

# Condition Assessment



Comhairle Ceantair  
an Iúir, Mhúrn  
agus an Dúin  
Newry, Mourne  
and Down  
District Council



MOURNE HERITAGE TRUST

Caring for Mourne

The ASCENT Site

## Slieve Donard Co Down, Northern Ireland

### T1.1

### Research on the Impact of Unregulated Access to Upland Sites

by Newry Mourne & Down District Council and Mourne Heritage Trust and researcher ,Marc Vinas, Ecologist



**ASCENT**  
Promoting Sustainable Access  
to Uplands & Natural Environments



Northern Periphery and  
Arctic Programme  
2014–2020



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**This report delivers against ASCENT activity target  
T1.1 Research on the impact of unregulated access to  
upland sites, habitat damage and restoration needs.**



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Plate 1 Slieve Donard, Newcastle and Dundrum Bay  
“Where the Mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea”; Percy French

## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction and General Description

Slieve Donard dominates the northern fringe of the Mourne Mountains, rising above the seaside town of Newcastle in the south-eastern corner of County Down. Standing at 852m, Slieve Donard is Northern Ireland's highest mountain and one of the most heavily-used areas for recreation on the island of Ireland (Davis, 2012), with adjacent forests, parks, nature reserves, beaches and long-distance walking routes providing additional recreation opportunities. Its companion mountains include Slieve Commedagh to the west, the second highest in the Mourne range at 767m, and, in its foothills, the smaller Thomas's, Millstone and Crossone mountains between Donard and the sea.

The Mourne Mountains comprise 12 peaks over 600m tall and, uniquely for a mountain range, most of the high summits are grouped together in a compact area only seven miles wide.

The quality of the area is reflected in its landscape, habitat and biodiversity designations, and, above all, its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The Mournes and Slieve Croob AONB have a population of more than 50,000 people in an area of 57,000 hectares.

The Eastern Mournes is one of the largest areas of heathland in Northern Ireland, and Slieve Donard forms part of the Eastern Mournes Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and Special Area of Conservation (SAC), see below, noted for its biological and earth science interests. The extent and quality of the habitats represented is particularly notable, including montane heath on the highest summit area, and wet and dry heather and blanket bog down to the lower slopes.



Slieve Donard and the Mourne Mountains provide a range of ecosystem services, including, among others, agriculture, biodiversity, carbon sequestration, forestry, health and well-being, mineral extraction, recreation, tourism and water catchment.

Electronic counters record approximately 90,000 journeys passing through the Glen River access route: one of a number of access routes to Slieve Donard. The other main access routes to approach Donard include the Brandy Pad: an iconic route through the mountains and, as the name suggests, it was a route popular for smuggling in the 1800s (see Plate 2 below).

The Mourne area is also one of Northern Ireland's most popular tourist areas. It lies directly between Belfast and Dublin and is readily accessible to both cities, especially with the improvements in road links to the south. It is estimated that in 2003 there were 1.43 million visitors to the Mourne AONB. As a result, some parts of the area are already under pressure, and there is potential for this activity to grow.

In 2003, the Mourne AONB, through Mourne Heritage Trust, was the first area in the UK or Ireland to receive the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism, awarded by the Europarc Federation. A re-assessment was successfully undertaken in 2008, leading to the Trust receiving the award for a further five years at a ceremony in Stromstad, Sweden.

The Charter is a practical tool for ensuring that tourism development in Europe's most valued landscapes is carried out sustainably. It requires a structure for working in partnership with stakeholders, a strategy for growing sustainable tourism and a set of actions. The 10 Charter Principles have helped to guide the development of tourism in the Mournes throughout the last decade, although challenges remain.

Plate 2 The Eastern part of the Mourne Mountains containing the 12 highest peaks, with Slieve Donard rising above Newcastle in the north-east corner.



## CHAPTER 2

# Location, Ownership and Management

## 2.1

## Land ownership

Four land owners share the summit area of Slieve Donard:

- National Trust, a UK conservation charity, which protects historic places, green spaces and cultural heritage for access by all, and owner of the northern part of the mountain, including the main approach from the Glen River and open land immediately above Donard Forest
- Northern Ireland Water, an agency within the Department for Infrastructure, and owner of 3,000 hectares within the Mourne Wall.
- Crossone Mountain Trustees, which has grazing rights and management responsibilities for the land to the east of the summit outside the Mourne Wall.
- Spence's Mountain Trustees (part of the Mourne Mountain Trustee Group), with grazing rights and management responsibilities for land to the south of the summit outside the Mourne Wall.

Lower down, Donard Forest is owned by Forest Service NI (an Agency within the Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs).

## 2.2

## Government Jurisdiction

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council is the local government administration and has within its remit tourism, recreation and biodiversity. It also owns Donard Park: the main car park and access point for people accessing Slieve Donard via the Glen River through Donard Forest.



Plate 3 The location of Slieve Donard in Northern Ireland

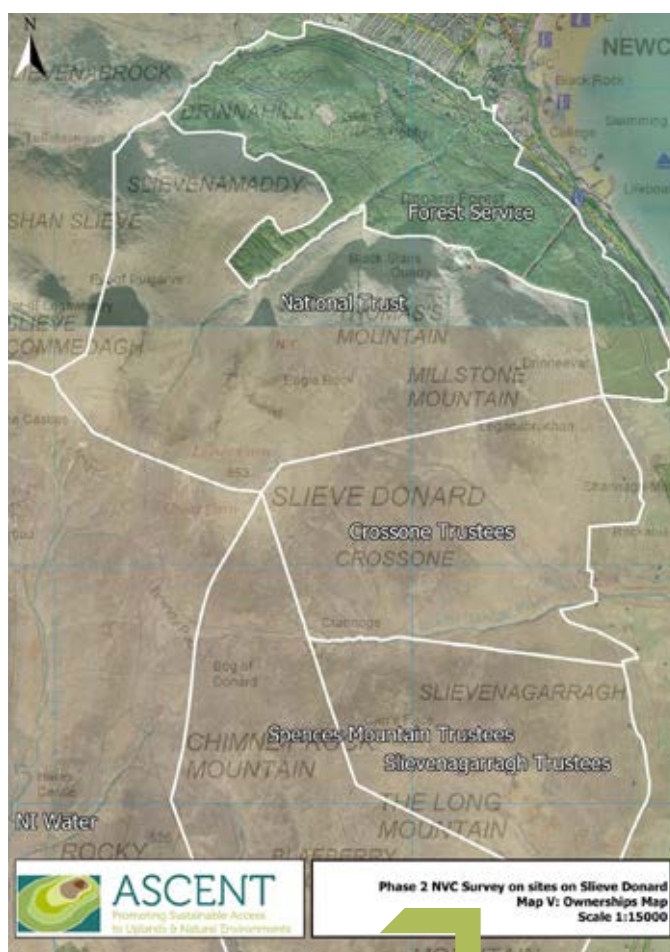


Plate 4 Land Ownership on Slieve Donard

## 2.3

### Mourne Heritage Trust

Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT) is a charity, funded by Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and also by Tourism NI and other project funds, to meet an identified need for locally-based, strategic management of the Mourne AONB. The Trust's mission statement is: To sustain and enhance the environment, rural regeneration, cultural heritage and visitor opportunities of the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and contribute to the well-being of Mourne's communities. The Trust works in partnership with the land owners and district council to help manage the mountain and chairs the Mourne Outdoor Recreation Forum, which brings together stakeholders interested in recreational access.

