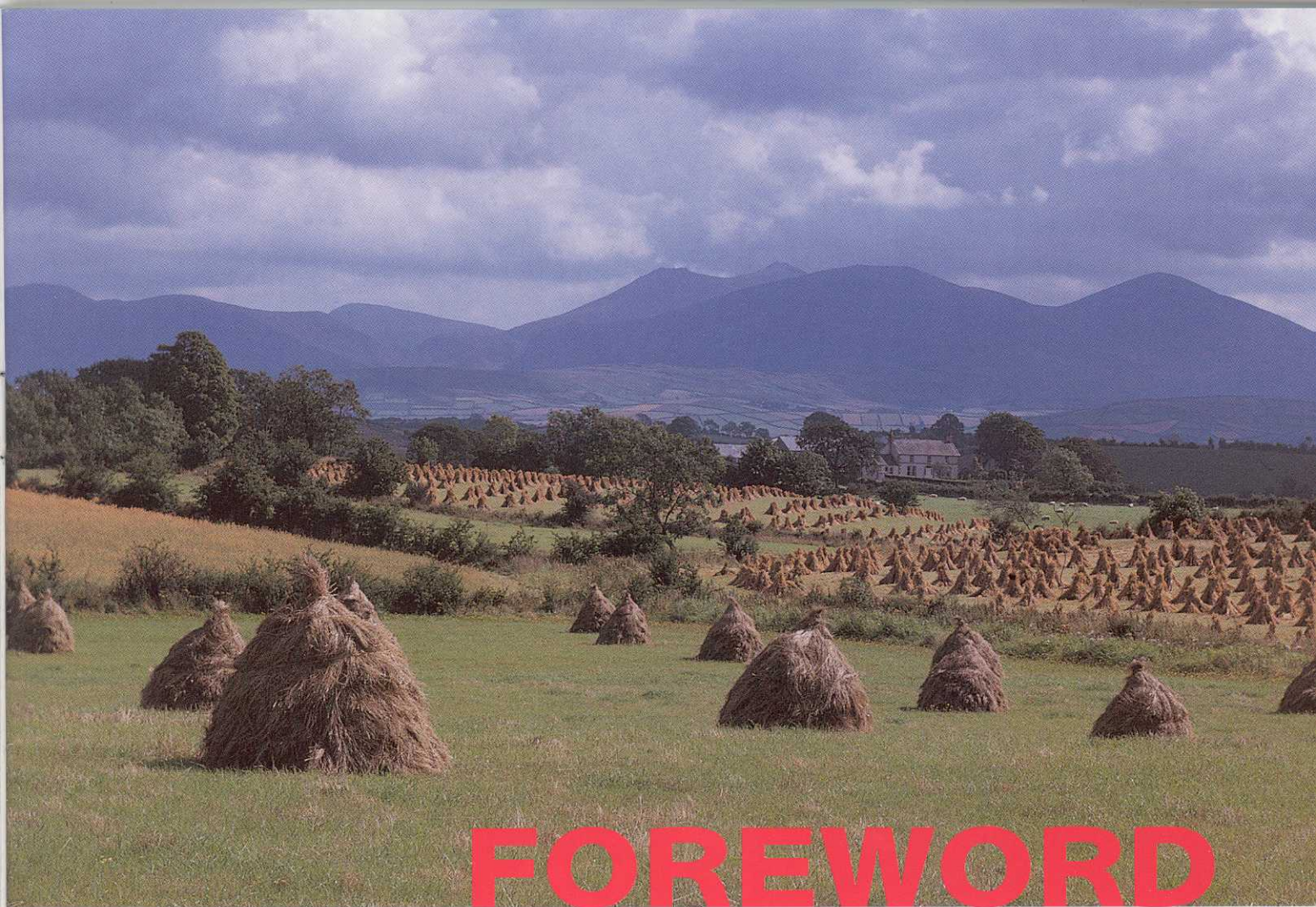


TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE COUNTRYSIDE



A countryside **RECREATION** strategy for Northern Ireland

**A Report by
The Countryside Recreation
Working Group**



FOREWORD

**Lord Dubs,
Minister for Agriculture
and the Environment**

The pressures for conservation and recreation do not always sit easily with the needs and aspirations of a rural population which has seen agriculture facing crises of consumer confidence and the collapse of traditional markets.

The term "countryside recreation" covers a myriad of activities, many of which in themselves are mutually incompatible and some of which, unless carefully sited and managed, can do considerable environmental damage. However, recreation is also an area of considerable growth in our economy which can and should bring benefits to the rural economy and rural communities, as well as to the participants.

I welcome the effort of the Working Group in developing a Strategy for countryside recreation which includes the values of mutual respect, sustainable access and maintaining a quality of experience.

These are values that we can all adhere to in order to help realise the vision.

I commend this document as an important contribution to the debate on the future of our countryside.

Alf Dubs



John McFall MP
Minister for Education
and Health

"Countryside recreation matters"

There are many reasons for getting into the outdoors; to escape from the routine of daily life, to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of the countryside, to get fit, to be close to nature or to experience the thrill of 'an adrenalin sport'. This diversity is reflected by the countryside resource itself, particularly in Northern Ireland, with its patchwork of landscapes which play host to a number of different functions ranging from agriculture to tourism, fishing to recreation.

