland's eight Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), and the absence of secure funding, prevent the current AONB management bodies from proactively and holistically engaging in landscape protection and recreation management.

4.2 Access

The shortcomings in Northern Ireland's access legislation represent a significant constraint to the development of outdoor recreation, a fact acknowledged in *Our Great Outdoors*. While the Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 provides a range of mechanisms to improve public access to the countryside, the procedures involved are cumbersome and the legislation doesn't place any obligation on councils to create and maintain an access infrastructure in their areas. As a result, the legislation has failed to secure meaningful access in the 31 years to date.

There are access difficulties throughout the study area, affecting both formal and informal walking routes as well as the climbing sites as already mentioned.

The closure of sections of the Causeway Coast Way affects the quality of the route and therefore detracts from the experience of tourists and recreational users. As an example the section between Dunseverick Harbour and Portbradden has been closed since a landslide and rockfalls early in 2012. Despite being accorded the highest priority in the Causeway Coast Way Strategic Path Review no repair work has been carried out (report published December 2012 by Outdoor Recreation NI). Walkers are missing out on an interesting and attractive section of this route and instead are forced to use the road.

The north east Antrim coast, from Torr Head to Glenariff, offers excellent scope for quality coastal walking and appreciation of the landscape and sea views, but due to the lack of any access agreement, that section of the Ulster Way is currently along the road.

Access presents a challenge for DofE and other youth groups. While some landowners are supportive by facilitating access and allowing camping on their land, others refuse to permit this due to fear of litigation, and concern about littering or damage to fences. The Forest Service is no longer allowing wild camping on forest property which has prevented responsible groups from using a number of popular, but informal camping areas. The Youth Camp Site in Glenariff, which included a building with showers, toilets, washing up facilities and a common room, is closed up and no longer in use, forcing youth groups to use the public caravan site which is less than ideal.

Mountaineering Ireland clubs from other parts of Ireland report a perception of access difficulty in the Antrim Hills which has discouraged them from visiting the area for walking breaks. Access difficulties also make the area unattractive for commercial guiding activity, depriving the area of the accommodation and hospitality business that accompanies these activities. Unfortunately the issue of access is more than a perception problem, with one experienced member familiar with the area describing the Antrim Glens as a minefield of access problems.

Even where landowners are agreeable to informal access, there is usually nothing to indicate that walkers are welcome. This lack of clarity presents a difficulty for walkers, especially those less familiar with the area. For example, the presence of fences between the Moyle Way and Trostan, Antrim's highest mountain, creates the impression that access may not be permitted.

4.3 Path erosion and environmental damage

Path erosion is becoming evident in popular areas, e.g. on the informal walking route between Murlough Bay and Fair Head. Dumping, quad bike and scrambler bike damage are also current issues in the study area, particularly in the Antrim Glens.

5. Opportunities for improvement

5.1 Recreation management

The formation of the new Causeway Coast and Glens District Council creates an opportunity to put in place new arrangements for outdoor recreation management within the Council area. The development of this action plan is well-timed to guide this function.

Coherence in management across the enlarged area, a proactive approach to the maintenance of existing routes and facilities, and a determination to improve opportunities for people to engage in outdoor recreation would make appropriate pillars within the action plan.

The action plan, and future recreation management in the area, should be guided by the values that underpin outdoor recreation activities – values such as adventure, skills development, responsibility for one’s actions and respect for the natural environment.

5.2 Landscape and environment

Mountains, coastal headlands and other natural landscapes provide a stable backdrop to our constantly changing urban or suburban environment. For many people the appeal and value of wild areas lies in their natural and unplanned character. The landscape itself is often the only facility that people need for recreation. Most wild landscapes are best left alone and not managed like a public park. The action plan should include a firm commitment to respect and protect the landscape and natural environment in the study area.

There is a clear affinity between recreation management and natural resource management, e.g. in improving opportunities for access, addressing issues to do with parking, interpretation and maintenance. The protection of Northern Ireland’s landscape and natural environment could be significantly advanced by putting AONBs on a statutory footing and providing them with sufficient resources to be effective in the integrated management of their respective areas.

5.3 Access

Undoubtedly the greatest barrier to delivering meaningful improvement in opportunities for people to engage in outdoor recreation is the current access situation. Current local government reform provides the perfect opportunity to adjust and strengthen Northern Ireland’s access legislation.

This action plan should also seek the commitment of the new Causeway Coast & Glens Council to exercising its powers under the 1983 Access Order to enter into formal access agreements so as to secure access to key areas and routes in the study area.

While there is currently no difficulty regarding access to Fair Head, neither is there certainty regarding access in the future. It should be a priority within the action plan to secure long-term access to Fair Head for climbers and walkers.

There is need for robust access agreements and binding management agreements for both the Causeway Coast Way and the Moyle Way.

5.4 Education

The development and promotion of outdoor recreation should always incorporate education. There are many dimensions to this.

Responsible participation - There is an ongoing need to encourage responsible participation in outdoor recreation; challenging people to reduce the impact of their activities on the natural environment and other people, communicating the risk that is inherent in the outdoors and nurturing skills development amongst participants. The Leave No Trace programme provides a positive vehicle for fostering this approach, with the added advantage that a single responsible recreation message is used across the island (www.leavenotraceireland.org).