## CHAPTER 3

### Climate

The changing moods of the Mourne landscape are much influenced by the weather. The climate is temperate, which typically means warm and - of course - sometimes damp summers, and comparatively mild winters. But the Mourne area is one of contrasts in relation to weather.

The mountains, in their dramatic moods, can produce some of the wettest and wildest conditions experienced in Great Britain and Ireland and then, in an instant, give way to serene calm – and, of course, vice versa. Meanwhile, much of the coast – only a few miles away – enjoys Northern Ireland's driest and sunniest weather. The average rainfall on the summits over 650m is 2,000 millimetres (mm) per year while, at sea level, it is in the region of 1,300mm. At Murlough National Nature Reserve, however, in the shadow of Slieve Donard, the average annual rainfall is only 750mm.

A plan for climate change is needed. In recent years the weather has become even more unpredictable, with more frequent extreme events of freezing, rain, dry periods and high winds posing management challenges for the landscape and community, such as vulnerability to wildfires and erosion. In June 2012, for example, 70-80mm fell in a few hours on two separate days and caused immediate damage to the paths on Slieve Donard.

## CHAPTER 4

# Geology

While granite mountains dominate the Mourne, much of the wider Mourne AONB is underlain by Silurian rocks of shales, mudstones or greywackes, which were formed over 420 million years ago. The high Mourne granites, on the other hand, developed a mere 56 million years ago. During this time there was a huge amount of volcanic activity, as the great continents moved apart, leaving what is now the north-eEast Atlantic Ocean. The mountains were formed from molten magma -rock from the Earth's centre - but they were not volcanoes.

The molten rock never quite broke through the Earth's surface as lava, but bubbled up inside the Earth's crust and slowly cooled beneath the overlying sandstone into the interlocking crystals of quartz, feldspar and mica that form granite.

The granite mass that is now exposed was formed when blocks of Silurian shale subsided, leaving a cavity which was filled by an upwelling of acid magma. Once formed, however, it took millions of years and at least six Ice Ages scouring the earth to reveal the Mourne Mountains.

The Silurian rocks probably originally formed a complete 'roof' over the granite intrusions – but, during millennia, the softer rock was gradually eroded away by weather. Once the underlying hard granite revealed itself to the elements, the great ice sheets which occurred over the last 2 million years, further carved and shaped this robust rock into the enduring domed peaks we see today.

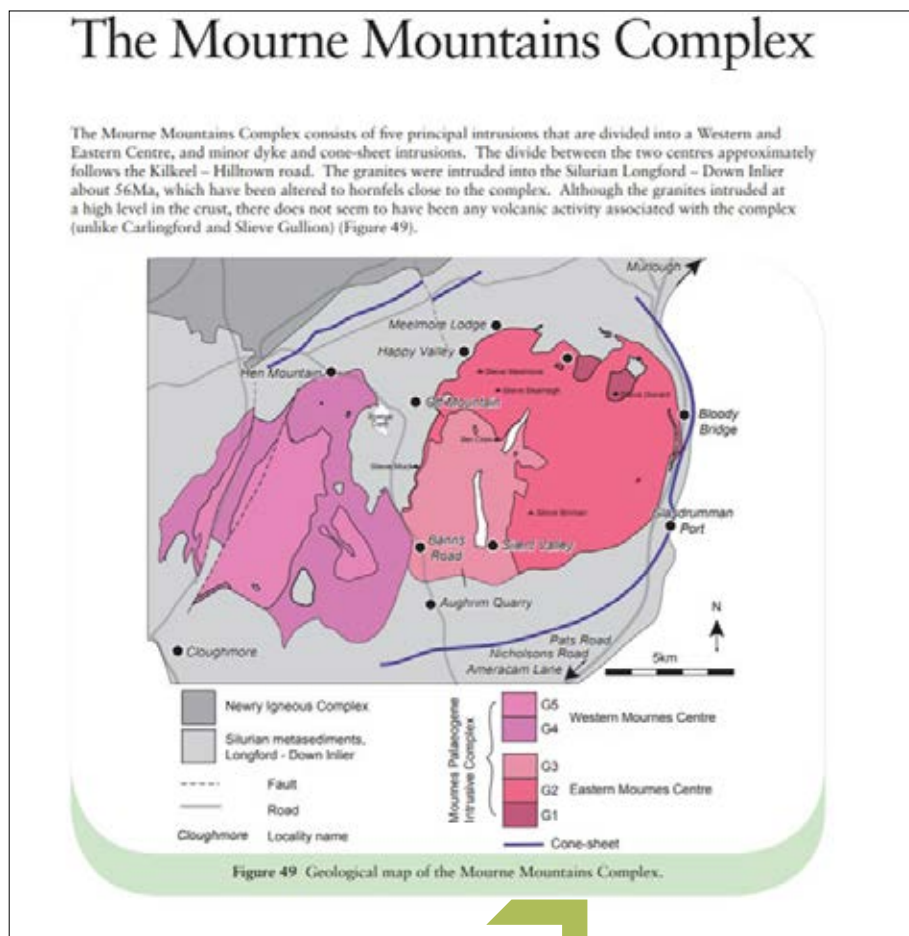


Plate 5 Geological Map of The Mourne Mountains



## CHAPTER 5

# Soil

The diversity in the Mourne area owes much to the different soils that overlie the various geological conditions described. The exposed granites in the cooler, wetter highlands produce peaty soils low in nutrients, often water-logged and highly acidic. The soils here tend to be shallow and stony. The soils of the shale-based lowlands reflect the acidity of the ice-eroded glacial material from the mountains. These are mainly acid brown earths, which have been modified in places by forestry, farming and podsolisation. The soil layers are exposed as shown in Plate 6 in popular recreation routes such as the Glen River route to the col and summit of Slieve Donard. Where the slope is gentle and use is moderate, the granite mineral soil can provide a carrying capacity and preferred walking surface, but erosion quickly develops as the slope and footfall increase.

## CHAPTER 6.0

# Land Use

The geological conditions described were, as illustrated, subsequently shaped by the meteorological and human activity to produce the impressive scenery of the Mourne AONB today. This results in a diversity of semi-natural habitats with land that is actively farmed or forested.

### 6.1

## Farming

The boundary dry stone walls characterise the Mourne farm smallholdings in the lowlands and shared grazing areas in the uplands and are an important and much-loved feature of the landscape. Traditionally, seaweed (wrack) would have been vital to fertilise the thin acid soils in the lower areas but virtually all arable cultivation is now gone, although the 'lazy beds' in which seed potatoes were laid on the ground and the turf to either side folded over them - creating raised beds - remain visible in a number of places.

