

Managing Outdoor Sports

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MANAGING OUTDOOR SPORTS IS SOMEWHAT LIKE HERDING CATS.

Cat herding would be a very highly skilled profession that requires concentration, dexterity, the ability to perform small miracles and the setting of completely unrealistic targets.

Cats are very distinctive characters – you never own a cat – in fact they probably own you and they are autonomous, self determined, single minded creatures. They are not unlike the very autonomous, self determined, single minded creatures that we call outdoor sports enthusiasts an managing them is about as easy as herding cats.

Northern Ireland is a small country that is part of the United Kingdom – but has obviously strong links with the Republic of Ireland. Some facts and figures are important for understanding the context of managing outdoor sports:

- Size 13,840 km²
- Population 1,810,900 (2011)
- Lough Neagh – 391km²
- Lough Erne – 140km²
- Strangford Lough – 150km²
- 8% (1100km²) is Heather Moorland

While Northern Ireland is not a big place it does have lots of water – the largest sea Lough and the largest freshwater lake in the British Isles and over 350 miles of beautiful coastline. Even where there is land there's water – as over 8% of the land is moorland which is effectively wet for most of the year holding vast amounts of water.

There are no National Parks in Northern Ireland but there are seven “Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) across Northern Ireland which are fantastic landscapes that are highly valued by wildlife and also by people for recreation. In the West we have rolling hills and mountains and extensive forests that are slowly being developed for mountain biking, on the North Coast there are fantastic geological features including the Giants Causeway (and the only real way to see it properly is from the sea in a kayak) and then in the South we have the Mourne Mountains. Not high by European standards (all less than 1000m – but they rise straight out of the sea and are a mecca for climbers and hill-walkers.

It all sounds idyllic and too good to be true.....and it is. We have really weak access legislation which enables local councils to develop public rights of way and access – but does not require them to. Further the land owning patterns in Northern Ireland are different from that in other parts of the UK as most farms are small scale, occupier owned and the land is held very close the heart. There are 26 local authorities across this small area who are for the most part insular looking and we have very limited financial and staff resources to develop outdoor sports.

A new post was created in 2006 within Sport Northern Ireland to manage funding and support outdoor sports in recognition of the (at that time anecdotal) increase in participation in outdoor sports and the growing issues involved in the management of it.

So early in 2008 SNI commissioned 2 reports to try to get a handle on the scale of participation in these activities. The last data set that there was in Northern Ireland on the scale of participation was in 1995 and it was somewhat lacking in data. The first report carried out was into the trends in 23 distinct outdoor sports between 1995 and 2008, and then a second one into walking, cycling and horse riding as these activities warranted a separate study due to their scale. Sports involving engines were excluded as was angling as the scale of angling warranted as study in its own right but an economic impact study of angling was being carried out by another organisation.

So while in Northern Ireland there are increasing concerns about rising levels of obesity and corresponding falling participation in sport – there are significant increases in use of the natural environment by participants engaged in outdoor sport and recreation. While that is very positive – it was starting to put pressure on land management bodies and national federations who were trying to manage this.

Sport Northern Ireland is focused on 2 distinct areas of work: improving performance and increasing participation. The focus of the work in developing and managing outdoor sports is on increasing participation although this has not been exclusively the case. As such there is engagement with a great range of organisations to try to achieve this.

However, it has been important to acknowledge that participation in outdoor sports is not sufficient in itself, it has become increasingly apparent that there is a real need to develop participation that is both sustainable and responsible.

One of the really important organisations for the delivery of this increase in participation that is core funded by SNI is Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (ORNI). ORNI was established by a range of government departments in 1999 following the 1998 Countryside Recreation Strategy. ORNI was established to bring together key stakeholders for outdoor and countryside recreation, to disseminate information and to develop and improve access and facilities for outdoor sports.

Sport NI also supports the National Governing Bodies for outdoor sports. Some of these have a strong focus on high performance sport such as the Olympic disciplines of equestrianism and canoeing – but others such as orienteering and mountaineering are much more participation focused.

Mountain and cave rescue is the statutory responsibility of the police in NI but they rely very heavily on voluntary rescue teams that we support both from a financial but also a technical point of view.