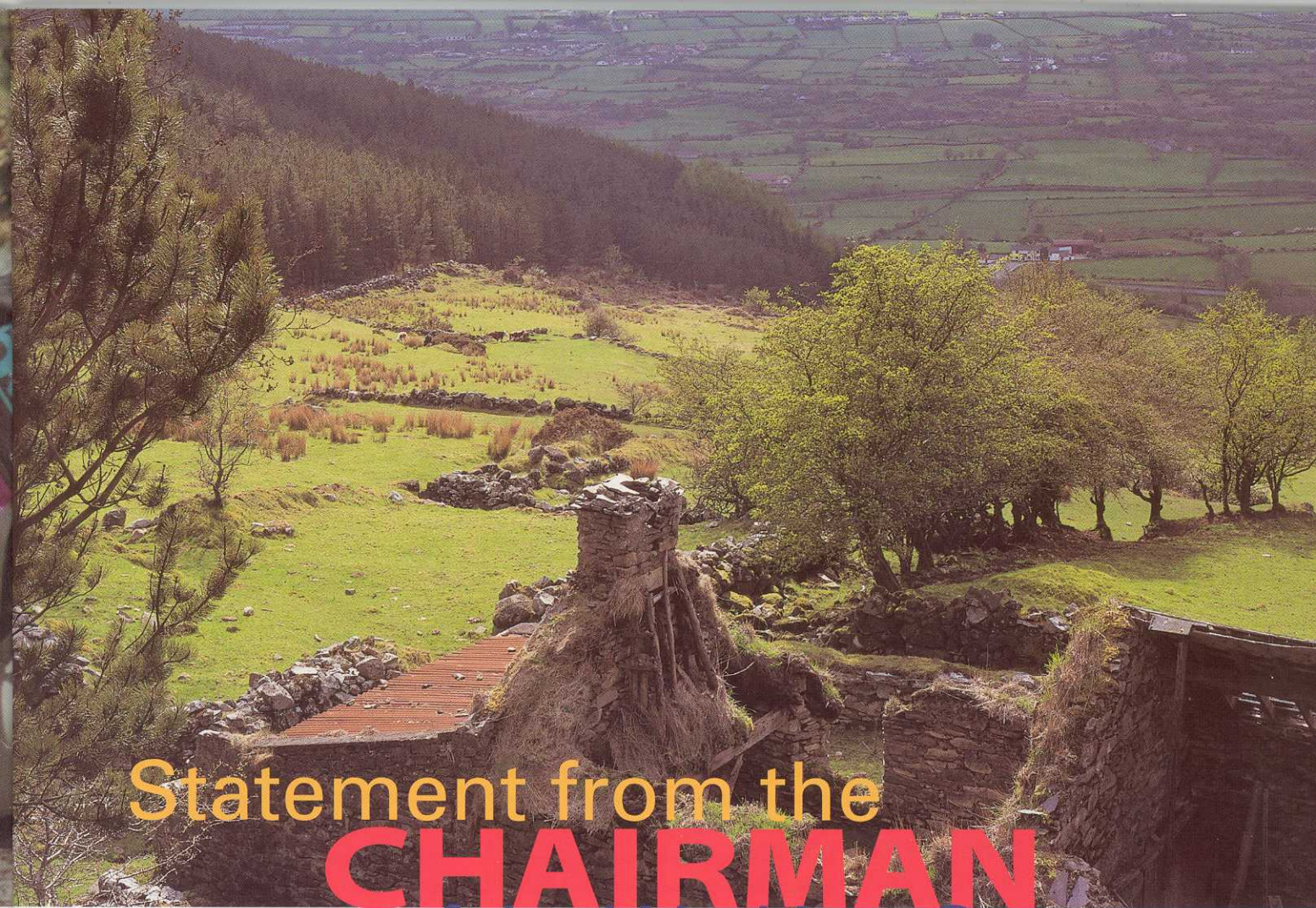
For many people it is therefore no surprise that conflicts of interest develop and that significant barriers constrain participation in countryside recreation. However this is no excuse for inactivity particularly when one considers the considerable health, social and economic benefits which are available to both

the individual and community through countryside recreation. These, together with the forces of change that are evident in the rural economy present new opportunities for development which can only be optimised if carefully managed.

I welcome the strategy as an important milestone in realising more fully the potential benefits of countryside recreation. The challenge is to ensure that we do this in a sustainable manner. The strategy provides the framework for this to happen but requires the ongoing commitment of the various interests to make sure that the vision becomes a reality. Extensive consultation has confirmed widespread support for the new structures and programmes proposed. By accepting this challenge of collective responsibility our actions will herald in a new era in which it is agreed that:

" Countryside Recreation Matters!"

John McFall



Statement from the **CHAIRMAN** of the Working Group

The future of the countryside is one of the most burning political issues - not just in Northern Ireland, but throughout Europe. At its heart is the dilemma - is the countryside a factory floor for food production to be managed and controlled by the rural communities or is it a recreation resource shaped and managed for the delight of urban dwellers and tourists?

It is of course both and therein lies the potential for conflict, especially in Northern Ireland where the relationship between urban and rural is tight and inter-knit; where almost all land is owned by individual farmers, not large estates or the public, and where most of the prized recreation resources are also the raw materials by which others make their living.

Active recreation can also conflict with the need to protect the environment and, even though most users would subscribe to a care and concern for the environment, as numbers grow pressures and problems inevitably occur.

International realities cannot be avoided - the numbers of people living off agricultural income alone is falling and likely to continue to do so. Farm diversification, especially into tourism is a necessity if rural communities are to survive and the recreation resource of the countryside is central to the growing market of activity tourism.

Urban dwellers also make a direct contribution to the rural economy and could do much more if the infrastructure was in place - encouraging longer stays and closer contacts. The reality is that most of the population live in towns and cities and it is vital they respect and understand the countryside to ensure that all policies contribute to its sustainable future.

The focus of this document is not about solving individual access problems but **to set out an agreed strategic framework to ensure proper management and consideration of recreation in the countryside.**

It is against this background that the Sports Council and the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment established a Working Group and facilitated the intensive programme of research, discussions and workshops over the last two years that has led to the production of this strategy document. The fundamental message is that unless we manage recreational use of the countryside properly then conflicts and environmental damage will inevitably ensue. These conflicts will set recreational users against landowners, or environmental groups, or each other, and no-one will benefit.

Thus the focus of this document is not about solving individual access problems but to set out an agreed strategic framework to ensure proper management and consideration of recreation in the countryside. This Strategy is only the first step since it recognises the requirement for continued and continuing action by all involved. One of its main recommendations is the establishment of a Countryside Access and Activities Network encompassing not only the major organisations but liaison groups for the main interest areas. This Network will be serviced by a dedicated officer who will be charged not only with the responsibility for establishing and developing the Network but with seeking to make it an independent Trust in the near future.

Just about every organisation with an interest in the countryside has been involved in the process leading to the development of this document. We achieved a very high degree of consensus as to the issues and the way forward at the three open workshops held in Craigavon and consistently within the Working Group. A draft of this document was widely circulated for comment in March 1998 but only minor alterations have had to be made in light of the comments received reflecting the overwhelming endorsement recorded. The test remains whether this wide support will be translated into a commitment to its implementation. To help this happen, an action programme has been added to help monitor the level of commitment and progress being achieved.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have contributed in any way to the preparation of this Strategy. In particular, I would thank the members of the Working Group noted overleaf, Ross Millar of the Environment and Heritage Service, Jim Clarke and Stephen Wilson of the Sports Council and those employed as consultants and facilitators- Caro-lyne Ferris, Judith Annett and Peter Scott. It has been an enjoyable and rewarding task to Chair the meetings and workshops but I am only too acutely aware that the value of all this work will be measured not by words on paper but the practical realisation of the vision into action.