The iconic landscape of heathland and upland bog in the Mournes is the result of farming activity in clearing the uplands of trees and scrub for grazing with animals. Every bit of available land was utilised in order to sustain the

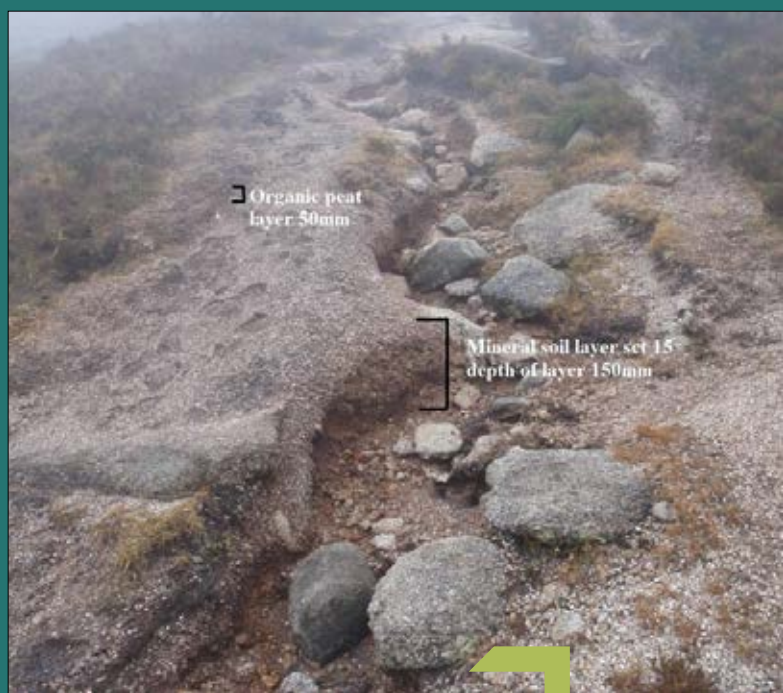


Plate 6 Typical example of exposed soil layers in eroded access corridors



Plate 7 Mourne Blackface sheep

population. Cattle rearing was once synonymous with the Mourne and only during the 19th century did sheep replace cattle in the hills, with the Mourne Blackface developed as a hardy mountain breed.

High mountain pastures, usable only in summer, encouraged farmers to 'booley' their livestock, saving lowland pasture for winter grazing. Booley huts and then sheepfolds or 'bochts' became the farming structure that dominated the uplands. The practice of cutting turf to heat the traditional cottages that encircled the uplands has also left its mark in places.

## 6.2

### Stone Working

Although agriculture was a predominant activity for centuries, by the 18th century the use of granite as a building stone came to the fore. The lower mountains of Millstone and Thomas between Slieve Donard and the coast had quarries opened in 1824 and 1859 respectively, with a railway line built to take the stone to the harbour below (see Granite Trail below). The quarrying of granite reached its peak by the late 1800s as better means of transport and an improvement in cutting techniques made an export trade in dressed stone possible. Mourne granite was used in new road and dock constructions in Belfast and Liverpool, and – it is claimed – was said to have 'paved Lancashire'.

## 6.3

### Forestry

The Mourne are encircled by state forest plantations managed by Forest Service NI, and are mostly based at previous private demesnes such as Donard Forest and Tollymore Forest. Donard Forest lies at the foot of the Mourne Mountains, providing one of the most popular access routes into the uplands via the Glen River and additional trails and woodland attractions. The Annesley family left their mark in this forest thanks to ornamental trees, such as Monkey Puzzle and Giant Redwood, which can be spotted close to the Glen River Bridge that was constructed in 1835 by the same family, allowing appreciation of the many cascades and waterfalls. The forest encompasses woodland of Scots and Corsican pine planted in 1927 and is designated as a Heritage Stand.



Plate 8 Glen River in Donard Forest

## 6.4

### Water Supply and The Mourne Wall

By the end of the 19th century, Belfast had become an industrial powerhouse, with a rocketing population. Chosen by the Belfast Water Commissioners for both the amount and purity of its water, Silent Valley, within the Eastern Mournes, became a giant industrial site and the Silent Valley reservoir opened in 1933. A second storage reservoir, Ben Crom, was opened in 1957. Today, the twin reservoirs supply most of Belfast and County Down with water.

The Mourne Wall, which was constructed between 1904 and 1922 to define and enclose the catchment area for the newly-constructed Silent Valley Reservoir, stretches for 22 miles and is 2.5m high and 1m thick in places. The wall is predominately constructed from local granite using traditional dry stone walling techniques and is broken at three points by lookout towers capped with triangulation points. These towers, which also serve as shelters, are located at the summits of Slieve Donard, Slieve Commedagh and Slieve Meelmore. The towers were the only part of the wall that were constructed using mortar.



Plate 9 The Mourne Wall on Slieve Donard



Plate 9 The Mourne Tower on Slieve Donard



## 7.0

# Natural Heritage

## 7.1

## Environmental Designations

The site was designated as an Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) in 1995 and a Natura 2000 site - Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in 2005 (total area is 7,507 ha).

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doe/eastern%20mournes-assi-citation-documents.pdf>

[https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doe/land-information-reasons-for-designation-special-area-of-conservation-eastern-mournes-2006\\_0.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doe/land-information-reasons-for-designation-special-area-of-conservation-eastern-mournes-2006_0.pdf)

The SAC designation is based on the presence of Annex I Habitats of European importance. All of these are likely to be present within the Slieve Donard area of the SAC.

### Annex I Habitats that are a primary reason for selection of the site:

- Northern Atlantic Heaths with *Erica tetralix*
- European dry heaths

### Annex I Habitats present as a qualifying feature, but not a primary reason for selection of the site:

- Alpine and boreal heaths
- Siliceous alpine and boreal grasslands
- Blanket bogs
- Siliceous scree of the montane to snow levels
- Siliceous rocky slopes with chasmophytic vegetation

## 7.2

## Flora and Fauna

The key features and species of nature conservation interest (Northern Ireland Priority Habitats) are:

- Montane heath on the summit of Slieve Donard with dwarf willow, a component of one of the rarer upland vegetation types. Other characteristic species include woolly fringe-moss and both alpine and fir clubmoss.
- Extensive areas of upland heathland especially along the mid-slopes/valley sides with good dwarf shrub development.
- Blanket bog on the spur of Thomas's Mountain with good vegetation cover, very little bare peat and a series of boggy pools, supporting scarce invertebrates, such as an upland crane-fly.
- Upland flushes, fens and swamps including extensive areas of wet heath and mire communities with locally distributed plants such as pale butterwort, black bog-rush, bog asphodel and star sedge that are characteristic of the nutrient-poor wetlands in the uplands of western UK. There are also some of the highest flushes supporting notable plants such as starry saxifrage.
- Inland rock outcrops and scree with ledge and crevice flora reported in historical surveys, including notable bryophytes at Eagle Rock and Black Stairs and Wilson's filmy-fern at Eagle Rock.
- A different heathland community occurs around the lower slopes, especially on the eastern edge, where western gorse is prominent.

The Mournes are home to species such as ravens, red grouse and peregrine falcons, as well as the Irish hare. On a winter's day you may be lucky enough to spot a beautiful snow bunting. Spring sees the arrival of wheatear and, in particular, two more scarce species: the ring ouzel, which is a very rare breeding summer visitor to Northern Ireland, and the red grouse, which had been recorded on Millstone Mountain in some years, though there is no proof of breeding. Wet springs and flushes are home to some unusual invertebrates, including the keeled skimmer, a nationally rare dragonfly. Eagle Rock is said to be the last known breeding site in Northern Ireland for white-tailed sea eagle in 1917, with both sea and golden eagles still commonplace in the Mournes until the mid-19th century.