Walking groups - Members in the study area report growing interest in walking and the existence of embryonic walking groups. Typically these groups lack the skills, knowledge and confidence to walk off the road. The action plan should include a programme to actively engage with such groups. Support and training should be made available to introduce groups to walks in their area, to provide basic skills training and to address concerns around injuries, insurance etc. This could be based on *Get Ireland Walking*, *Walking In Your Community* or a similar local programme. The new Lowland Leader Award should be built into the programme as this is recognised across the UK and Ireland as the award for those leading groups on day walks in lowland countryside and woodland. This would deliver health and well-being benefits through social contact and regular physical activity, as well as enabling people to get the most from their local environment.

Heritage awareness - The study area has a rich endowment of natural, built and cultural heritage. Any new recreation development should incorporate some element of environmental or heritage awareness as this feeds into respect for the facilities and the natural environment. There is also scope for themed trails, e.g. archaeology at Knockdhu, geology around the fossil beds near Larne etc.

Stewardship - Recreational users can assist in protecting the landscape and environment through reporting problems such as dumping and off-road vehicle activity. The Council should encourage people to report these activities and provide details of who to report to.

5.5 Risk management

Mountaineering Ireland strongly recommends that the management of outdoor recreation and future development in the Causeway Coast and Glens area are informed by the Visitor

Safety in the Countryside Guiding (VSCG) Principles and the tiered approach in the VSCG Risk Control Matrix (see <http://vscg.co.uk/guiding-principles>).

The coastal environment is inherently dynamic ; there are areas which could never be made safe (e.g. the boulder field to the west of Murlough Bay) but there are also wonderful paths which have been closed due to disproportionate safety concerns (e.g. the lower path between the Giant's Causeway and the Amphitheatre). The sense of freedom and adventure in a natural landscape should be retained by advising people of the character of the terrain and the nature of the risk. Paths should only be closed when this is absolutely necessary.

5.6 Other developments

Walking trails - The need to provide better opportunities for walking at a low level is evidenced through the frequency with which one sees people walking on roads throughout the study area. A programme to support the development of short looped walks in the vicinity of towns and villages would increase the opportunity for people to be active in their community and would also enhance the experience of visitors. These routes should be robust without exposure to hazards and without the ecological impact that large numbers can bring in more fragile environments.

In addition to striving to get sections of existing walking routes off-road, there is scope to complement the existing marked walking routes in the area by developing a coastal walking route in east Antrim, between Torr Head and Glenariff. This would make an excellent flagship project within the action plan, and would significantly enhance the Ulster Way. There are many visitors to the study area, particularly Americans, French and German, for whom coastal scenery delivers a very special experience.

Agreed access points - A project to agree and discreetly mark access points for hillwalkers and provide stiles at appropriate fence crossings would counter the perception that the Antrim Hills and Glens are closed by highlighting those points where walkers are welcome. This would enable greater enjoyment of the Antrim Hills by walking clubs, independent walkers and youth groups. In return an indemnity or insurance arrangement should be provided for participating landowners (an indemnity for landowners is currently being put in place as part of a pilot Mountain Access Project in the Republic of Ireland – further details can be provided if required) . Hillwalkers do not require marked walking routes and prefer the experience of making their own way in a natural or semi-natural landscape. A similar project to identify points where access to the coast is permitted would be hugely valuable.

Managing Forest Service lands for recreation - The arrangement recently put in place in forest parks such as Tollymore and Castlewellan, where the council has assumed responsibility for recreation management and development, provides a positive model for Glenariff, Ballypatrick and possibly other Forest Service sites in the study area. This would complement the council's role in recreation and tourism and should enable greater recreational benefit to be derived from these important assets. It should be stressed though that any development should be on a scale which is appropriate to the setting and focused

on protecting the environment and delivering a quality recreational experience, rather than seeking to attract large numbers.

Path management – A small team trained to carry out low key ‘stitch-in-time’ path repair work on an ongoing basis would reduce or prevent the need for larger capital works. This work should be guided by the Helping the Hills principles (www.helpingthehills.ie).

Toilet facilities - A programme of funding to provide sensitively designed, eco-friendly toilet facilities at busy visitor sites such as Fair Head would also help to alleviate pressure on the fragile environment in the study area.

6. Closing remarks

Mountaineering Ireland appeals to those involved in the development of the Causeway Coast and Glens Outdoor Recreation Action Plan to take a visionary and long-term view so as to optimise future opportunities for people to enjoy authentic outdoor recreation experiences.

Difficulty regarding access for outdoor recreation activities is a very significant constraint to future growth in this area and must be addressed as a priority. While there are deficiencies within the current access legislation which need to be addressed, there is also scope for the new Council to exercise its existing powers to secure access to key areas and routes.

It will be important that the action plan strives to protect the integrity of the natural environment of the Causeway Coast and Glens area and to avoid further ‘suburbanisation’ of this special landscape. Maintaining a focus on enhancing opportunities for outdoor recreation, rather than developing facilities for outdoor recreation should be helpful in this regard.

A pro-active and co-ordinated approach to recreation management and implementation of the action plan is essential, led by either the Causeway Coast and Glens District Council or a strengthened AONB for the area. Finally, Mountaineering Ireland asks to be notified of any meetings of the Causeway Coast and Glens Outdoor Recreation Forum because of the importance of this area to our members.

7. 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, Sport HQ, National Sports Campus, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15.

Telephone: 00 353 1 6251115

E-mail: karl@mountaineering.ie

Website: www.mountaineering.ie