Dawson Stelfox M.B.E.
Chairman of the Working Group

COMPOSITION of the Working Group

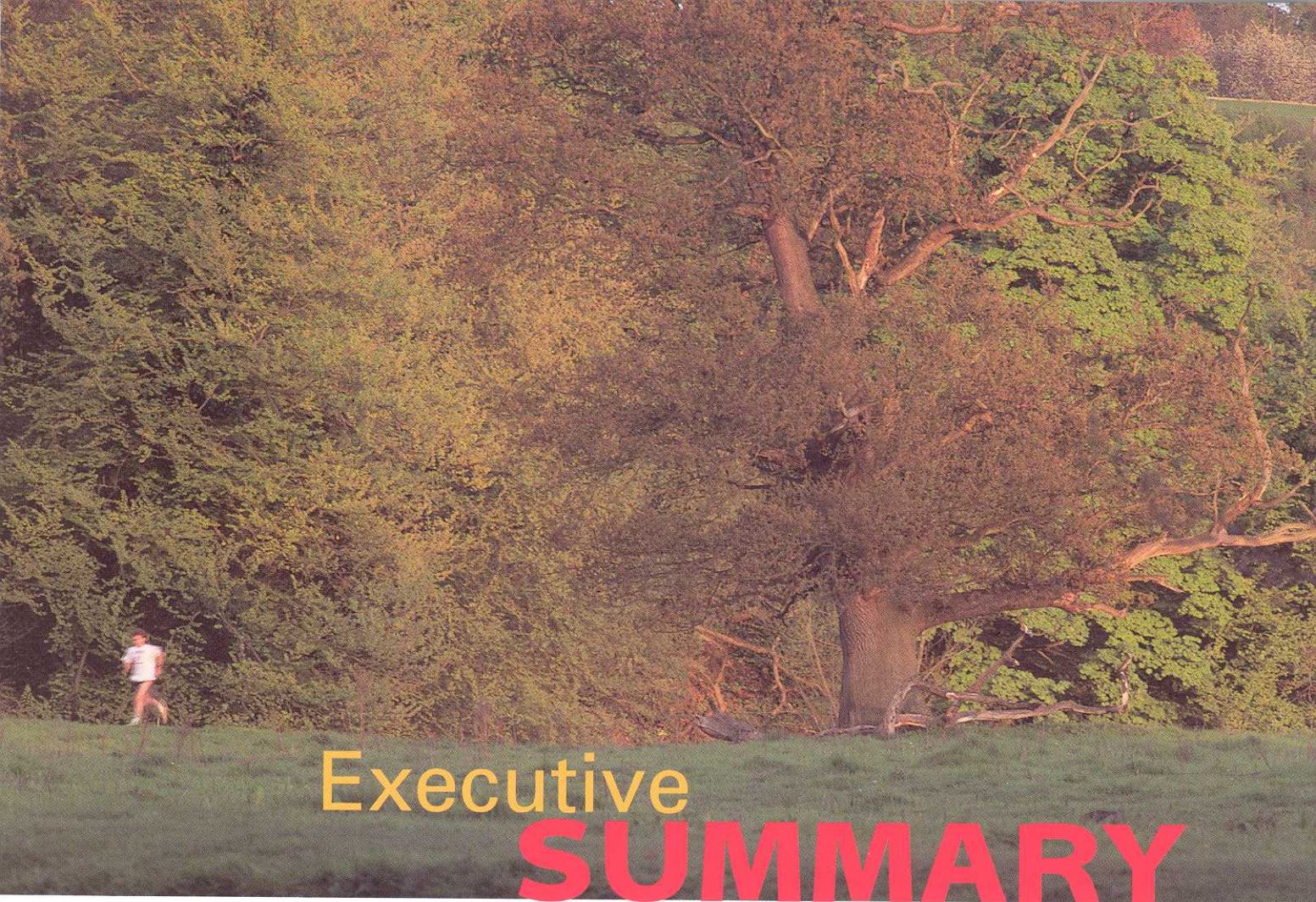
Mr Kevin Balmer	Royal Yachting Association - N.I. Council
Ms Louise Brown	Northern Ireland Tourist Board
Mr David Cartmill	Northern Ireland Tourist Board
Miss Mary Doyle	Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs
Mr Alec Foye	Rivers Agency, Department of Agriculture (DANI)
Mr Niall Fitzduff	Rural Community Network
Mrs Jennifer Fulton	Countryside Management Division, DANI
Miss Nuala Hamilton	Banbridge District Council Access Officer
Mr Robert Hanna	Council for Nature Conservation & the Countryside
Ms Hilary Heslip	Planning Service, DoE Northern Ireland
Mr Austin Kelly	N.I. Agricultural Producers Association
Mr Bertie Kennedy	Ulster Hang Gliding & Paragliding Club (UHPC)
Mr James Kerr	Retired Civil Servant, former Director Environment Service
Mr John McCurdy	Forest Service, DANI
Mr Newell McCreight	Ulster Angling Federation
Mr Brian Murphy	Countryside & Lands Division, DANI
Mr Maurice Parkinson	Chief Leisure Officers' Association
Mr Jim Simpson	Ulster Farmers Union
Mr Dawson Stelfox	Invited Chairman, Working Group
Mr Ronnie Trouton	N.I. Federation of Car Clubs
Mrs Jo Whatmough	The National Trust
Mr Eric Woods	N.I. Education & Library Boards
Mr Jim Workman	Chief Leisure Officers' Association

Officers in attendance and Strategy authors

Mr Ross Millar	Environment and Heritage Service, DoE Northern Ireland
Mr Stephen Wilson	Sports Council for Northern Ireland

Consultants/ Facilitators

Mrs Judith Annett
Dr. Caro-lynn Ferris
Mr. Peter Scott (1 meeting)



Executive SUMMARY

Introduction

The term 'countryside recreation' invokes many differing images. For some people it automatically triggers a stereotype of activities such as rock-climbing, canoeing, orienteering and other active and physical pursuits commonly referred to as outdoor sports. For others it has a much wider connotation including general leisure activities such as walking, cycling and horseriding.

This Strategy focuses on the full range of activities that depend upon access to a natural resource for their facility base. Hence, this includes all water sports, air sports and land sports normally found in a rural or urban fringe location and spans all levels of participation, ranging from the informal, individual choice to formalised and organised competitions and events.

Context

Uniquely within the United Kingdom, responsibility for the development and management of countryside recreation in Northern Ireland currently falls to no one agency or governing body. Rather, the obvious requirement for most recreational activities to have access to natural resources means that many agencies, landowners and interest groups are implicated and involved. Such involvement can either be by deliberate choice or as a consequence of actions or policies but, collectively or individually, these interests influence both the development of and participation in countryside recreation.

Given this backdrop, there is a situation in which a chronic lack of co-ordination between these interests further compounds a growing number of local access/user problems often caused by a lack of communication or respect. All this not only detracts from the development of recreational opportunities, with the loss of the associated benefits to the economy and the health and wellbeing of individuals, but it also undermines Government's commitment to sustainability.



Sustainable use of our countryside must be based on achieving a balance between managing impacts and use and satisfying the needs and aspirations of both landowners and users.

Ways must also be found of maximising opportunities to collectively consider and influence policy and decisions, and to do so in a co-ordinated and representational way. Ultimately we all depend on each other for the use and responsible enjoyment of our countryside and, as we enter into a period of considerable change with new administrative structures associated with the Assembly, an enlarged European Union with the implications of Agenda 2000, and growing pressures on our countryside, it is imperative that all those involved have the opportunity to address the issues together and work towards common goals and a shared vision.

This Strategy document was drafted in as inclusive a manner as possible. Whilst the process was led and facilitated by the Sports Council and Environment and Heritage Service, every effort has been made to reflect a consensus as to the proposals and recommendations. **This is not a policy document on behalf of the Sponsors. Rather, it is an attempt to create an agenda for action and to propose structures and initiatives that will facilitate this.** All those involved will have a part to play whether through action, policy or resources. **The theme of the Strategy and its implementation, and the ultimate determinate of its success, is the need for partnership and communication.**

This desire for consensus and partnership was reflected in the methodology of how this document came about.

Methodology

Much of the thinking behind the Strategy follows on from the recommendations contained within the report **'Access to the Northern Ireland Countryside' (HMSO 1994)**. This largely considered the workings of those involved in operating the 1983 Access to the Countryside Order which empowers and facilitates district councils in the provision of access for walking, cycling and horse-riding for informal recreational use. Amongst the many recommendations of the report was one that **a Countryside Recreation Strategy for Northern Ireland be prepared** and that this should take on board all the issues associated with the wider recreational use of the countryside.

