



# ASCENT

Promoting Sustainable Access  
to Uplands & Natural Environments



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European Regional Development Fund

## ASCENT Output

A Research Report Documenting Upland Path Management Approaches  
to Contribute to Enhanced Knowledge and Appreciation of the Issues  
Affecting Sites

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# A Research Report Documenting Upland Path Management Approaches to Contribute to Enhanced Knowledge and Appreciation of the Issues Affecting Sites

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## Section 1

### Introduction

The report delivers the ASCENT Project Output: *number of capacity building solutions to maintain the balance between competing environmental, economic and social interests. The project will improve organisational knowledge, management capacity and skills to deal with issues that arise in relation to unregulated access to sites of environmental importance. Such access causes loss of bio-resource and biodiversity. The research report will contribute to enhanced knowledge and appreciation of issues affecting sites. The teacher: learner principle will be applied across the partner regions, whereby regions will impart and share knowledge with partner regions. The research report will document upland path management approaches and environmental tools and techniques.*

It represents the element of the project concerned with learning how to sustainably manage upland areas and natural environments that are used for tourism and recreation. It highlights the collaboration and sharing of knowledge throughout the project (see also Section 3 of the Final Conference report <https://www.ascent-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ASCENT-to-Summit-Conference-Report-2019.pdf>) that facilitated the above, with specific focus on:

- Researching the ASCENT sites to identify issues and management approaches
- Reviewing best practice for upland path management
- Sharing knowledge through Living Laboratory Study Visits to document approaches and contribute to enhanced knowledge & appreciation of the issues
- Key Learning and recommendations of a way forward

22 reports were produced in the delivery of the above activity and these are included as an appendix to this summary, and constitute the detailed body of the research report.

Reciprocal learning continued to flourish throughout as partners engaged in a constant effort to exchange knowledge, skills and experiences through site visits, workshops and seminars. The teacher-learner principle was successful as a key driver in knowledge transference primarily through the living laboratory study visits, and the constant effort approach employed on some of the partner's sites that demonstrated and trialled the learning from each other as well as the research carried out during the project.



## Section 2

# Researching the ASCENT Sites to Identify Approaches and Issues

ASCENT partners identified the current state of play at the seven project sites to collectively inform the way forward. The resulting reports elucidated common issues, but also reflected the unique circumstances of the particular partner site - hence there was a variety of approaches and issues identified. Moreover, some partners decided to explore in more depth due to their own needs and experience. To this end all partners carried out assessment of the impact of unregulated access to their sites, and the partners from Iceland, Ireland and NI went a bit deeper and surveyed the particular habitat impacts and also carried out a strategic review on the path networks at their sites.

A total of fourteen reports were produced that clearly illustrated similar problems were replicated across all partner sites, albeit with varying levels of intensity. Partners were at different stages of response to the problems, and had varying skill sets and resources available to them. There were differing requirements on managers and practitioners whether legal, planning, or policy. The local framework for managing impacts and developing ideas and solutions differed due to factors such as land ownership, government agendas and stakeholder buy-in.

In particular, the project theme of developing the capacity of remote & sparsely populated communities for sustainable environmental management would have to be addressed with different approaches by the partners depending on local context. For example, the Dunlewey community in Donegal had been involved as a key initial driver with the Errigal Stakeholders Group and Donegal County Council in plans for Errigal, that ASCENT could help take forward, whereas other project partners may not have had such a cohesive group initially to work with and had to focus on developing a community dynamic, or opportunity for it, through stakeholder engagement as the project progressed.



Figure 1: Sensitive moss on an Eldhraun lava field damaged by visitor impact

However, the differences as outlined above were actually the potential strength of the project, as it meant solutions had to apply broadly to varying scenarios, and be adaptable, while still delivering the aims of ASCENT. This was seen as a key attribute in an international project.

## 2.1 Case Study

### Social Media Game Changers

A trend identified in the reports of particular significance, was the 'game changer' effect of social media posts, which had in a number of locations caused an exponential increase in user numbers such as at Trolltunga in Norway and increased damage to sensitive habitats, such as at Eldhraun in Iceland.