The development of policies and undertaking appropriate research is critical part to have a sound evidence base for decision making and investment. Two or three pieces of research that to be undertaken are identified at the start of each year with a business case and the terms of reference being prepared. While a budget at the start of the year to carry them out may not exist - if funding comes available everything is ready for the research to be undertaken.

One of the big growth areas in Northern Ireland is activity tourism with a plethora of new businesses being created in the past 10 years offering all sorts of adventure experiences on a commercial basis. This growth is in the absence of any form of regulation or control and so there was increasing concern within government that a serious accident or incident would be politically untenable but would also be very negative for this new industry. Sport NI was therefore tasked with developing a scheme that would check and ensure that activity providers had suitable safety systems and procedures and operated to recognised standards. A UK wide scheme called “Adventuremark” has been adopted and is being implemented to meet this need. Sport NI provides workshops and seminars on how to develop best practice systems and procedures and also provides a funding scheme for activity providers to go through Adventuremark.

It is critical that the interests of sport and recreation users are represented on the various committees, forums and networks to try and ensure that there is always a voice for outdoor sports.

Voluntary clubs are supported through the provision of small grants, advice and support for their development.

The 1998 Countryside Recreation Strategy was a first for Northern Ireland and was partly responsible for the growth in outdoor sports. In 2010 a review of this strategy was carried out as it was 12 years old and this noted that many aspects of it had been fulfilled but that as much had changed politically and economically since then it was time to renew it.

In 1998 Northern Ireland was just emerging from the troubles and activity tourism did not exist, access for people with disabilities was not as high on the agenda and the economic growth was good.

So over the past 2 years a new outdoor recreation action plan has been worked on for Northern Ireland which while being led by Sport Northern Ireland is a partnership involving the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, the Inland Waterways Branch of the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

The Action plan vision is

“Developing, managing and promoting a dynamic culture of sustainable outdoor recreation in Northern Ireland.”

To achieve this vision the aim is for Northern Ireland to be a place where:

- There are increasing opportunities and improved access and infrastructure for sustained and increased participation by all in the broadest possible range of outdoor recreation activities.
- There are accompanying benefits to communities in terms of health, social cohesion and economic development.
- People enjoy the outdoors and show a high degree of responsibility for themselves, towards others and the environment they are using and play their part in maintaining, supporting and enhancing that environment.

It is about people, places, demonstrating benefits and all about responsibility and sustainability in the broadest sense.

Outdoor recreation is has many aspect and so when developing the plan these needed to be factored in (Fig.1).



Fig. 1 Outdoor recreation

An extensive consultation was carried out to get feedback from as many organisations as possible including national governing bodies, local councils, policy makers in central government, protected area managers, environmental bodies, tourism bodies and then the users and public at large. These took a considerable amount of time but were hugely beneficial and even of themselves have created new developments whereby users and land managers were brought together for a common purpose.

As a result of the consultation seven significant issues kept arising and right at the top was the concern about the poor access legislation in Northern Ireland. However, lots of concerns were raised about the issues of liability and responsibility and also safety. The main issues therefore were:

1. Access law
2. Liability & Safety
3. Environmental impact and degradation
4. Communication
5. Funding
6. Economic growth
7. Facilities

During the consultation, people were asked not only what the key issues were but what they believed were the potential solutions

Following the consultation process all the information on these issues and solutions was distilled down

to 34 key actions that captured all the main suggestions. The actions then were placed into groups which resulted in seven main themes.

In November 2012 the final recommendations and actions were released for a final statutory 12 week consultation process and this can be accessed at www.sportni.net/about_us/consultations

The first section of the draft plan is to put in place new structures that will ensure that the plan is achieved. The national strategy for sport in Northern Ireland is called “Sport Matters” and this has been signed up to by the Northern Ireland Executive which requires all departments to contribute to it. It was agreed early in the process that the Outdoor Recreation Action Plan would sit under this strategy for sport and use the same reporting mechanisms.

A new Strategic Partnership between all the relevant government departments who have a responsibility for outdoor recreation or its impacts needed to be formed. This group needs to be empowered by their departments to deliver relevant actions.