The Montane heath vegetation includes some interesting and first recordings for Northern Ireland of feeding sawfly and two predatory ground beetles, with other scarce beetles present in the upland flushes, fens and swamps, wet heath and mire communities. Lower down, several noteworthy butterfly species have also been recorded, including the green hairstreak, the dark green fritillary and the grayling.



Plate 10 Woolly Fringe Moss (*Racomitrium Lanuginosum*)



Plate 11 Peregrine Falcon



Plate 10 Heather (*Calluna Vulgaris*)



Plate 11 Keeled Skimmer



## CHAPTER 8

# Built and Cultural Heritage

## 8.1

## Domangard and the Cairns

Slieve Donard is named after Domangard, a holy man who built a prayer cell on the mountain's summit. Its 'companion' mountain - Slieve Commedagh - means 'the mountain of watching' (as in look-out).

The 'greater cairn' on Donard's summit is what remains of a passage tomb that would have been the highest in Ireland and Britain when intact. That honour now goes to the surviving passage tomb atop Slieve Gullion in County Armagh. Sadly, the Slieve Donard passage tomb (which was originally some 40 metres in diameter) has been greatly robbed of its covering cairn and nothing at all remains of its chamber. A second Bronze Age cairn lies a couple of hundred metres away.

Up until the 1830s, people made a pilgrimage to the mountaintop in late July each year. It is likely that this was originally a Lughnasadh ritual that became Christianised. The church at Maghera and St Mary's Church at Ballaghanery Upper may have been starting points for the pilgrimage.



Plate 12 Remains of the Great Cairn on Slieve Donard



## 8.2

### Triangulation

In 1826, as part of the Principal Triangulation, Royal Engineers used Slieve Donard as a base to map Ireland. They camped on the mountaintop from late July until late November that year and used the two cairns to make triangulation points. The towers also have triangulation points.

## 8.3

### Ice House and Follies

The uplands were once owned by big estates - including the Annesley family - in the Donard area. The legacy of this can be seen in buildings and follies such as the ice house, which is situated above the tree line on the Glen River. This functioned as a primitive fridge and served the former Donard Lodge, owned by the Annesley family, bridges and other derelict structures throughout Donard Forest.

## 8.4

### The Brandy Pad

The Brandy Pad was used to smuggle items from the coast, including coffee, tea, silk and brandy. It is said that the smugglers would have made their way into the mountains via the Bloody Bridge area, and apparently there is a cave along the coast that was used to bring the contraband to shore. The Brandy Pad would then have been used to cross the top of the Annalong Valley and Silent Valley until, upon reaching the Hare's Gap, smaller groups would have dispersed in different directions to get out of the mountains and into the surrounding lands. The Brandy Pad is a popular thoroughfare and follows a contour for a long distance in the mountain section. It is therefore sustainable through much of its length.



Plate 13 Ice house, Glen River



Plate 14 Artwork at Bloody Bridge Car Park depicting a Brandy Pad Smuggler

## CHAPTER 9

# Recreation

## 9.1

## Significance of Slieve Donard and the Mournes for Recreation

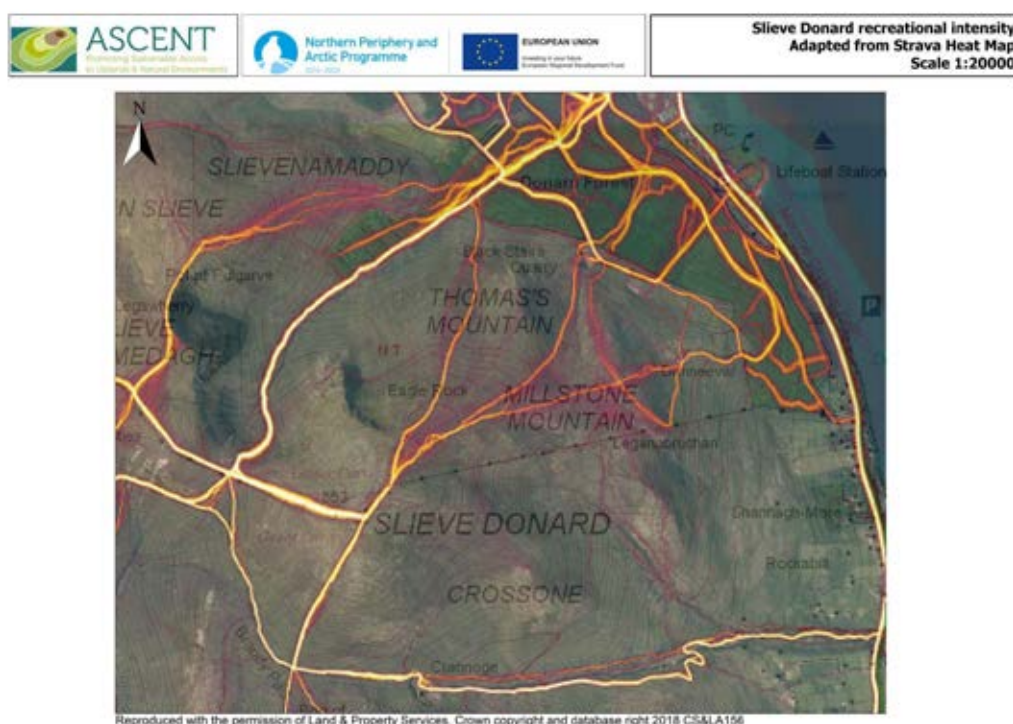
The Mournes are a highly accessible landscape, more so than many other similar landscapes in the UK and Ireland, despite the fact that there are limited asserted public access rights or agreements. The paths to Slieve Donard are strategically very important in that they access the most significant 'control point' within the whole of the Mourne Mountains - the summit of Slieve Donard itself. The majority of recreational activity is walking, fell running and orienteering, with a low level of mountain biking. (Davis, 2012).

The overall activity can be illustrated by the Strava Heat map at Plate 15, generated by users of Fitbit watches and other GPS devices. This not only shows the popularity of the main access routes, but also the spread of activity across the wider mountain on increasingly popular secondary access routes. The path networks throughout the Mournes, including on Slieve Donard, are, in effect, very large social trail networks, i.e., they have not been formally developed for recreation.

The main access routes leading into the uplands are primarily old quarry and farming tracks, now used for recreation, but also by farmers, land managers and emergency services. Beyond these tracks, the majority of the path networks consists of paths with no formal path structure and are essentially very well- established desire lines, often following sheep tracks. The nature of the topography, geology, ground condition and vegetation essentially restricts most recreational use to clearly-defined paths, but also makes it vulnerable to erosion. Some repair work has been carried out (see below), but this has not been in the context of a strategically-managed network.

A more detailed strategic assessment of the path network is provided in the associated ASCENT report on Slieve Donard Strategic Path Review.

Plate 15 Strava Heat map indicating the extent of access on Slieve Donard



## 9.2

### Legal Status of Access

Access to Slieve Donard and the Mourne in general is largely de facto (i.e., existing even though it is not planned or legally recognised). There are a few exceptions where legal status has been asserted and permissive paths agreed and this includes a public right of way along the Glen River to the summit of Slieve Donard, and a permissive path along the Granite Trail. There is no general right to access the open countryside in Northern Ireland such as the Right to Roam in England and Wales and Scotland, or the Everyman's Right in Finland.