Site studies at the lava fields at Eldhraun showed the impact of tourists on the sensitive moss ecology. The landscape has become a popular background for advertisement and music videos, often involving famous actors or singers, with the net effect of making the area a tourist hotspot instead of just an incidental site of interest.

### Section 3

# Reviewing Best Practice for Upland Path Management

The next stage was to gather a fuller understanding of existing best practice with regard to wider policy development, and also specific upland path guidance and the practical work it had influenced before, and stakeholders thoughts about it. Given the escalating demand and impacts; were they still relevant and did they need revising.

Other EU projects were scoped to identify how they influenced policy, -a key aim of ASCENT. Innovative strategic projects that operated across transnational boundaries were reviewed, and common themes highlighted were: extensive sharing of knowledge and skills, standardised research methods, the importance of networking and collaboration, partnerships on a multi-disciplinary basis, stakeholder participation and the recognition that challenges require a wide perspective, ultimately of global significance. The ASCENT approach was consistent with the common themes identified and it was further recommended that perspective is maintained during project implementation, to inform policy, to be of strategic significance and to sustain international co-operation.

A desktop review was undertaken of guiding principles, ethics and standards in upland path management and aligned manuals & toolkits to inform the debate and an ASCENT way forward aiming at a more consensus approach across the NPA region. The research paper identified relevant approaches in UK, Ireland and further afield in USA, South America and Europe. It found that best practice ethics and principles followed a lineage developed from Scottish and other UK upland areas, and while there is also an apparent US autonomous lineage, it can be traced back to a Scottish approach via a John Muir late 19th century influence. A recurring theme is that the value of the landscape should be a priority where the need to develop access is being considered, and that there should be a gradation of moving to less intervention in path design and maintenance when moving from urban to rural and remote landscapes, with the use of natural and local materials preferred. Lessons from the USA, where access is often controlled through

a licensing system, are deemed difficult to impose, particularly for the ASCENT sites where the challenges of increased demand are compounded with unregulated and unmanaged access. Moreover, best practice needed to be reviewed in light of current contextual developments such as changes in environmental (e.g. increasingly erratic weather), user (e.g. exponential increases in use) and funding (e.g. lack of strategic joined up resourcing for landscape management) scenarios.

The opportunity was also taken to benchmark practical path techniques identified in the research by drawing them into the Path Team's work at Slieve Donard and Slieve Gullion.

### 3.1 Case Study

## Managing Upland Paths – Are Good Principles Enough?

Contributing to the development of guiding principles for Upland Path Management Policy, an ASCENT led workshop entitled Managing Upland Paths – Are Good Principles Enough took place on the 22nd and 23rd of November 2017 in Bryansford, County Down, in the foothills of Slieve Donard. Eighty five representatives, including path experts, from the UK, Ireland and Iceland, met to review Upland Path Principles and their applicability for land managers, practitioners and local communities, who are responding to increased erosion in environmentally sensitive landscapes. Site visits to Slieve Donard helped focus thinking and initiatives and ideas were explored through themed presentations and two workshops aimed at identifying a consensus way forward.

The challenges of balancing the opportunity for natural landscapes to provide the hook on which to develop rural, economic and health and well-being initiatives, against the need to preserve their inherent natural and wilderness value was recognised as becoming an increasingly greater dilemma. As in case study 2.1 above, this was highlighted by the observation that user patterns can now dramatically increase due to social media, while, for example, climate change adds to the challenge.

The lack of a strategic approach and joined up management with limited resources for maintenance in particular, and managers and practitioners often operating in relative isolation focused a clear need to improve effective networking across land managers and practitioners that enables easy and quick access to information, advice, skills, and training and helps develop group funding bids etc. The UK based Upland Path Advisory Group and the Irish Uplands Forum were models for how a network could develop.

