

Living Laboratory Study Visit Report



The ASCENT Site

Errigal Mountain Co Donegal, Ireland

T1.3 Sharing Path Management Knowledge, Exchange of Experience and Learning, T2.2 Upskilling & Toolkits

by Newry Mourne & Down District Council and Mourne Heritage Trust with Donegal County Council

Errigal Mountain Living laboratory Study Visit Report : A Practitioners Perspective

19 - 20 July, 2017

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As part of the ASCENT project, Mourne Heritage Trust and Slieve Gullion representatives attended a site visit in July 2017. The aim was to achieve outputs under T1.3: Living Lab Study Visits, but also contribute to T2.2 regarding the development of path assessment toolkits/templates suitable across all project partners, by assessing current trail conditions and proposed trail developments based on new survey techniques developed through the project. Visiting the location also provided a means of gaining insight into current upland management issues, and the extent to which ASCENT techniques could be used to alleviate issues. Representatives from the Errigal Stakeholders Committee met ASCENT partners during this trip to provide clarity and insight into the issues.

1.1

Site Visit Location

- 19th July 2017 : Errigal Mountain, County Donegal.

1.2

Study Trip Preparations

Before conducting the trip, recording documents were designed in order to gather insight on the path quality, and the extent to which paths were fit for purpose in light of recent issues. These included an overview survey (Appendix 1) to collate general spatial and qualitative data (i.e., path location, distance, grid reference, ownership and conservation designations) and a resource assessment (Appendix 2) to gather insight on how path refurbishment/restoration might be conducted with regard to labour availability, tools, native materials (aggregate, stone), funding, consent and local knowledge. Finally, an ASCENT condition survey was designed to record on-site observations of the overall path quality and to highlight key areas of interest. The trip also provided an invaluable opportunity to trial the use of technology in implementing path assessments. To this end, a number of devices were used to further document the visit:

- GoPro Hero 4 Camera and waterproof casing
- Panasonic HX-WA30 waterproof camera
- Nikon DSLR camera
- Garmin GPSMap 64s
- Spot Gen3 Satellite Messenger
- Zhiyun Gimbal handheld camera stabiliser: Crane 3-axis

Figure 1: Devices used during the study trip



Chapter 2

Errigal

Before visiting Errigal, background information was collected through discussions with representatives from Donegal County Council, and also through examination of the 'Errigal

Mountain Path Study' report completed by Walking the Talk (2015) on behalf of the Errigal Stakeholders Committee. This helped identify the three key summit routes used on the mountain to be surveyed during this trip, which were outlined within the Walking the Talk (WtT) report as follows:

- The Direct Approach, i.e., a straight route from the R251 car park constructed in the mid-1980s.
- The Stream Side Route, which was identified within the WtT report as the most robust approach route and a focus for improving site sustainability
- The Old Route, the 'traditional' ascent route which has largely been unused since the development of the Errigal car park

2.1

The Direct Approach

The most direct route to the Errigal summit, leading visitors straight from the car park towards the mountain peak, is beneficial in some ways as it presents an obvious path for visitors new to the area. The route ascends from the right stream side, with the first 0.19km proceeding through deep peat and wet boggy areas. Unregulated path access has caused areas of deep braiding to form at both sides of the path, where visitors have edged sideways seeking to avoid particularly muddy areas. In some parts this has inadvertently allowed for vegetation restoration to occur, where avoided braids have begun to recover.

The spread of braiding has also restricted the development of deep peat gullies or exposed aggregate, suggesting that habitat restoration is possible at this level of damage. Attempts to manage the erosion exist, with some paving stones placed near the beginning of the trail, however the lack of natural path materials at this stage (such as natural stone deposits or aggregate) limit endeavours of this kind. No drainage or water bars exist to manage excess moisture.



Figure 2: Trail Access from car park to Direct Ascent Route displaying attempts to pave path and erosion damage.



Figure 3: Exposed peat gullies formed by a combination of water and wind erosion. Pencil for scale.

As the route begins to ascend sharply at a $\pm 35^\circ$ gradient, erosion damage is amplified, with deep peat gullies and areas of exposed aggregate demonstrating the combined damage of visitor footfall and unregulated drainage.

Exposed bedrock and loose scree stone available in this area are comprised of quartzite, with granitic intrusions which would feasibly be suitable path material. Initial aggregate analysis also suggests that good-quality native path materials comprised of a glacial till, exist to utilise in this area. Higher along the route, glacial till contains clay deposits.

As the route ascends (gradient $\pm 40^\circ$), the slope is comprised of loose scree, with wide areas of erosion where people have moved to avoid the loose stone and no discernible trail. From here to the 200m towards the summit there is a high level of damage, which is unlikely to recover without intervention.