Moreover, despite the fact that access is so 'permeable' and relatively easy compared to other sites in the UK, the options for regulating general access by permits or otherwise is probably extremely limited, and although the Event Scoping process provides a degree of monitoring and regulation of events, it is, at present, voluntary and inconsistent. It is clear also through stakeholder engagement that any attempt to control access by permits would be strongly opposed (Davis, 2012).



Plate 16 The main access routes on Slieve Donard

## 9.3

### The Main Routes for Accessing Slieve Donard

**Glen River** - The busiest in the Mourne, this route directly links Newcastle through Donard Forest alongside the Glen River to the Slieve Donard and Slieve Commedagh col and from there to the Donard summit (or alternatively the Commedagh summit and the Brandy Pad). This direct route is approximately 3 miles/5km one way. Electronic counters indicate approximately 90,000 journeys per annum (monitored at the forest/open mountain interface). The path follows a desire line and has been repaired in sections using stone pitching and aggregate techniques on an ad hoc basis.



Plate 17 The Glen River Route To The Summit Of Slieve Donard



### Bloody Bridge via the Bog of Donard and the Brandy Pad

This route begins in the Bloody Bridge car park and follows the Bloody Bridge River to the Mourne Wall at the Bog of Donard, where users either follow the wall to the summit or carry along the Brandy Pad to below the col with Commedagh and ascend from there. The distance is approximately 3.2/4.2 miles or 5.2km/6.8km one way depending on the route chosen. Electronic counters indicate approximately 30,000 journeys per annum (monitored at the Glen Fofanny Footbridge at the NT/open mountain interface). The route is again a desire line, albeit there is a section that runs on a disused quarry track. Very little path repair work has been carried out on this access corridor compared to the Glen River route (albeit the quarry track was repaired to encourage users to avoid using the open mountain).

**Granite Trail** - From the harbour in Newcastle, the trail follows the old bogey line to the quarries at Thomas's, Millstone and Drineever, and from there follows unmaintained routes over the foothills to the northern slopes of Donard. This is becoming a more popular route and the Granite Trail is promoted as a heritage trail. Electronic counters indicate approximately 13,000 journeys per annum. (monitored at the bottom of the bogey line). The bogey line has been fixed for walkers and also the routes to the quarries on the open mountain.

Other popular routes include the **Black Stairs** to the west of Thomas's quarry albeit there is no maintained path and there are steep vegetated/peat outcrops to navigate. This is particularly popular for fell running events.

Access via the **Glen Fofanny** River from the Bloody Bridge is also noted as a low level but popular route and monitoring will indicate if this becomes busier.



Plate 20 The Black Stairs



Plate 18 Bloody Bridge Quarry Track and the Bog Of Donard to the Summit of Donard

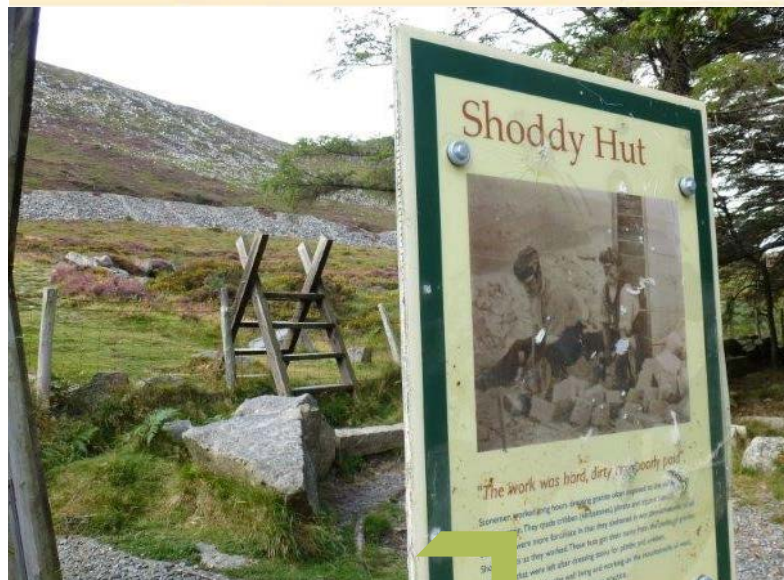


Plate 19 Granite trail promotional material & top of the Bogey Line Section

## 9.4

### Increasing Use

Recreational use in the Mourne, with the honeypot site being Slieve Donard, has been increasing in recent years and it is predicted that this will continue (Davis 2012, MAAS 2007, etc.). Studies have indicated a predicted increase of 3% per annum in visitors to the Mourne AONB (Buchanan 2006).

The Mourne area and Slieve Donard is seen as an important site for the delivery of initiatives to meet government agendas relating to tourism, economic regeneration and health and well-being. This is evidenced, for example, in the Mourne Gateway Study (below) where regional and local government is investigating options to develop visitor experiences based on the combined attraction of Slieve Donard, Donard Forest and Newcastle.

The increasing value of challenge walks as charity fundraisers and an increase in adventure races and mountain races, coupled with the advent of online forums for walkers, mountain bikers and fell runners, all provide reasons for increased demand (Davis, 2012).

