Principles

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

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 in part to Ireland's wet climate and peaty soils, continued growth in outdoor recreation activities is impacting on many of our mountains, with deep and wide eroded paths becoming more common.

The purpose of the Helping the Hills initiative is to advocate a considered, quality approach to managing this erosion and to ensure that interventions do not detract from the character of the upland environment. It is hoped that Helping the Hills will become a network of people and organisations sharing experience and learning in the funding, management and repair of upland paths.

In the context of these draft principles 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 normally at lower levels. The geographic scope of these principles is primarily unenclosed hill and mountain land, typically found above 300m, 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 incorporate state-owned and privately-owned land; with the privately-owned land being made up of commonages with multiple shareholders and individually owned land parcels. With the continuing growth in outdoor recreation activity, mechanisms may be needed to collectively address the sustainable management of upland areas, and to tackle issues arising from recreation activity such as parking, disturbance of livestock and upland path erosion.

It is hoped that through the Helping the Hills initiative a shared approach to the management of upland path erosion can be achieved through adoption of these 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. When path repair work is in progress, temporary signage and other communications should explain 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 obviously 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 have to 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 multi-annual 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, and this should be reflected in the public procurement process.

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. This is particularly important in areas designated for nature conservation or landscape value.

14. The addition of intrusive features such as fences, waymarkers, inappropriate signage 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.

The first draft of these principles emerged from the Helping the Hills conference in Glendalough, September 2012. This version incorporates amendments which arose from discussion in two workshops at the Helping the Hills seminar in Dublin on 14th November 2013. The seminar was attended by over 50 people, drawn from a variety of backgrounds who shared an interest in land management, outdoor recreation and path repair.