Underneath that and yet holding it to account would be a National Forum for outdoor recreation. This has been articulated as being really needed to create a unified voice for change and development across what is actually a fairly disparate sector. This group would be made up of non-governmental bodies and therefore is free to lobby and articulate the need for change. The Department of Environment that is re-

sponsible for the Access legislation does not believe that there is a need for change as they do not hear that call clearly articulated. This forum may be the mechanism to make that happen.

Finally feeding into this would be a range of local outdoor recreation forums from across Northern Ireland. Some of these already exist and are proving very effective at dealing with local issues, exploring solutions to problems and communicating needs between users, local authorities and other bodies. Where a problem cannot be solved at a local level it should be flagged up to a national level.

Scotland has a similar structure to this – but it is primarily focused on access whereas it was felt that there was an opportunity for the focus to be broader. Also the bit that is missing is a strong strategic partnership between the relevant agencies. So the Scottish model has been taken and modified slightly to suit the needs in Northern Ireland.

One of the big areas of concern was about liabilities, responsibility and safety. Landowners are increasingly concerned about their liability to those who use their land for their activities. Outdoor sports are relatively unique in that the participants normally do not own the land on which they practice their sport or activity. Combined with this – there is increasing evidence that people are taking part in all sorts of new activities and perhaps don't always understand the consequences of actions.

So the action plan has articulated a need to develop clear communications on personal responsibility. Increasingly people who do not have a background in adventure activities are engaging with them – perhaps initially through a commercial provider. So they go and purchase equipment, but do not necessarily get further training, or join a club where training is provided if only informally. In an effort to communicate with such people, partnerships with the retail sector are being developed as the point of sale of equipment is often the only opportunity to impart such information to new participants. This piece of work has been a partnership with the Environment Agency, the National Trust (a conservation body), the Mourne Heritage Trust (mountain management organisation), the Health and Safety Executive in Northern Ireland and Outdoor Recreation NI.

However, in parallel with that there are close working relationships with the Police Service of Northern Ireland to support the mountain and cave rescue teams to ensure that while participation is promoted there is support for those who have to go out and pick up the pieces when it goes wrong.

Unlike other parts of the UK and some other parts

of Europe, in Northern Ireland we do not have activity providers regulated in any way at all. Therefore someone could set up a business providing for example sea kayaking who holds no formal qualifications in that sport. Sport NI has therefore been working closely with the industry and the National Governing Bodies in Northern Ireland to implement the Adventuremark scheme. This is a non statutory (optional) scheme that checks that activity providers are compliant with recognised industry standards. This has absorbed a considerable amount of time and energy. As there was no licensing in NI there was a lot of capacity building required with providers to make them aware of how best to undertake appropriate risk assessments and to develop appropriate policies, procedures and management protocols.

The first stage of implementing such a scheme is to communicate it to the activity providers and provide support and guidance for them. Sport NI also provided a grant for these providers so in effect the accreditation process cost them very little financially. This has proved to be very important given the current economic situation.

However, it is imperative that then this communication plan is broadened out so that the public – particularly those with responsibility for young people are aware of the scheme. In fact, most people in Northern Ireland falsely assume that activity providers are accredited or licensed.

There are real advantages to having a non statutory scheme in that the scope of the accreditation can be adjusted with the stroke of a pen. A statutory scheme is bound in scope by the statute that created it and it is cumbersome to effect such changes.

However while there is a clear duty of care on an activity provider, the liability due to an independent participant is low. The courts have been very clear on this subject – if a participant knowingly and willingly has undertaken an activity where there are clear and apparent dangers and risks and subsequently is injured because of said risks – they have no recourse on the landowner. Therefore having clear information that highlights the inherent risks (and the extensive benefits) for participating in outdoor sports is essential.

Sustainable and responsible participation also therefore means thinking very clearly about the impact of these activities on the environment. This raises all sorts of questions about thresholds, capacity, disturbance that is significant or not, erosion, damage and careless destruction. Across the island of Ireland it was recognised that just having a countryside code

was really not sufficient in reducing impacts on the environment.

Hence the Leave No Trace ethic was adopted and is being implemented both in the North and South of Ireland. However, the roll out of leave No Trace has not been without its difficulties in getting organisations to sign up to it.