## 9.5

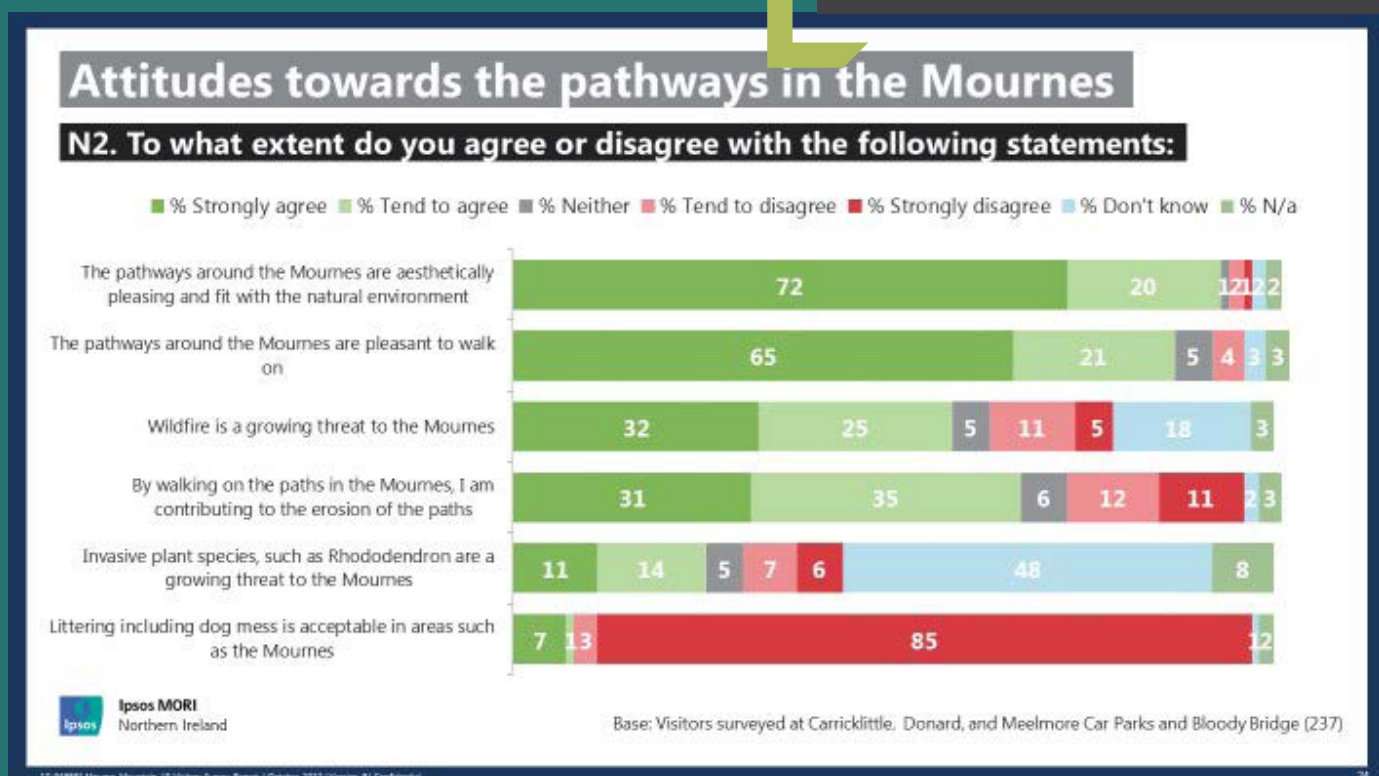
### Visitor Opinions

#### IPSOS MORI October 2017

Forty per cent of visitors questioned at Donard car park in Newcastle said their reason for visiting the area was that it was good for walking.

Moreover, the survey found that the aesthetics and natural fit of the mountain paths had made a good impression on visitors, with 72% strongly agreeing.

Fig 1 Summary of IPSOS MORI poll of visitors to Slieve Donard and other Mourne Mountain access points.





## 9.6

### Events

A review of mountain walking and hill running events in 2018 identified that, of 27 known events -including hill running, charity and challenge events using the Mournes -, 16 (approximately 60%) were using Slieve Donard or its foothills.

In 2009, NIEA and Sport NI invested in the development of an Event Scoping Process (for the Mournes and other designated sites in Northern Ireland), primarily in response to a concern about unregulated access, in particular from large scale events, on the Natura 2000 (SAC) habitat. In effect, the Event Scoping Process demonstrates a generic Article 6 assessment of the wider recreational impact. This resulted in the establishment of a voluntary event planning and assessment procedure found at: <http://www.outdooreventplanning.com/>

In 2013, a more detailed study of the events in the Mournes was carried out by MHT and ORNI with the help of volunteers. Of a total of 30 known events in the Mournes (average would be 100-200 participants with some over 500), 21 of them (70%) were on Slieve Donard and most of those used the Glen River route. Of a more detailed investigation of 10 of the biggest events (five used Slieve Donard), the main findings were:

- Unregulated events (as opposed to planned and promoted events by an established event organiser or charity) go under the radar and can have a big impact on the sites. How could these events be identified and organisers engaged with?
- Stewarding and briefing participants about the importance of protecting the environment were generally good and litter was generally well managed.
- Some events had half of the participants new to the activity, whereas other, such as the Mourne Mountain Marathon had a higher proportion of experienced users (indicating their impact may be less).
- The events were a combination of using main paths and also off-piste orienteering. The former arguably kept to an already eroded line, while the latter dissipated impact.

- Waymarking the event included temporary post and tape, temporary arrows, and spray-painted arrows on forest trails.
- There was a favourable response to the idea of a 'giving back' initiative (in financial donation or volunteering) to help protect the paths.
- Some key sites for attention included the Black Stairs on Slieve Donard

The Mourne Outdoor Recreation Forum subsequently developed a voluntary event waymarking protocol where a key change was an agreed prohibition against any spray painting.

## 9.7

### Impact on Habitat, Flora and Fauna

Impacts on habitat have been observed on all sections where the main routes access Slieve Donard and now increasingly on the secondary routes. The impact is assessed in more detail in the ASCENT reports: Slieve Donard Habitat Condition Assessment and Slieve Donard Strategic Path Review.

Plate 21 High proportion of *nardis stricta* in surveyed areas indicates impact from users and grazing





In particular, access (along with grazing impact) has negatively affected the rarest, most fragile and arguably the most important habitat within the study area, namely the Montane habitat, which is only found in a few key locations within the island of Ireland. The Eastern Mourne ASSI Condition Assessments 2003 and 2009 state that human impact is a contributory factor of the Montane habitat being in unfavourable condition and requires mitigation to be carried out: The alpine heaths and grasslands were both recorded as unfavourable. Signs of present overgrazing are extensive, especially in the alpine boreal siliceous grasslands, with the evidence being in the very low cover of *Racomitrium lanuginosum*. The impact of humans in these habitats cannot be dismissed and evidence of significant disturbance was also noted as a contributory factor.

The open slopes and short vegetation mean that walkers are not confined to a single narrow corridor; in fact, they are able to move across a wide area, particularly when descending. This open landscape may initially have dissipated impacts but, as pressures have increased, the vegetation cover is becoming increasingly impacted upon. Moreover, the Mourne Wall greatly facilitates access by a wide range of users, as, essentially, the Mourne Wall serves as a guide or “handrail” that walkers can follow in all weather conditions, funnelling users into a busy corridor. The above has, in turn, led to very significant pressures on this habitat and path repairs have not fully succeeded in minimising or managing impacts (below).

## 9.8

### Erosion Control and Path Repair

The path from Glen River to the col and summit has received sporadic repair since the 1990s, to some extent driven by the availability of resources rather than any strategic overview. This is typical of similar works across other protected upland areas in the UK, such as the Cairngorms and Snowdonia.

National Trust management on Donard in the 1990s centred on upland erosion control. From 1993 to 1996 and from 1998 to 2002 a team of between three and five footpath workers of the National Trust carried out upland footpath work, fundamentally to restore vegetation and ameliorate the impacts of erosion on the landscape.



Plate 22 Montane habitat at the Slieve Donard summit



Plate 23 Evidence of widening impact near the col partly due to a combination of increased use and the open terrain where earlier pitching has been left exposed

This focused on sections from the tree line to the steep ascent to the col; from the ascent to the col; and from the col to the summit. The main technique was pitching using locally-won granite field stone. This was in part funded by Environment and Heritage Service (now NI Environment Agency). NT managers have, for a number of years, endeavoured to minimise the impact of walkers' feet on this habitat by carrying out path repairs, and other initiatives, such as getting walkers to spread grass seed and slow release fertiliser in the barren summit areas.

In 2012, MHT lead a NIEA funded repair of a 1km section from the third bridge to the end of the tree line, attempting to define a more sustainable line and introduce aggregate trails (to mimic the sustainable natural contour trails such as the Brandy Pad), rather than use traditional pitching. The route through the forest alongside the Glen River has also seen increased erosion and this has widened the braided desire lines out into the forest as tree roots and rocks made walking difficult.

However, the above capital projects have suffered from a lack of dedicated maintenance resources, while user numbers have increased. These facts, along with more erratic weather patterns, are causing further disturbance to the access corridors. Consequently, the focus of the ASCENT path team will be on trialling a combination of a range of techniques (including the use of treated scots pine branches as retaining aggregate 'steps' or platforms to mimic natural exposed root platforms), and working with a volunteer path team to make constant efforts to try and address the problems with the site and build stakeholder support.