Two of the original sponsors of the 1994 report, The Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment, agreed to sponsor the strategy process. A research assistant, Dr. Caro-lynn Ferris, was appointed in a full time capacity for a year to carry out extensive research and to facilitate the operations of a Working Group. Her first task was the publication of an information leaflet, 'Access to Opportunity', setting out the proposed Strategy process and seeking comment thereon. This leaflet was widely circulated to all bodies, groups and individuals with an interest in countryside recreation.

The Working Group was then established to represent as broad a range as possible of the interests involved. However, it was accepted that it had to be limited to a workable size (23 with two Officers in attendance) and that

some interests were therefore not directly represented. The 'workshop' system built into the process was felt to compensate for this. The Working Group's remit was to consider the issues and to advise the Officers from the two sponsors who were tasked with leading the process and preparing and writing the Strategy working closely with the Working Group Chairman. The Group met on 8 occasions, often to hear and consider presentations on specific topics, and to debate the issues and matters raised at the three wider workshops. The Group are particularly indebted to those who gave of their time to offer expert advice on certain subjects, notably Mr. David Butler of the Irish Farmers Association and Mr. Joss Lynam of the Waymarked Ways Committee both from the Republic of Ireland. Mr. Peter Scott and Mrs. Judith Annett also acted in a professional capacity in the early stages to steer the process.

In order to widen active participation and to better inform the process, three 'open' workshops were held, which were well attended by representatives from a broad section of interested groups.

A draft Strategy document was circulated in early March 1998 to all those who attended the workshops, to all on a wider mailing list and through members of the Working Party into their respective organisations. This asked for comment by early June, and it is on the basis of comment received and subsequent discussions with the Working Group that this final Strategy is now published.

The Strategy is divided into three Sections which are briefly summarised below.

Section 1: Background

As well as detailing the background, this section gives a brief summary of the main research findings. Through questionnaire and interview, these illustrate a picture of:

- sustained growth in participation levels for most countryside recreation activities matched against a significant shortage of accessible facilities;
- governing bodies struggling to attract active participants yet facing criticism from landowners for the actions of non- members often despite their best efforts at introducing codes of practice;
- statutory agencies widely perceived as focusing mainly on conservation and pre-disposed against accommodating legitimate recreation activities, and
- the underpinning of all this by a low level of public awareness of available opportunities and a lack of co-ordination/policy development amongst the key players.

The open workshops, arranged to facilitate discussion, provide guidance and to help develop a consensus between all those involved, confirmed these matters and highlighted:

- the need for clear direction and the co-ordination of interests;
- the benefits that would flow from an accessible Northern Ireland countryside and a developed infrastructure based on a sustainable approach, and
- the need for mechanisms which would accommodate increased participation by optimising the use of resources in a sustainable manner.

Section 2: The 'Vision'

Through the workshops and subsequent discussion, a vision of countryside recreation for Northern Ireland was moulded. This was based upon three underlying values and is to be delivered through the implementation of three principal action programmes. The values identified include:

- **Mutual respect between all interested parties** - users, providers, managers and landowners - moving to a position where everyone who uses the countryside is aware of their responsibilities to others and to the protection of the resource itself;
- **Sustainable access** - accommodating the needs of sport and recreation without conflicting with the needs of others, detracting from the quality of the resource or giving rise to significant or long term damage, and
- **Quality of the experience** - establishing benchmarks which managers should aspire to provide and users can reasonably expect to experience.

The Northern Ireland Countryside Recreation Vision

To develop and sustain a vibrant countryside recreation culture in which responsible and well informed people enjoy high quality, sustainable and appropriate activities in an accessible, well managed yet challenging environment; where landowners and managers are welcoming and there are accompanying benefits to local communities both in social and economic terms.

Section 3: Action to Realise the Vision

The programmes of activity agreed as the means of delivering the vision are:

- **Management structures**
- **Planned development**
- **Education and training**

The management structures programme is regarded as the highest priority of the three programmes. The Strategy recommends a committee structure that should be created at an early stage. These committees must be properly constituted, supported and serviced to provide a solid basis on which progress on the other two essential programmes of activity can be made.



Key components of the three programmes include:

Programme 1 - Management Structures. **The Strategy recommends:**

1. **NEW:** The establishment, by Environment and Heritage Service, of a 'Countryside Access Liaison Group', comprising of representatives from mainly statutory bodies. The Liaison Group's role will be to co-ordinate policy and any activities by member bodies which have an impact on countryside recreation.
2. **NEW:** A countryside recreation/adventure activities lobby group formed to represent the interests of governing/representative bodies, established by the Northern Ireland Sports Forum and to be facilitated by the Sports Council.
3. **NEW:** The establishment of a 'Countryside Access and Activities Network' as an umbrella voluntary body representing the full cross section of countryside recreation and other relevant groups. This will have as its core functions: the facilitation of better communication between, and greater understanding of, respective interests; and fostering a partnership approach to management and development.
4. **NEW:** The appointment of a Northern Ireland Countryside Access and Activities Officer to act as the catalyst in establishing and maintaining the Network.
5. **Changes to legislation:** The Strategy recommends:
 - initiating appropriate changes which resolve the current widespread concerns about occupiers' liability;
 - changes to ensure that the wider framework of legislation governing countryside recreation is fair, effective and workable;
 - the consideration of measures required to improve access provision to open countryside.

Programme 2 - Planned development. **The Strategy recommends:**

1. **NEW:** The creation, by the Network, of a 'natural facilities database' of existing facilities.
2. **NEW:** A scoping study, commissioned by the Liaison Group, of natural resources which would potentially lend themselves to accommodating new or additional activities.
3. **NEW:** The production of Strategic Development Plans, tasking the Countryside Access and Activities Network with facilitating the production of these activity-specific Plans. Such Plans would be used to inform the planning function of both the Liaison Group and the appropriate sports bodies.
4. **NEW:** Benchmarking of quality standards for recreational activities.

Programme 3 - Education and Training. **The Strategy recommends:**

1. The upgrading and further development of activity-focused 'access opportunities' and 'codes of conduct' information.
2. **NEW:** The establishment of a central information point on countryside access opportunities.
3. The improvement and extension of monitoring of the impacts of countryside activities on natural resources.
4. Exploring the potential integration of contemporary International examples of curriculum-based outdoor activities resources.
5. The development of closer links between countryside managers and recreational users.

Mindful of previous comments about the importance of establishing appropriate management structures and of the important role of the Countryside Access and Activities Officer in that process, the Sponsors have considered it fundamental to progress with that appointment. Accordingly, steps have already been taken to appoint someone of a suitable calibre and background to take forward many of the recommendations above. An Action Plan is therefore included as part of this Strategy which, while not definitive, sets out clear tasks and performance indicators for that Officer. It also includes commitments from the Sponsors to establishing the Countryside Recreation Liaison Group and supporting the N.I. Sports Forum standing conferences on countryside, water and air based sports.

