

# SHAPING THE FUTURE OF IRELAND'S MOUNTAINS AND UPLAND AREAS

As the representative body for walkers and climbers on the island of Ireland, Mountaineering Ireland is committed to being a voice for the sustainable use of Ireland's mountains and upland areas. **Helen Lawless** reports.

Last year, Mountaineering Ireland initiated a process to develop its vision for the future of Ireland's mountains, with many members contributing to the development of the vision below. You can become involved now by sharing some of the ideas and information from this article.

Mountaineering Ireland's vision is that Ireland's mountain landscapes will be valued and protected as environmental, cultural and recreational assets.

## Overview

Mountaineering Ireland members have a strong connection with Ireland's mountains and upland areas, and respect for the people who own the land and others who live and work there. Members also recognise the many social, economic and environmental challenges facing Ireland's upland areas.

A healthy upland environment provides many benefits to society, including better water quality, carbon storage, space for biodiversity, scenic landscapes and, of course, the provision of opportunities for recreation.

Mountaineering Ireland emphasises the need for an integrated approach to supporting upland areas, with policy measures focused on protecting upland landscapes, maintaining communities and rewarding sustainable farming practices.

Mountaineering Ireland encourages its



Ireland possesses 8% of the world's blanket bogs, an important resource in a global context. The greater part of this is in upland areas.

clubs and individual members to celebrate Ireland's mountains and upland areas, to show that these areas are special and worthy of greater attention and investment, and that they must be conserved and looked after for the benefit of future generations.

Mountaineering Ireland's vision will be achieved by:

- Engaging with policymakers to secure the policies and resources required for the long-term protection and management of Ireland's mountains and upland areas;
- Working in collaboration with landowners, upland communities and other relevant organisations;
- Celebrating the benefits that society gains from Ireland's uniquely special mountain environment;
- Encouraging all to have respect and care for these fragile places and the people who live and work there.

## The importance of Ireland's mountains and upland areas

Although Ireland's mountains are not high by international standards, Ireland's diverse geology has bestowed us with a rich variety of mountain and upland

landscapes, all with strong regional distinctiveness.

Most of Ireland's mountains and upland areas are privately-owned, either by individuals or jointly as commonage. The primary land use across most of Ireland's upland areas is low-intensity farming. However, this is increasingly under threat due to low average farm income, the increasing age profile of farmers and changes in hill farming practices.

In the vast majority of situations, recreational users enjoy unhindered access to Ireland's mountains and upland areas, due to the goodwill and tolerance of the landowner. However, the growth in tourism and recreational activity is exerting ever greater pressure on this unmanaged situation.

Every person living on the island of Ireland gains benefits from Ireland's mountains and upland areas. The benefits enjoyed by hillwalkers and climbers are extensive, including adventure, physical challenge, camaraderie, the acquisition of skills and connection with nature. For some, the mountains provide an antidote to pressurised urban living; others find that the mountains provide mental and spiritual solace. The many ways that Ireland's mountains and upland areas benefit those who do not even visit these places are less apparent, but nonetheless significant.



➤ **Helen Lawless** is Mountaineering Ireland's Hillwalking, Access & Conservation Officer.



## 9 reasons to care for Ireland's mountains and upland areas

### 1 Defining features in the landscape and vital areas of relatively wild land

Within the context of the island of Ireland, mountains and upland areas are very significant elements of the landscape, which contribute to our sense of place and provide a stable backdrop to a constantly changing urban or suburban environment.

### 2 High-quality places for passive and active recreation

Ireland's mountains inspire, shape and enrich the recreation experiences enjoyed by hillwalkers and climbers, bringing mental and physical health benefits. The quality of the environment and the quality of the recreational user's experience are inextricably linked, as shown in the graphic below.



The most popular responses when Mountaineering Ireland members at six regional meetings were asked 'What makes Ireland's mountains special?'

### 3 Influenced by centuries of farming activity

The distinctive landscapes of Ireland's upland areas are the product of many centuries of traditional and extensive farming practices. Right up to the summits of our highest mountains, these lands have been influenced by farming activity.

### 4 Beautiful scenery and its importance for tourism

Fáilte Ireland's annual Visitor Attitudes Surveys consistently show that the friendliness of the people, the beautiful scenery and the natural, unspoilt environment are the main factors that influence overseas visitors in choosing Ireland as their holiday destination.



Ireland's mountains provide quality recreation experiences, which enhance people's physical and mental wellbeing.

### 5 Living, lived-in landscapes

Ireland's mountains and upland areas are living landscapes, home to people who have a resourcefulness born of coping with remoteness and poorer services. With appropriate support measures, these attributes provide opportunities for continued vitality within upland communities.

### 8 Carbon storage in peat soils

Peat soils cover 20.6% of Ireland's land area, with the greater part of this in the form of blanket bog in upland areas. Ireland's blanket bogs are a huge carbon store and have an important function in controlling the greenhouse gases that cause climate change.

### 9 Significant built and cultural heritage

Ireland's upland landscapes contain some of the best-preserved examples of our archaeological heritage. These physical remains are complemented by written and oral accounts of worship and legend, in some cases extending back thousands of years.

It is Mountaineering Ireland's position that Ireland's upland areas are vital natural assets which should be wisely managed for societal benefit through appropriate planning and landowner involvement, in a way which ensures ecological integrity and the maintenance of these cherished natural landscapes.

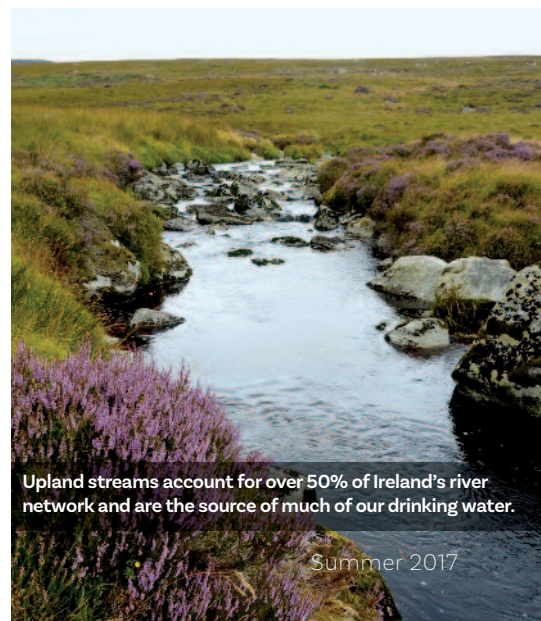
**FIND OUT MORE:** A more detailed version of Mountaineering Ireland's future vision and this statement about the importance of Ireland's mountains and upland areas is available online at <http://bit.ly/2sI9sxU> ■

### 6 Repositories of biodiversity

Ireland's mountains and uplands form our largest expanses of semi-natural habitats and are of major conservation importance. Many upland habitats and species are protected under EU legislation.

### 7 Drinking water and flood mitigation

Almost 82% of Ireland's drinking water comes from surface water, i.e. rivers and lakes, which in turn have their origin in upland areas. Upland habitats in favourable condition have greater capacity for absorption of rainfall, thus slowing the flow of water to areas downstream.



Upland streams account for over 50% of Ireland's river network and are the source of much of our drinking water.