Other routes to Donard were worked on including the 'triangle' from the col to the Brandy Pad in 2013 (thanks to funding from SportNI and Tourism NI), and some limited work in the Bloody Bridge area up to the ford crossing above the water pipeline. The quarry track was refurbished in 2010 with NIEA funding, with the aim of defining it as the main route to the bog of Donard and mitigating impact on the north side of the Bloody Bridge river on the open designated heathland. The latter also included the (re)installation of a footbridge across the Glen Fofanny River to steer users towards the quarry track route.

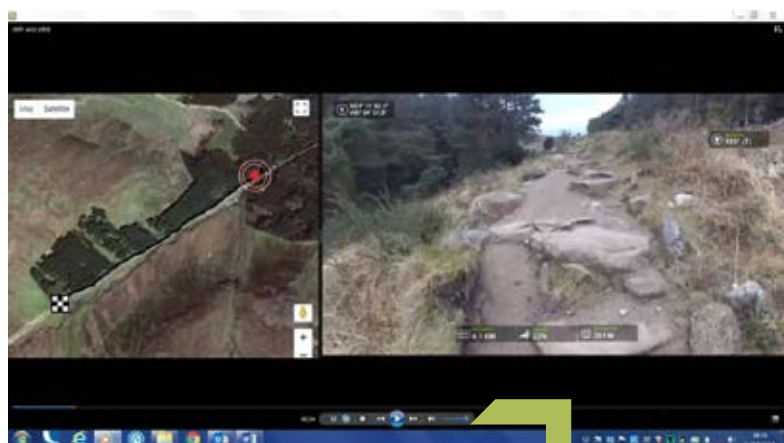


Plate 24 Garmin virb monitoring of path erosion and repair techniques, Glen River



Plate 25 Path Issues: Braiding alongside Aggregate Paths on the Glen River and exposed tree roots in Donard Forest



Plate 26 ASCENT Path Team working with MHT Volunteer Path Team at the Glen River



## 9.9

### Safety

The 2012 Mournes Strategic Path Review noted that the Mournes are used by an increasingly wide range of users, with many observed as being unprepared for the upland landscape, with inappropriate clothing and footwear, food and drink, map reading skills etc., and there are regular incidents where people have had to be rescued from Slieve Donard. The dilemma is whether there is a requirement to make the main routes safer by engineering them to e.g., remove slips and trip hazards. However, this may simply increase the problem by creating a false sense of safety, and, in particular, sanitise the wilderness aspect of Donard, which is its inherent attraction. Safety is a key issue for ASCENT Partners and there will be a range of interpretations by managers given local ethics and management traditions.

## 9.10

### Associated Issues

Associated management issues have been observed to increase as use increases, and therefore, need to be addressed, such as erosion, litter, memorials, dog attacks on sheep, damage to built heritage such as the Mourne Wall and cairns, wild party camping, and other associated impacts (see below).

### 9.10.1

#### Memorials

Memorials are a sporadic but increasing problem. They occur on the summit area of Slieve Donard and also other mountains in the Mournes. Best practice has been to discourage them and try and develop an alternative way of commemorating a loved one, such as a memorial garden below Donard Forest, but, to date, no coordinated and sustained plan has been implemented. ASCENT can help focus attention on this issue and help develop an agreed way of managing it.



Plate 27 Using an excavator for erosion control and path work in the Mournes



Plate 28 Before and after path repair work using a 3-tonne excavator near the Slieve Donard/Slieve Commedagh col



Plate 29 Memorials on the great cairn on Slieve Donard summit 2017



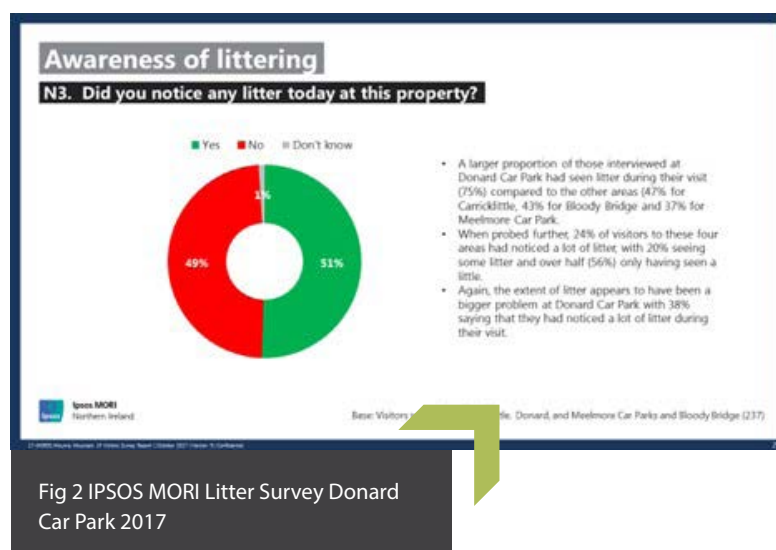
## 9.10.2

## Litter and Wild Party Camping

Litter has been observed to be an increasing problem, particularly along the Glen River route from Newcastle, and in the summit tower. The IPSOS MORI 2017 highlighted this issue:

Donard Forest can also suffer from wild party camping, which is more likely to result in litter and other debris being left behind (unlike routine mountain camping) - often blamed in part on the 'disposable' nature of camping equipment given its increasingly cheaper cost.

Organisations such as NT and MHT carry out litter lifts, and often organise litter lift events along with others such as NMDDC, Keep NI Beautiful and Belfast Royal Academy School. They have also written media articles to highlight the issue. However, the problem continues and a coordinated and resourced response is needed, to which the ASCENT project can contribute.



## 9.10.3

## Dog Attacks on Livestock

The open mountain is grazed with traditional Mourne blackface sheep, in part to deliver appropriate management to maintain the Natura 2000 designated features, including wet and dry heath and montane habitats. However, recreation users often take dogs with them, and this has resulted in dogs worrying or attacking sheep. Signs on the Glen River and Bloody Bridge routes ask dog owners to keep their dogs on a lead, but these are often ignored.

## 9.10.4

## Wildfire

Wildfire has become a significant issue in NI as in other northern European countries, and Slieve Donard has been affected by regular fires. The Bloody Bridge area has been recorded as having the highest number of gorse fires in NI (NIFRS). In 2012, a report was carried out to analyse the wildfire risk and propose mitigation including land management, and this has resulted in prescribed burning to manage key fire gateways in the Bloody Bridge to the Bog of Donard corridor (2012 Eastern Mournes Wildfire Report, Wildfire Advisory Service). While increased recreational use is not directly linked to an increased wildfire occurrence, it is important to assess the risk to users and the possibility of negligence with a campfire causing wildfire.

## 10.0

# New Challenges or Opportunities

## 10.1

### Mourne Gateway Study

As noted above, it is predicted that recreational pressures will continue to increase on Slieve Donard. Of particular interest is the Mourne Mountains Gateway Study (LUC in association with Tourism Resources Company and Mullin Design Associates, 2017).

The study was commissioned by Tourism NI and Newry, Mourne & Down District Council to investigate options to develop visitor experiences based on the combined attraction of Slieve Donard, Donard Forest and Newcastle.

The overarching vision is to provide a world-class, international tourist attraction (or attractions), which develop sustainable enhancement of access from the town of Newcastle to the Mourne Mountains, foothills and forests, while also broadening the recreational activity provision therein.