Main Report

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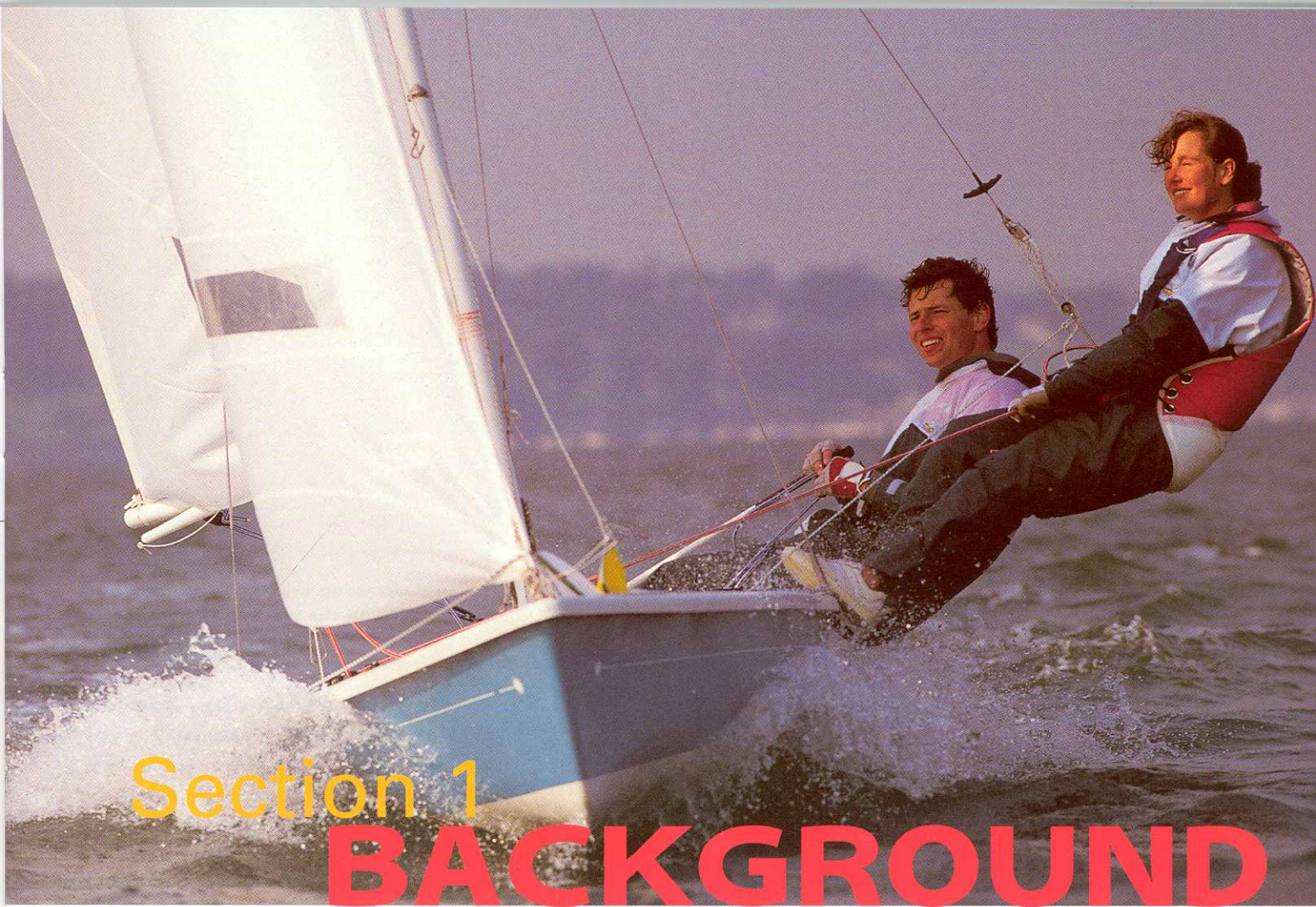
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1.1 Introduction

This document sets out a ‘**Countryside Recreation Strategy for Northern Ireland**’, and is the result of two years research and deliberations involving representatives of all the main recreational users, governing bodies and those with executive responsibility or other involvement.

Whilst the Strategy is neither a statutory document, nor a binding commitment on the many groups and individuals who use the countryside, it is a bold attempt to create a framework for the future management of a wonderful resource which is too often taken for granted. However, this resource is not only increasingly coming under pressure for recreational use, it remains the basis for the

livelihood of a large section of the community and a place where large numbers of people live and work. It also contains many valuable and interesting species of wildlife, remnants of our cultural heritage, and areas of dramatic or special landscape. All these factors point to the need for co-ordinated action to ensure the quality of that resource and its constituent parts is sustained.

The considerable and extensive research undertaken as part of the Strategy’s preparation, and the resulting feedback from both the Working Group and the various workshops, has highlighted issues which demand a focused and determined response. The Strategy is, therefore, not merely a summation of issues but contains a range of proposals and recommendations. Details are included on the implementation of the Strategy and the role of key organisations and structures. For the Strategy and its proposals to succeed, it will be necessary for everyone to operate in a spirit of partnership, tolerance and consideration. The work to date has shown that such a spirit exists and exists in good measure.

The purpose of the strategy is ‘**to provide a framework to maximise the current and future opportunities for participation in countryside recreation activities while also striving to conserve and protect the natural environment and resource base of that countryside.**’

1.2 Development of the Strategy

Background

The development of a 'countryside recreation strategy' was one of the main recommendations made by the 1994 Report on 'Access to the Northern Ireland Countryside' (HMSO). Whilst Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment and the Sports Council, two of the main sponsors of that report, recognised the need for them to take the lead in this task, (given the absence of one overarching agency), they also recognised that the very wide range of bodies, organisations and interests that are concerned with countryside recreation should themselves be directly involved in developing any strategy. Accordingly, they decided that the preparation should be as inclusive as possible with the resulting output hopefully jointly 'owned' by all of the stakeholders.

It was also recognised at the outset that the Strategy would only be effective if it was based on a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the current situation, including the nature and extent of recreation provision and the level of unfulfilled demand, as well as acknowledging the principal management issues.

To meet these objectives:

- An independent **Working Group** was established to lead the strategy process and the production of a strategic framework. The Working Group's membership was broad-based and included representatives of statutory agencies, government departments, district councils, user groups, landowning and community groups. It was **Chaired by Dawson Stelfox, MBE**, and initially serviced by a research assistant, Dr Caro-lynn Ferris.
- A comprehensive programme of research was undertaken to provide the factual basis and analysis needed to inform the work of the Working Party.
- A series of three workshops were arranged to act as a sounding board for discussion, give guidance and to further the development of a consensus between all those involved.

It was the workshops in particular that led directly to the development of a 'vision' for countryside recreation on which the Strategy and its six key themes are based.

Scope

The Countryside Recreation Strategy is concerned with the provision of opportunities to take part in those forms of outdoor recreation which begin with the use of natural resources and which contribute to healthy, active lifestyles. The term 'countryside recreation' can, broadly speaking, be taken to apply to those sporting and recreational activities that operate, or have their origins, in the use of land, water and air. They can be competitive or non competitive; formal or informal. **The research programme**

underpinning the Strategy considered the needs and demands of 27 such activities, listed in Appendix 1.

The Strategy does not deal with general leisure provision in the countryside such as, picnicking, viewing the scenery and visiting stately homes. With regard to what is meant by 'sport', the Strategy adopts the inclusive definition of sport as recommended by the Council of Europe, that is **"sport means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aims at improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships, or obtaining results in competition at all levels"**.