A recurrent theme was that remote sensitive landscapes should be valued much more. This could be achieved through education programmes for users and practitioners and an advisory set of guiding principles that land managers should be required to pay attention to when planning activity in these sites; for this government leadership and the role of local authorities would be key. The Helping the Hills Principles, which cover the geographical area of the island of Ireland, were a good basis for an agreed approach, albeit with some suggested amendments for ASCENT partners, participants and represented organisations to adopt.

Figure 2: Welcome Address in the auditorium at Tollymore National Outdoor Centre



## Section 4

# Sharing knowledge through Living Laboratory Study Visits to document approaches and Contribute to enhanced knowledge & appreciation of the issues

The third element of learning, and the one that encapsulated best the theme of sharing knowledge and skills both in landscape/ and habitat knowledge and in path management was achieved through the living laboratory study visits. These in effect ground truthed the condition assessments, habitat and path surveys, and the best practice principles. Moreover, the project's teacher-learner principle was primarily implemented through the living laboratory study visits, where the sharing of knowledge and skills was enhanced through one partner, Newry Mourne and Down District Council with sub partner Mourne Heritage Trust, making prolonged visits to all partners' sites; thus enabling a more thorough understanding to develop.

The idea was that the sites were literally living laboratories where empirical evidence could be observed and theory or best practice could be practically applied or innovation trialled. In this way they are laboratories to work things out and to learn from the experience, mistakes or otherwise. In contrast, the thematic seminar is a more formal technique that contributes to the above.

Living laboratory Study Visits gave more substance to an understanding of the following:

- Site responses have happened in isolated management and practitioner contexts resulting in varying approaches with varying success
- There is a need and appetite for wider sharing of knowledge and skills and training of managers, practitioners and volunteers
- Pressures can cause an urgency to be seen to be doing something to mitigate a site issue, often within a narrow window of funding, with varying success
- The sites need a constant effort, albeit good work should be relatively resilient to erosion but pressures mount and dynamic can change, which can make this difficult to achieve
- There is a need to step back and consider the longer term rather than responding to an immediate problem in a knee jerk reaction and risking escalating the problem
- Early intervention may allow a less interventionist and more cost effective approach – 'stitch in time'