Of particular relevance for the ASCENT project is the proposal to construct a gondola from Donard Park to Thomas's Quarry and to develop the quarry as an innovative visitor experience. This is seen as being the hook on which broader investment in facilities is dependent.

There has been significant debate about how the gondola and quarry proposal will impact on the designated habitat, how they will encourage less-skilled users into a remote and challenging landscape, and exponentially cause increased erosion and related issues (litter etc.) on a lesser used part of the mountain (i.e., not directly on the Glen River route).

Mitigation has been proposed in the form of increased ranger and maintenance provision and also the development of lower level linkages from Thomas's Quarry to Bloody Bridge to the south, and to the Glen River and further from Donard Forest to Tollymore Forest to the north, as well as more extensive visitor facilities with Donard Forest and Donard Park, such as a mountain visitor centre and wider links to Murlough NNR to spread the impact.

Moreover, there are proposals for a European Geopark in the Newry and Mourne area, which includes access to key sites on Slieve Donard.

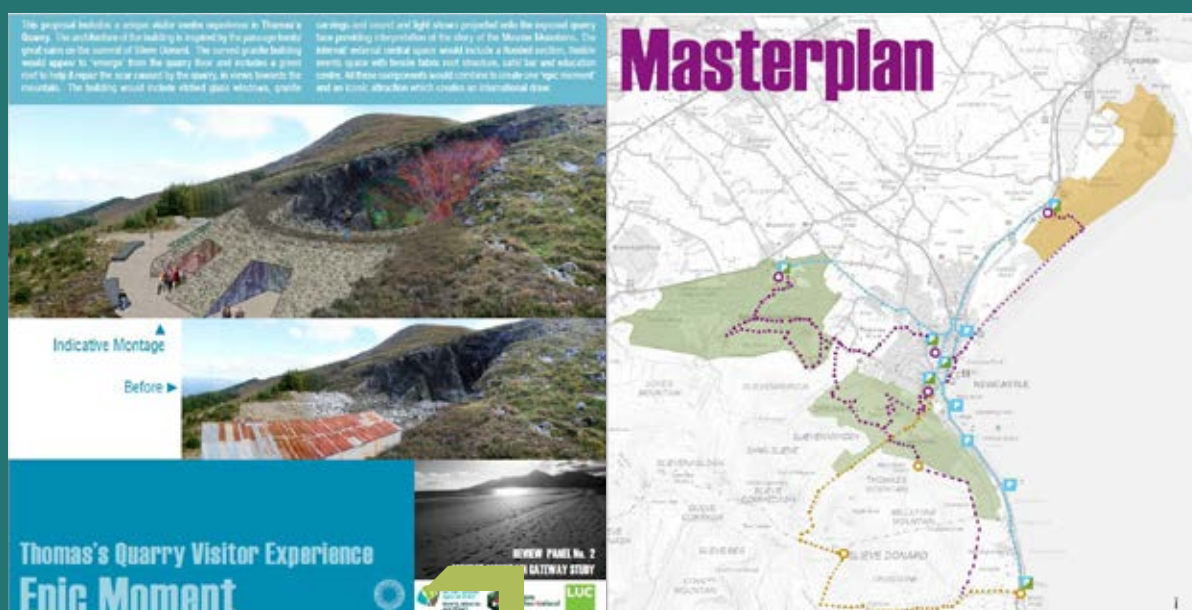


Plate 30 Mourne Mountain Gateway Study

## 11.0

# The Way Forward

### Need for strategic management

Reports have highlighted the importance of strategic management, and to resourcing and developing low level alternatives to help deflect impact from the sensitive upland and montane habitat and to avoid the need to create engineer paths and sanitise the wilderness (Davis 2012). Moreover, the ASCENT Workshop on 22/23 November 2017 identified the need to develop a network to support managers and practitioners to further their knowledge, skills, training and coordination on policy change to properly resource a strategic recreational management approach across the island of Ireland.

### Diversiory Routes

An important strand of recreation management in the study area should be to develop more formal low-level recreational opportunities at key “access nodes”, such as Donard and Tollymore Forests where hard management measures can be put in place. This is potentially very important in creating a more balanced hierarchy of recreational use within the area. These locations could still provide access to the wider path networks, but their primary function would be one of managing who enters high ground and how, and thereby go some way to address wider issues.

### Intervention Vs Wilderness

One of the challenges will be balancing, on the one hand, a requirement voiced for better access corridor definition, management, site information and rangering, with, on the other hand, a desire for less constraint and less interference with the landscape in order to preserve the wilderness experience. These are not mutually exclusive aspirations, but will require a careful approach to ensure an appropriate balance can be achieved.



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## Appendix 1

# List of References

*Mourne & Slieve Croob Strategic Path Review, Davis, 2012*

*Mourne National Park Working Party Report 2007*

*CAAN, The Mourne AONB Access Study 2007 (MAAS 2007) for EHS and Sport NI.*

*Colin Buchanan and Partners Ltd. Tourism in Mourne: Current and Potential Economic Impact 2006*

*MHT Mourne AONB Visitor Survey 2005*

*MHT Mourne AONB Action Plan 2012*

*NITB Mourne Signature Project Action Plan 2009*

*Outdoor Recreation NI Operational Plan 2012-2015*

*Mourne Outdoor Recreation Action Plan. Outdoor Recreation NI on behalf of Sport NI, 2014*

*Mourne Mountains Gateway Study, LUC in association with Tourism Resources Company and Mullin Design Associates, 2017*

*Eastern Mourne Wildfire Report, Wildfire Advisory Service, 2012*

## Appendix 2

# Plates and Figures

*Plate 1 Slieve Donard, Newcastle and Dundrum Bay “Where the Mountains of Mourne Sweep Down to the Sea”; Percy French*

*Plate 2 The Eastern part of the Mourne Mountains containing the 12 highest peaks, with Slieve Donard rising above Newcastle in the north-east corner*

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*Plate 7 Mourne Blackface Sheep*

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*Plate 20 The Black Stairs*

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*Plate 22 Montane habitat at the Slieve Donard Summit*

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*Plate 23 Evidence of widening impact near the col partly due to a combination of increased use and the open terrain where earlier pitching has been left exposed*

*Plate 24 Garmin virb monitoring of path erosion and repair techniques, Glen River*

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*Plate 26 ASCENT Path Team working with MHT Volunteer Path Team at the Glen River*

*Plate 27 Using an excavator for Erosion Control and Path Work in the Mournes*

*Plate 28 Before and after path repair work using a 3-tonne excavator near the Slieve Donard/Slieve Commedagh col*

*Plate 29 Memorials on the great cairn on Slieve Donard Summit 2017*

*Fig 2 IPSOS MORI Litter Survey Donard Car Park 2017*

*Plate 30 Mourne Mountain Gateway Study*



**For Further Information on the ASCENT Project, contact:**

**Rosita Mahony**

**ASCENT Project Manager**

Donegal County Council

Station Island

Lifford

Co Donegal

F93 X7PK

Ireland

**Telephone:** (074) 9172261

**Email:** [rosita.mahony@donegalcoco.ie](mailto:rosita.mahony@donegalcoco.ie)

**Web:** [www.ascent-project.eu](http://www.ascent-project.eu)

**Facebook:** ASCENTProjectNPA

**Twitter:** ASCENTProjectEU