

The right approach



Tapping into the power of volunteers

THEMATIC SEMINAR

STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING 4

TUESDAY 24TH APRIL 2018

NEWCASTLE

NORTHERN IRELAND

Approaches to Path Repair in Sensitive Landscapes

The Northern Ireland Thematic Seminar was held during the ASCENT Steering group visit to Northern Ireland from 22 April – 27 April 2018. The trip was hosted by Newry Mourne and Down District Council (NMDDC), and sub-partner Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT). The trip profiled Northern Ireland’s current approach for meeting the rising demand for access to remote and sensitive upland areas and the issues involved.

It was also an opportunity to highlight the findings of the ASCENT workshop in November 2017; *Upland Path Repair = are Good Principles Enough?*, which saw the need to improve effective networking across land managers and practitioners that enabled easy and quick access to information, advice, skills, and training. This focused thinking and debate throughout the week and provided a framework for the thematic seminar.

The Thematic Seminar itself was held on Tuesday 24th April at Tory Bush Cottages; a local Mourne tourism

business. ASCENT Partners were joined by participants from Katla Geo-Park, Sjálfböðalíða Umhverfisstofnunar (Iceland Conservation Volunteers), and Mossfellsbær and Skaftárhreppur Municipalities in Iceland, along with the Mourne Upland Path Volunteer team, Mountaineering Ireland and representatives of local walking groups.

The theme of the seminar was Approaches to Path Repair in Sensitive Landscapes. The seminar was opened by Chair of Mourne Heritage Trust, Mr Desmond Patterson and included

presentations from McGowan Ltd and the ASCENT Path Team with MHT Upland Path Volunteers, and a plenary discussion.

The theme was chosen in part because the ASCENT Teacher-Learner approach was based on NI’s and, in particular, MHT’s role as the path experts, with the ASCENT Path Team based in the Mournes, and also because of the significant contractor, and in-house and volunteer path work activity in the area.

Outcome

McGowan Ltd, Civil & Environmental Engineering has significant experience of upland path work, and Ross McGowan, director, gave a presentation describing the company's ethos, past work, and plans for repairing the Slieve Gullion summit path in 2019.

Their careful approach including pre-works considerations enabled them to carry out remedial works at Sliabh Liag in Donegal, Ireland, among the highest sea cliffs in Europe and a Special Area of Conservation, where their job was to 'fix' a previous contractors' unsuccessful path works. They used local stone for pitching and retaining walls, and aggregate and geotextile for level paths, but are also adept at utilising plant machinery for path work, and helicopters to supply materials. The company adds value by holding tailored training events during a contract, which provide guidance on upland path work principles/techniques, as well as hands-on practical sessions.

The public sector/NGO perspective was given by the ASCENT Path Team; Philip Savage and Katie Taylor, who illustrated

the innovation theme underpinning ASCENT including branch & aggregate steps across tree roots, sheep wool as membrane for 'floating paths' across wet ground, natural path effects achieved using excavators in remote areas, and using multimedia for documenting techniques/training. Slieve Donard and Slieve Gullion were used as examples, particularly as participants were visiting and carrying out path works on their main access routes during the NI visit, but also path and habitat restoration work was shown from the wider Mournes. The value of skilled volunteers was also championed, three of whom gave an insight into their motivations: James Fisher, a graphic designer looking to switch career paths to the environmental sector; Marc Vinas, a Catalan ecologist looking to gain broader experience; and Andrew Baird, a local farmer and recent university graduate seeking employment opportunities. They strongly valued the social aspect and the sense of achievement in helping to protect sensitive uplands from increasing use.



Key Findings & Learning Points

The plenary discussion highlighted the problems that all ASCENT partners face of working within resource constraints and the lack of a strategic and joined up approach by government, despite the increasing pressures. Often resources were only available as capital funding, but this could result in inappropriate 'fixes', that were exacerbated without revenue funds to support a constant effort; at least providing maintenance of capital works, but more ideally, a stitch in time capacity.

Moreover, both presentations referred to the importance of applying best practice, including Helping the Hills, but the plenary discussion reiterated that these were limited without broader skill sharing and development and strategic resourcing as identified in the 'November 2017 workshop.'



NI Thematic seminar at Tory Bush Cottages - welcome by MHT Chair, Desmond Patterson

FURTHER INFORMATION

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