#### 4.1 Case Study

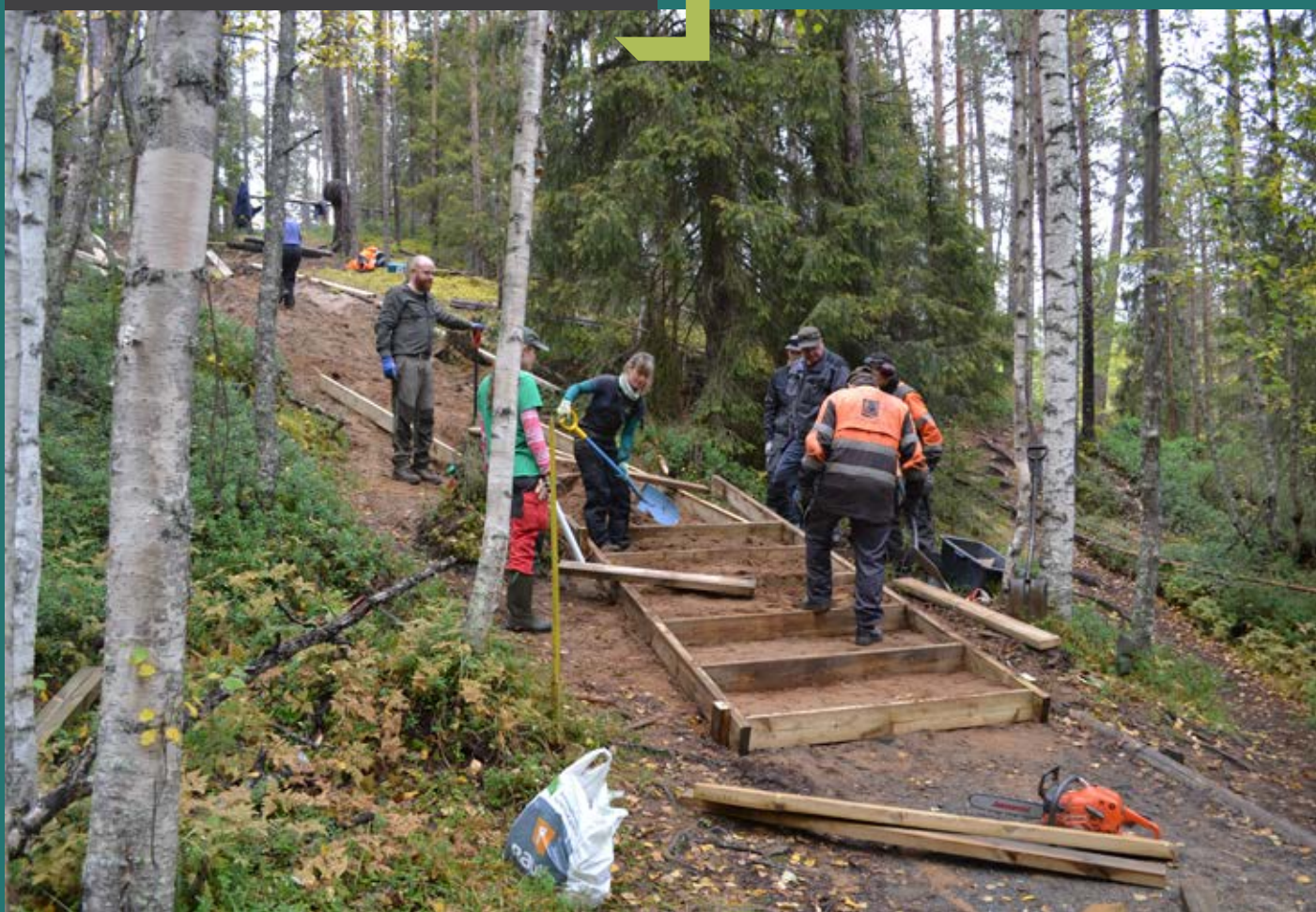
### Living Laboratory Study Visits

The principle of accompaniment underpinned the visits, which aided learning and a feeling of mutual effort and opened dialogue and helped overcome language barriers. This came into its own when sleeves were rolled up and partners got digging together; whether helping shift rotten timber off site before installing new steps at the Kiutaköngäs trail in Oulanka National Park, Finland, or demonstrating stone built cross drains near Trolltunga or sheep wool paths near Odda, Norway.

It allowed time to observe the challenges facing some partners and offer suggestions for immediate and longer term solutions. At Laki in the Vatnajökull National Park, Iceland, the increasingly popular mountainous path had suffered considerable damage from snow melt over the spring season, causing large areas of erosion. Park Rangers mentioned the difficulties in maintaining the paths due to the limitations of the short summer season for work (the area is inaccessible during heavy snow cover) and the restricted staff and volunteer resources. Similar problems were seen at Trolltunga, Norway and Riisitunturi National Park, Finland.

Significantly, the teacher-learner approach is activated, but as a reciprocal process, which develops a more collegiate approach to site specific responses with wider initiatives and policy influence. This can help sustainable collaboration to develop regional and international alignment of approaches.

Figure 3: Staff from Parks & Wildlife Finland with Mourne Heritage Trust/Ring of Gullion path teams in Oulanka National Park



## Section 5

# Key Learning

There is an opportunity to develop a collegiate approach to developing skills and competencies, with benefits such as: sharing best practice, problem solving, training, building trust, a quick support network, sustaining momentum and buy-in for legacy options. The Learn element has been approached from a practitioner's perspective and therefore seeks solutions and opportunities within that framework, which is maybe a rare focus, where usually development of ideas is at the management and policy level. It also recognises that the key factor is people; and usually a small number of committed and clued in individuals that are the internal champions and inspiration to others, but can often be side-lined. Without opportunities for those to be supported or for them to be exposed to other similar champions or to tap into the latent potential that resides in other staff and volunteers, their knowledge and work can often be contained and isolated. It helps establish common ground in approaches, but also provides a platform for innovation and different thinking that may have validity.