The key differences between countryside related and other forms of sport lie in the need to:

- acquire access to natural resources, usually as a secondary or tertiary user;
- be aware of the importance of safe practice and sustainability in relation to environmental resources;
- appreciate the relevance of competition between the individual and natural elements as opposed to competition with other people.

1.3 The Justification for a Countryside Recreation Strategy

- **Importance of the Northern Ireland countryside for recreation**

Northern Ireland's countryside is undoubtedly a high quality natural resource base, both spatially extensive and diverse in nature. The N.I. Tourist Board recognise this asset as being the cornerstone of their marketing strategy. This extensiveness and diversity of the resource base lends itself to the provision of opportunities for a wide range of countryside recreation activities for both the local population and for an increasing number of tourists.

The popularity of the countryside for recreation was confirmed by the **Northern Ireland Leisure Day Trip Survey 1990-91** (HMSO 92) which found that an estimated 7.5 million sports and recreation trips were made to the countryside and coast between April 1990 and March 1991.

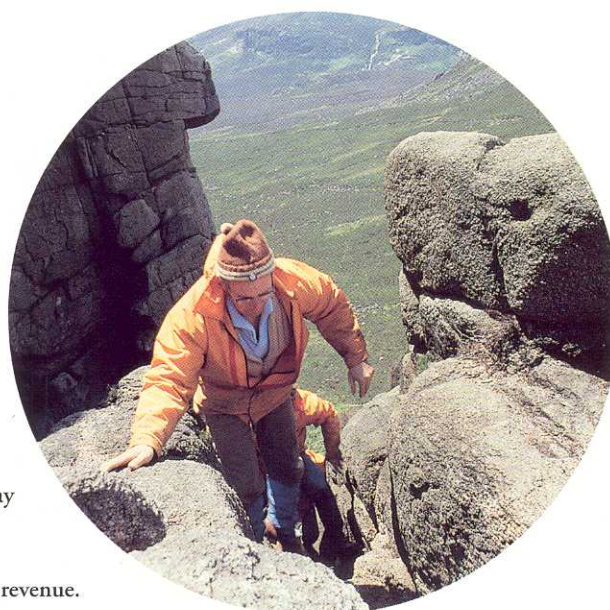
An indication of the importance of recreation in economic terms is that:

- the estimated 9.25 million day trips taken between April 1990 and March 1991 for participation in active countryside and water recreation activities or sports **generated an estimated £89.3 million** revenue.

- an additional 6.6 million day trips taken by people for walking, **generated an additional £10 million** revenue.

The exceptional quality of many of the Province's landscapes and seascapes, together with the recognition of the need to protect and conserve our rich natural resource for future generations, is reflected in the scale and range of environmental designations.

These include, for example: the physically extensive Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty [AONBs], such as the Mourne, Antrim Coast and Glens and the Causeway Coast; National Nature Reserves; Areas of Special Scientific Interest, and Marine Nature Reserves. More recently, the process of designating Special Protection Areas and Special Areas of Conservation under the European Habitat Regulations has begun and these will have significant implications for the future use and management of certain areas.



It is important that all such areas are protected for their own sake, for their role in wider ecosystems and, particularly in the case of the AONBs, protected for their value as a recreational resource for people. A large part of the rationale for AONB designation is to take active steps to do these very things and in the absence of any designation of National Parks, as in England and Wales, they are currently the most significant protected landscape designation in Northern Ireland. Given the importance of AONBs designated under the 1985 Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands Order, steps have already been taken in those areas designated to manage their resource base in a sustainable way. However, in all parts of the countryside, whether AONB or not, a balanced management approach is required to ensure that all legitimate interests are accommodated and conflicts avoided.

• **Personal, social and economic benefits of sport and recreation¹**

It is well documented that participation in countryside sport and recreation realises significant benefits both in personal terms to individual participants and, in wider terms, to society, the economy and the environment.

The personal benefits of regular participation in sport include: a reduction in the incidents of heart disease, angina and breathlessness; an improvement in participants' overall health, and the ability of elderly people to remain active and be better able to perform everyday tasks. Creating the conditions for lifelong participation in sport is, therefore, one of the best investments that can be made in preventative medicine. Sport is also widely recognised as a positive social force. For example, eight out of ten people, from all classes, creeds and shades of political opinion, believe that sport can help to build lasting relationships between people and often people from different social and religious backgrounds.



In economic terms, consumers in Northern Ireland spend some £500,000 each day on sport, creating over £100 million of wealth for the economy each year. Some 8,000 people are currently in sports-related employment, about the same number as those involved in banking and finance, whilst the greatest growth in the leisure industry to the year 2000 is projected to be jobs connected with sport.

Countryside recreation is a significant part of the overall sporting picture. For instance, participation in countryside sport and recreation is often accompanied by expenditure in rural communities, thus supplementing local incomes and supporting employment and services. The development of countryside activities, especially '**activity tourism**', may support new business ventures. While directly comparable data is currently unavailable for Northern Ireland, the study of The Economics of Countryside Access in Scotland (Scottish Agricultural Colleges, 1991), estimated that tourist and

day trips involving active and non-active leisure activities (which require countryside access) generated some £250-300m to the Scottish economy and generated or supported more than 20,000 full time equivalent jobs.

Within the Northern Ireland countryside there are a host of special places and features which give insight into our rich heritage and provide interest, enjoyment and wonder for many of the population. Participation in countryside recreation and sport is also one of the main ways of developing environmental awareness and care for the countryside. Although the majority of the Northern Ireland population now live in towns and cities, enjoying and using the countryside in this way enables many people to become aware, and develop an understanding of the natural environment and its landscapes, wildlife, history and culture. Informed leadership by environmentally-aware instructors, the activities of 'countryside officers', appropriate interpretative provision and special interest events can all enhance and increase the users' interest, knowledge and desire to care for the countryside and coast and to do so in partnership with landowners and farmers.

¹Ref. Strategy for the Development of Sport in Northern Ireland 1997-2005.

1.4 The Strategy Context

Just as countryside recreation is not a single activity so responsibility for its provision and management does not fall to one individual organisation. District councils, Governing Bodies of Sport, central government departments and agencies, and private landowners and their representative groupings all have an interest and a role to play. Significantly, no single agency (in the absence of a Countryside Commission or equivalent) is seen to take the lead at present in co-ordinating policy and planning. Accordingly, the context of this Strategy reflects the wide range of issues affecting various bodies. Key aspects include:

1. Current planning for recreation provision.
2. Sustainable development and the sustainability of the resource base.
3. The relationship to the 'Northern Ireland Strategy for the Development of Sport'.
4. The considerations of the draft Policy Statement on 'Access to the Northern Ireland Countryside' (DoE 1996).
5. The need for changes to the Access to the Countryside Order (1983) and the consideration of wider access issues by the Department of the Environment.
6. The wider context.

1: Current planning for recreation provision

Prior to the commencement of the Strategy process, few of the key players accorded priority to this area of activity and, in particular, to **working in partnership** within a common strategic framework. Instead many were, at best, developing 'action plans' in isolation and within the security of their own particular remit.

Poor practice - Example

District councils are responsible, under the provisions of separate legislation, for both developing informal recreation for walking, cycling and horse-riding, and for providing, maintaining and co-ordinating provisions for various forms of active recreation. They also have an important role in economic development and in the life and future of rural communities.