2.2

The Stream Side Route

An advantage of this route is its proximity to the stream, which provides natural drainage and makes the land substantially drier to walk on as the route ascends. Additionally, strategically-placed stone cairns, set to guide hikers along this route, provide key feature points through which a trail could be led. However, it may be difficult to encourage hikers to avoid the 'lure' of the direct ascent (as stated by Chris York in the WtT report, 2015), and the trail is longer and less instinctive for those new to the area. Trail developments with this route in mind will therefore need to be sensitively constructed to navigate hikers accurately along this path. However, there is potential to create a scenic, substantial route along this line. The first section of this route displays habitat damage in the form of deep gullies and wide patches of erosion due to heavy usage and the lack of a defined path. The heath/bog habitat is sensitive to usage and would not withstand consistent custom without a robust path in place to contain visitors and to mitigate damage to surrounding areas.

Glacial rock deposits along the lower path sections may provide valuable building material in keeping with the landscape. Further along the route the usage declines as many begin to follow the 'direct ascent' route.



Figure 4: Aggregate comprised of glacial till provides good-quality native path materials.



Figure 5: Exposed bedrock and loose scree apparent.



Figure 6: Heavy foot traffic in the first stage of the Stream Side route, leading to habitat damage and wide patches of erosion.

2.3

The Old Route

The old route begins 500m west of the car park, close to Dunlewey town, and bears evidence of former maintenance in the form of cross drains and stone periodic paving. The ground is substantially drier to walk on, with diverse heathland vegetation indicating little damage to the area either due to light past usage or natural restoration once the car park was built. The

line ascends gradually to meet the scree slopes of the direct ascent route. If this line were to be developed, a robust path system would be required to protect the current status of the surrounding habitat, which is sensitive to usage and swift to decline. Old path work can be reinstated and incorporated into new developments to preserve historic heritage of the area.

2.4

Stakeholder Meeting

From discussion with the Errigal Stakeholders Committee on the 19th July, it quickly became apparent that there is much disagreement as to which line the Errigal path development should follow. Many traditional routes (established pre-car park era, approximately 20-25 years ago) occur more towards Dunlewey village and are tied to the heritage of the area. For example, one particular route starts off by following an old quarry line. However, other stakeholders, such as mountaineering groups, are reluctant to make drastic changes to the current summit line and risk spreading the impact of current peatland damage.

Most traditional routes are at least 500m west of the car park, citing the inappropriate placement of the development. The stakeholders are keen to develop the tourism potential of Errigal within the village and surrounding towns, and advocate promoting the natural and historic heritage role of the mountain through visitor infrastructure.



Figure 7: Example of a cross drain found along the Old Route

Landowners also have a stake in Errigal with some sheep grazing. However, lack of fencing means that some livestock are free to roam. Those with land on Errigal are concerned about the potential liability/indemnity for visitors if the area becomes popularised, and also fear future restrictions to current grazing regimes.

Issues with the ASCENT project in general were highlighted by stakeholders, who noted that the short-term nature of the project (three years) has placed pressure on the community, stating that they felt 'rushed' by project pressures to make a decision on the line and begin trail development. They also noted that the issue is a sensitive topic with no right or wrong answer, and must be unanimously agreed to by all relevant stakeholders.

Chapter 3

Conclusions and Final Remarks

The visit to Errigal showed the problems that can develop with unmanaged visitor access and the need for well-planned and site-appropriate solutions. Errigal provided an insight into the problems caused by ad hoc responses to issues, e.g., the original Errigal car park constructed in the mid 1980s had caused tension and mistrust between local authorities and local residents due to its distance from the local village, leading to reduced economic benefits, and to the car park's lack of proximity to old, traditional summit routes, which link the mountain to a rich local and industrial heritage.

The Errigal case study also highlighted the limitations of the ASCENT project itself, as the relatively short-term nature of the project has placed an urgency on choosing a trail line and beginning the path development while funds are available. This does not reflect the sensitive and careful approach necessary to deal with this issue. However, the project has enabled stakeholder groups to interact and to raise discussions on the development of the area and the overall aim of reaching consensus is a worthy one.

In light of the fact that many of the issues witnessed in Errigal (and other upland access sites) are reminiscent of ones similarly faced in the Mourne, the necessity for increased partnership, communication and support between land authorities appears obvious, such as the establishment of an overarching land management forum or panel, in order to share experiences, guide decision making and respond to issues efficiently.

The study trip has also provided ASCENT with a clear indication of the need for path teams to deliver appropriate and sustainable site management. The 'Stitch in Time' method can help identify emerging access problems and resolve them quickly; reducing the need for expensive restoration or repair projects further down the line. Path teams have the added value of providing and sharing a much-needed skill set to other land management groups, since sensitive and robust path development and maintenance are growing increasingly necessary as upland walking becomes more popular.

Chapter 4

More Information

The above information was gained and interpreted through ASCENT project documentation conducted by the Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT) on behalf of the NMDDC. Video interviews and further visit documentation linked to this report are available for this report by contacting Matthew Bushby at matthew.bushby@mourne.co.uk, or by contacting our offices at Silent Valley Gate Lodge, 74 Head Road, Kilkeel, Co. Down, Northern Ireland, BT344PU, 028417 65489.

Chapter 5

References

- McGuigan, M, 2017. 'Visitor Data Report 2017'. Martin McGuigan Visitor Monitoring Ireland. Unpublished.
- York, C. 2015. 'Errigal Study Visit Final Report version 2.1'. Walking the Talk. Unpublished.

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