

Slieve Donard Counts

SLIEVE DONARD

NEWCASTLE

NORTHERN IRELAND



**Cedars Walking Group -
Glen River, Slieve Donard**

Surveying to inform strategic management of iconic landscapes

The Mourne are a highly accessible landscape and Slieve Donard is the most significant 'control point' within the whole of the Mourne, with increasing use in recent years. The majority of recreational activity is walking, fell running & orienteering with a low level of mountain biking. Slieve Donard is also increasingly popular for events including charity fund raising walks, and adventure and mountain races.

Counts show that the main access routes to Donard from Glen River, Bloody Bridge and the Granite Trail, have over 130,000 journeys p.a. Moreover, other routes such as the Black Stairs have no maintained paths with steep vegetated/peat outcrops to navigate, but is particularly popular for fell running events, and experiencing higher use than before.

As visitors increase, so do impacts such as path and habitat erosion and littering. The site is a designated habitat and farmed landscape, and has a number of landowners, including state, NGO and private trustee, so there is a need to understand the visitor dynamic to be able to mitigate current, and predict future pressures on Slieve Donard and inform a strategic way forward.

To this end ASCENT staff have been involved in a number of visitor monitoring activities including detailed visual surveys at fixed points to assess not just who uses the mountain but what 'lines' they take in eroded areas (informing path repair), event monitoring, and contributed to planning and delivery of site questionnaires including an IPSOS MORI poll at key Donard access points.

Outcome

A detailed survey at Slieve Donard was undertaken in July 2018 on the Glen River path where it exits the forest and enters the open mountain near the icehouse, where counters show 90,000 journeys p.a. Weather was an overcast 19C.

166 visitors were counted; 97 male and 69 females, and age profile ranged from children to 60+ with a large proportion being 30-50yrs. People tended to walk in pairs or in small groups with only 17 people visiting on their own. Two youth groups were observed including a Duke of Edinburgh group of 9 teenagers, and another of 11 people that appeared less prepared wearing sweat pants and trainers and carried plastic bags rather than rucksacks.

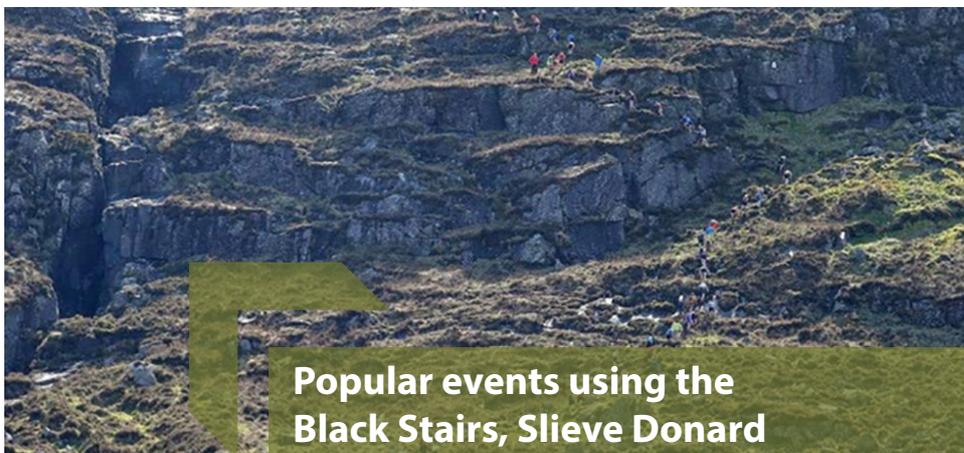
Preparedness for the open mountain ranged from experienced and well kitted out fell-runners and walkers through to the youth group. Only 2 groups had dogs - this has been an issue for sheep farmers, who have been concerned about worrying livestock, so observing how owners 'behave' is important.

Questionnaires showed that most people using Donard hill-walked over the previous 12 months, with some

undertaking lowland walks/bouldering and wildlife watching. Reasons for visiting included relaxation, health and well-being, stress relief and social. The Glen River path was rated well for aesthetics & accessibility; but litter was pointed out as a problem.

Other surveys in August/September 2017 showed that 79% of visitors to Donard access points lived in NI and only 6% were from outside UK/Ireland. The most popular activity was walking and 73% been to the site before.

In 2018, a total of 68 walking, running or cycling events were identified in the Mourne AONB. 36 (53%) of these events were held in the Mourne Mountains and 16 (44%) of these were on Slieve Donard. Out of the 16 events on Donard; 7 were charity events (44%). This is consistent with previous years and shows a general heightened interest in events, with Donard being a main hook for charities and challenge event organisers. An event protocol has been developed to try and mitigate environmental impact and encourage best practice, and ASCENT has contributed to a recent review and seminar to promote buy-in from organisers.



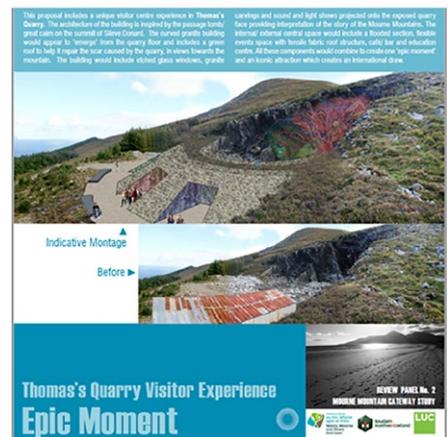
Popular events using the Black Stairs, Slieve Donard

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Key Findings & Learning Points

Monitoring provides a baseline from which to predict the impact and opportunity of developments and potential 'game changers'. Donard in particular is seen as an important site for the delivery of a wide range of government agendas relating to tourism, economic regeneration and health and well-being. For example the Mourne Gateway Study proposes options to develop visitor experiences based on the combined attraction of Slieve Donard, Donard Forest and Newcastle, including a gondola lift and visitor facility at Thomas's quarry above the tree line on the foothills of Donard.

Going forward, ASCENT is working with Donard land owners including the National Trust and the District Council to play a key role in coordinating surveys to inform the vision for Donard.