Against this backdrop, district councils have been encouraged by the Environment and Heritage Service to produce local district Access Strategies. At the same time, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland has been advocating the preparation of local district Sport and Recreation Strategies.

We have then 'two messages for one audience' whereas a unified message, coupled with support and assistance to empower and facilitate district councils in preparing **Sport and Recreation Strategies** (embracing all the relevant countryside issues associated with access and activities) would surely achieve much more. Instead, as evidenced by the 1994 Access Report, an acknowledged lack of opportunities for informal access remains the dominant feature within the context of countryside recreation.

In mapping out a way forward, the 1994 Access Report focused attention on the need for partnerships in managing the natural resource base. Some good planning practice, enhancing co-ordination and community involvement has already been developed in the light of its findings. Examples of such partnerships include the new 'Mournes Heritage Trust' and the structures that have been put in place in the Causeway Coast

AONB, Antrim Coast and Glens AONB, Lower Bann, Lough Neagh and Strangford Lough.

Each of the management bodies associated with these structures have recently been involved in strategy development of some form. Such strategies are aimed at guiding management decisions and optimising the available resources - natural, physical and financial.

Good practice example

Lower Bann Committees - Management of Water Sports

The Rivers Agency of DANI is the navigation authority for the entire length of the River Bann, a linear waterway navigable for 38 miles from Toome to the sea. Although the Lower Bann is relatively underdeveloped in terms of water-based activity, Rivers Agency has installed approximately a dozen public jetties/landing steps/ and slip-way facilities, and maintains the navigational channel, markers and lock gates.

Potential for conflict has increased with the recent diversity of use of the Lower Bann. In 1994, DANI established a two tier Committee Structure for developing and managing the Lower Bann serviced by a Lower Bann Officer. Working in partnership, a watersports management policy has been developed through a process of consensus building and this is currently being implemented by riparian councils and river users.

2 Sustainable Development and the Sustainability of the Resource Base

Principles of sustainable development

The United Kingdom Government is committed to translating and incorporating the principles of sustainable development into **all branches of public policy**.² Sport and recreation are not exempt.

There are many definitions of "Sustainable development" but perhaps the most commonly used is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

The Bruntland Commission

The preparation of a Countryside Recreation Strategy provides an opportunity for all involved to apply collectively the principles of sustainable development to countryside recreation. It will also be one of the main ways in which an agenda for sustainability can be created which reflects and influences the policies and approach of all those agencies, departments and groups who manage, use or benefit from the countryside.

Some guidance in incorporating the principles of sustainable development into policy planning and practice is provided by Article 10 of the Council of Europe's **European Sports Charter**.

"Ensuring and improving people's physical, social and mental well-being from one generation to the next requires that sporting activities, including those in urban, open country and water areas, be adjusted to the planet's limited resources and be carried out in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and balanced management of the environment.

These include:

- **taking account of nature and environmental values in the physical planning and building of sports facilities;**
- **supporting and stimulating sports organisations in their efforts to conserve nature and the environment;**
- **increasing people's knowledge and awareness of the relations between sport and sustainable development and their understanding of nature."**

The application of these principles must of course be applied to the entire recreational experience including the means of transport to the recreational site. Research shows that participation in countryside recreation is frequently influenced by the availability of personal private transport. Yet encouraging greater use of private transport compromises the principles of sustainable development. The development of an integrated transport strategy, which would compliment the proposals within this Strategy and facilitates better use of public transport and alternative

transport, is fundamental. However, it is recognised that this will necessitate detailed consideration for key recreational areas such as the Mourne and the Causeway Coast. In the interim, good practice, such as the promotion of cycling coupled with the development of a National Cycle Network (Sustrans) or the provision of local 'rambler' bus services, is to be encouraged, as are further initiatives to optimise the potential for sustainable transport to underpin countryside recreation.

3: Relationship to 'Northern Ireland Strategy for the Development of Sport'

The development of the Countryside Recreation Strategy has proceeded in parallel with the on-going development of the recently launched 'Northern Ireland Strategy for the Development of Sport'. A number of the problems facing countryside recreation are similar to those facing the wider sporting environment including for example:

- the absence of an overall agreed framework which would illustrate the degree of inter-dependence between organisations and the complementary nature of their activities. Such a framework would also inform everyone involved as to what their part could be in the development of sport or countryside recreation as a whole.

²This Common Inheritance' Britain's Environmental Strategy. HMSO 1990



- the knowledge that problems are often assessed in isolation and viewed as unique by each sport. As a result, work is often duplicated in finding solutions;
- the fact that certain sectors of society are marginalised as participants (notably young girls, women, those with disabilities, and those economically disadvantaged), and
- under-developed links between voluntary sport and the broader voluntary, youth and community sectors. The opportunities to share resources in tackling similar issues have been infrequently explored.

Because of the diversity of the subject area, and the need to look in more detail at subjects than is possible in the broader Strategy for Sport, the Working Party and the sponsors confirmed the value of a separate Countryside Recreation Strategy. However, it is recognised that the two strategies are complementary to each other. A number of direct references to the Strategy for Sport's action programme are therefore included in this Countryside Recreation Strategy.

4: The considerations of the draft Policy Statement on 'Access to the Northern Ireland Countryside' (DoE 1996)

In its draft Policy Statement on 'Access to the Northern Ireland Countryside', published in 1996, the Department of the Environment emphasises the importance of the countryside as one of Northern Ireland's major assets. The Policy Statement follows on from the analysis of the 1994 Access Report in identifying a role for the Department, through Environment and Heritage Service in:

- adopting a high profile, promotional stance;
- defining a national policy and strategy on countryside access;
- securing enhanced funding;
- determining or endorsing local access strategies, and
- encouraging liaison between, and co-ordinating action by, the many public bodies, voluntary organisations and other interests that are involved.

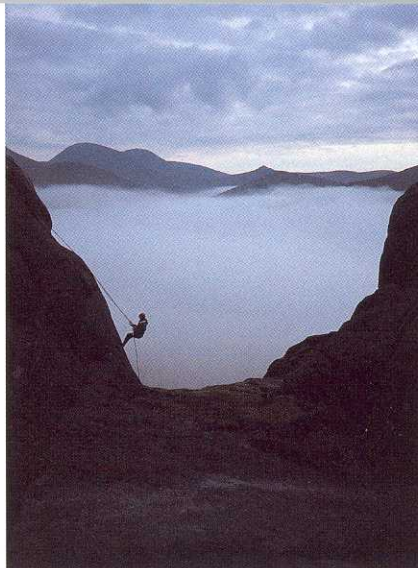
The preparation of a Countryside Recreation Strategy is seen by the Department of the Environment and Environment and Heritage Service as a logical progression of these roles and policy commitments. The Strategy will set an overall framework and can create mechanisms and partnerships that will enhance the effectiveness of Environment and Heritage Service's own role in particular. It will facilitate better consideration of issues of sustainability or of environmental concern at both a local and national level.

The Department's vision, as highlighted in the draft Policy Statement, is of:

"a welcoming and accessible countryside which not only continues to be a national treasure but has the potential to benefit both visitors and the economy and is a joy to all".

The consultation process leading to the development of this Countryside Recreation Strategy has shown that this is a vision which is shared by many other bodies and organisations throughout Northern Ireland and that the Strategy has the potential to provide a basis through which this common vision can be realised.