The issue of constant and consistent effort highlights the undervaluing of sensitive landscapes and the false economies of simply capital, knee -jerk and piece meal responses to mitigating impacts, and the lack of a strategic and coordinated approach. Constant effort would require a consistent revenue funded approach that would embody 'stitch in time' and early intervention that could avoid big problems arising. Moreover, with more time and funding path workers have the opportunity to know the landscape they are working with, its ecology, geology, soil and vegetation, develop their land literacy, learn from mistakes, and develop more effective site based solutions. This would, by its nature, engender a greater focus on effective networking, knowledge sharing, skill development and training and greater policy focus.

The varying frameworks (strategic/policy/funding/legal etc.) under which each partner operates will have a direct impact on how ASCENT will be able to influence resources and policy. For example, it is not a given that the target to Develop guiding principles for the development of Upland Path Management Policy can easily be 'stitched' into the existing policy of all ASCENT partners. In this case, the principles may sit parallel as an informal check and balance. To maintain this, therefore, it will be important to encourage ongoing connectivity between Partners, which may be by identifying further shared goals and a commitment to finding a way to resource them.





## Appendix

ASCENT documents produced under T1 constituting a detailed analysis of approaches to upland path management, which contribute to an enhanced knowledge and appreciation of the issues affecting the 7 ASCENT sites and similar locations.

Document	Work Package, Name and Item	Author
<b>T1.1 Research on the Impact of Unregulated Access to Upland Sites - Condition Assessments</b>		
1	Condition Assessment & Strategic Path Review – Errigal Mountain	DCC
2	Condition Assessment – Hossa National Park	MPWF
3	Condition Assessment - Eldhraun	SCSI
4	Condition Assessment - Ulfarsfell	SCSI
5	Condition Assessment - Trolltunga	HCC
6	Condition Assessment - Slieve Donard	NMDDC/MHT
7	Condition Assessment - Slieve Gullion	NMDDC/MHT
<b>T1.1 Research on the Impact of Unregulated Access to Upland Sites - Strategic Path Reviews</b>		
8	Strategic Path Review - Ulfarsfell	SCSI
9	Strategic Path Review & Survey - Slieve Donard	NMDDC/MHT
10	Strategic Path Review & Survey - Slieve Gullion	NMDDC/MHT
<b>T1.1 Research on the Impact Unregulated Access to Upland Sites - Habitat Assessments</b>		
11	Habitat Assessment - Slieve Donard	NMDDC/MHT
12	Habitat Assessment - Slieve Gullion	NMDDC/MHT
13	Habitat Assessment – Errigal Mountain	DCC
<b>T1.2 Guiding Principles &amp; Policy Development for Upland Path Management</b>		
14	Ethics, Standards & Guiding Principles	NMDDC/MHT
15	Review of Best Practice, Similar Projects & Policy	NMDDC/MHT
16	Workshop on Ethics Standards and Guiding Principles - Managing Upland Paths - are good principles enough? Nov 2017	NMDDC/MHT
<b>T1.3 Sharing Path Management Knowledge, Exchange of Experience &amp; Learning &amp; T2.2 Upskilling &amp; Toolkits</b>		
17	Living Laboratory Study Visit – Errigal Mountain	NMDDC/MHT/DCC
18	Living Laboratory Study Visit - Finland	NMDDC/MHT/MPWS
19	Living Laboratory Study Visit - Iceland	NMDDC/MHT/SCSI
20	Living Laboratory Study Visit – Norway	NMDDC/MHT/HCC
21	Living Laboratory Study Visit and Steering Group Meeting - Slieve Donard & Slieve Gullion	NMDDC/MHT
22	Living Laboratory Study Visit – Norwegian visit to Slieve Donard and Slieve Gullion	HCC

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### **NMDDC**

**Newry Mourne & Down District Council**

### **MHT**

**Mourne Heritage Trust**

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