One of the other significant changes is the increase in both the number and range of charity and challenge type events in the natural environment. These events are also attracting ever increasing numbers which in turn is having significant impacts. Guidance for event organisers has been developed and communicated via a website www.outdooreventplanning.com as well as through publications and a seminar. The website encourages activity providers and organisers to sign up to work within these guidelines and then they can be promoted by the site. Unfortunately while some events are run very well there is evidence that some participants are not particularly sympathetic to the environment and litter and damage can be rife after an event.

Visitor giving as a means of mitigating the impact of outdoor recreation is now starting to be explored. People generally are happy to pay to use sports facilities for other sports – but feel that the natural environment is a free resource. However the reality is that this resource needs to be managed and there is a cost associated with such management. If the cost is to be carried by a public body the benefits from its use needs to be articulate very clearly to justify the expenditure of public funds. However, there are real advantages associated with users being involved in putting something back in to the environment whether that is through voluntary time or finances. As noted earlier there has been a very significant increase in the number of commercial operators providing outdoor adventure type experiences. Many of these started during the boom times when outdoor team building activities for companies were very popular and also very lucrative. However, with the recession there is a lot less of this type of activity taking place. These commercial providers have now started to look to the schools and youth groups that were traditionally provided with adventure activities as a service and part of their education.

Increasingly some of these providers are challenging the public sector investment in providing these activities at reduced cost, claiming that it is negatively impacting on their businesses. These businesses were established 30 – 40 years after the establishment of the public outdoor education service providers, and so they were very aware of the fact this was the market

they were operating in. A demise of the outdoor education sector in NI which has historically been very strong, would be a real setback as the net result would be an outdoor activity provision only for those who can afford it. Aligned to that – some of the commercial operators employ minimally experienced and qualified staff to keep their costs as low as possible. These staff do not have the skill or knowledge to provide connections to the educational curriculum.

The next challenge after that could be to the voluntary sector providing sessions and courses free or very reduced because they have no staff costs through clubs and governing bodies.

The liaison with such a mix of organisations and individuals requires an enormous effort if one was to go it alone and so building relationships with others who have an interest (even if it is only slight) to achieve joint aims is essential. Such partnerships are excellent ways to collectively share information and avoid duplication of work.

However, in a partnership, each of the organisations and individuals will come to the table with their own needs, desires and requirements and will also have different values and ways of working. As funding and resources become tighter government agencies and other organisations retreat into a cocoon known as their statutory requirements and nothing else.

There is also a risk that they become very protective of their own little empires and there is a need to break through that and show that by collaborative working more can be achieved. This doesn't happen overnight and genuinely takes a lot of time.

As an example of this – it has taken over 10 years of engagement and relationship building between recreation providers and the NI Forest Service before the development of recreational facilities especially mountain bike trails could commence in the state owned forests. This has come about through a process of providing the right evidence of the benefits and opportunities that such facilities can bring, combined with the a partnership approach with the local authority and a recognition of the values and priorities of Forest Service.

The principles that are fundamental to developing good partnerships are:

1. Equality
 - Partners must be treated the same
 - Compromises are part of partnership but these should be adopted equally.
2. Clarity
 - Clear objectives for the project or partnership are essential

- Clear mechanisms for how the partnership will operate
 - Clear ways that each partner organisation functions
3. Transparency
 - There can be no hidden agendas and the processes that partners work to must be made clear.
 4. Commitment
 - Partners must be equally committed to the project.
 5. Responsibility
 - Partners should only agree to bring to the partnerships what they know they can deliver
 - Targets and goals must be realistic

6. Focus on Action
 - Look to what can be achieved

Finally clear and consistent communication is essential and binds the partnership together.

In conclusion, the management of outdoor sports is only effective when done collaboratively. It is a process that is ever changing rather than a mechanism that is set in stone as it needs to respond to an ever changing set of parameters. It requires commitment and co-operation on the part of many individuals and organisations and is therefore as much about relationship building as it is about procedures. It will involve set backs and failures and yet when done successfully can bring great benefits.

It is rarely if ever perfect – learn to accept that.