The preparation of a Countryside Recreation Strategy provides an opportunity for all involved to apply collectively the principles of sustainable development to countryside recreation.



5: The need for changes to the Access to the Countryside Order (1983) and the consideration of wider access issues by the Department of the Environment.

Although the provisions of the 1983 Order relate to the establishment of informal countryside access on foot, by cycle or by horse, and to the assertion of rights of way, that Order is of paramount importance in facilitating the creation of a wider network of access opportunities and in empowering district councils in this regard.

The 1994 Access Report looked closely at the operation of this legislation and was quite critical of many aspects of it. These criticisms have proved justified and the assertion of rights of way and the creation of new paths in particular have both continued to prove difficult and often controversial.

The Report also highlighted the need not only to develop such access opportunities but also to facilitate and co-ordinate their management as well. The issue of Occupier's Liability was especially highlighted as being of significant concern to the farming and land-owning community.

The increasing importance of informal countryside access in facilitating healthy lifestyles and an appreciation of the natural environment, and its potential in terms of diversifying the rural economy, have prompted the Department of the Environment to prepare a wide ranging consultation document which addresses all the issues associated with informal countryside access. The document will also provide the basis for consideration of the issues surrounding the Government's manifesto pledge to look at ways at improving

access to open countryside. The Working Party were kept aware of the progress on this document and their collective expertise and experience provided a useful sounding board as to the issues and matters it should seek to address.

The Working Party were particularly keen to ensure that the content of both this Strategy and the Department's proposed consultation document reflect the commonality of the issues associated with both the casual and the more organised use of the countryside for recreation.

6: The wider context

The character and topography of the countryside are similar throughout the whole of Ireland, as are the recreational pressures on the countryside and the opportunities presented by rural tourism. In addition many of the Governing Bodies of Sport are organised on an all-Ireland basis. The preparation of a Countryside Recreation Strategy therefore provides the opportunity to take into account the wider, all-Ireland context and to set the framework within which more detailed, joint policies could be developed as and when it is appropriate to do so.

Countryside recreation in the Republic of Ireland has witnessed significant advances over the past decade in two main areas. Firstly the promotion of rural activity tourism has developed, significantly influenced by the availability of European Union Regional Structural funding. Secondly, changes in the Occupiers Liability law have been introduced which were designed to resolve the concerns of landowners about their responsibilities towards recreational users thereby helping to

remove one of the main obstacles to accommodating recreational access. These shifts have impacted on Northern Ireland primarily through raising awareness of the opportunities available elsewhere and consequently creating a growing dissatisfaction with our own current access situation.

This Strategy has been developed against a dynamic political context evolving on a day to day basis. Whilst this introduces an element of uncertainty with regard to government structures, and to what administrative changes may be possible within the confines of the new Northern Ireland Assembly, it does not alter the need to develop a consensus about a vision for countryside recreation and the development of practical ways to achieve this. Rather, it presents the opportunity, in due course, to place the Strategy before the new administrative structures and identify and consider fresh ideas as to what can and needs to be done to realise the vision. It is further accepted that some of the departments and agencies included in and referred to in this Strategy may change in name or structure. However, the key players have been clearly identified and their significance in the process and the need for their involvement will remain.

1.5 The Research Programme

While the 1994 Report on Access to the Northern Ireland Countryside drew attention to both the need to increase access opportunities and the importance of a co-ordinated, strategic approach, that study was primarily concerned with informal walking, cycling and horse riding. To meet the dearth of information on the wider state of countryside recreation, as a key part of the Strategy preparation, an extensive research programme was carried out by Dr Caro-lynn Ferris.

The aims of this research were to:

- examine both the demand for countryside recreation opportunities within Northern Ireland and the nature and extent of existing countryside recreation provision;
- identify and assess the responsibilities, involvement and aspirations of the key providers, users and managers involved in countryside recreation;
- identify and examine the principle management issues, and
- identify the demand for countryside recreation provision and assess the opportunities for facility and sports development.

The research involved a desk review, extensive questionnaire survey and a programme of personal interviews with all the main groups and bodies involved.

Key research findings

The full research programme and its detailed findings are recorded in the ‘Report of Survey’, an unpublished reference document associated with the Strategy. Set out below is a summary of the key findings that are directly relevant to the Countryside Recreation Strategy.

Activity Levels

- There has been considerable growth in countryside recreation activity levels over the past 5 years.
- New activities that portray an exciting and fast moving image, such as Mountain Biking and Jet Skiing, have experienced particularly dramatic increases in participation levels and are expected to grow still further in popularity. Activities which are being actively promoted by their Governing Bodies are also expected to grow.

Accessible Facilities

- Securing access was a significant problem for all land-based activities with the

exception of Clay Pigeon Shooting. The majority of water-based activities also had problems in this regard. Two thirds of all the activities surveyed reported that they needed to develop new facilities to satisfy current demands. Forecasts of increased participation rates will add to any problems.

Sports Development

- Estimates of participants/membership ratios for Governing Bodies vary widely, but in some cases are as low as 10%. This is highly significant where unaffiliated members are unaware or unsupportive of good practice standards supported or promoted by Governing Bodies.
- Females and people with disabilities are under-represented in the countryside activity user profile.
- Many young people who are introduced to countryside recreation through outdoor education experiences do not sustain their enthusiasm after leaving school and find it difficult to improve their performance level. Few Governing Bodies focus on attracting young people into their activity.

Countryside Recreation Participation Statistics

Activity	Number of Clubs	Number of Members	Number of Non Members	Total estimated participation	% Participants Affiliated
Water-based Activities	195	23,255	24,000	47,255	49%
Land-based Activities	307	7,544	33,270	40,814	18%
Air-based Activities	24	850	500	1,350	62%
TOTAL	526	31,649	57,770	89,419	35%

Source: SCNI/DoE (EHS) Report of Survey 1996



Environmental impact awareness

- Many unaffiliated users in particular are not aware of, or do not comply with, standards of safe practice/responsible use. There is also a perception that many new participants no longer come from a background where they already know and understand the countryside.
- Little research or monitoring has been carried out to assess the real impact of recreation on the natural resource base. Few landowners take into account factors such as site carrying capacities in their policy towards permitting access.

Recreational Impact

- Governing Bodies recognise the need to ensure that good practice is observed by their members. Many have taken a lead through measures such as codes of practice, voluntary wardening etc.
- However, significant inter-user conflict exists. This arises mainly from competition for access, especially competition by the newer activities for access to facilities which are already used by traditional activities. Irresponsible users and rigid management policies which do not accommodate change also add to the problem.

Attitudes towards providers- statutory agencies/ landowners

- The statutory agencies are widely perceived as focusing mainly on conservation, with recreation being very low on their agendas and rarely raised at a strategic level with other agencies.
- Where access has been agreed, albeit of a limited nature, there is a reluctance on behalf of those benefiting to lobby for more secure and open access in case agreement is withdrawn.
- Those partaking in noisy sports believe that they are negatively stereotyped by managers and are, as a result, significantly disenfranchised in terms of access to suitable facilities.

Representation

- Local/regional management fora are regarded as useful, but there are concerns over the voluntary bodies' limited capacity to participate in the absence of the appointment of professional post holders.
- Countryside recreation Governing Bodies have historically not had a distinguished role within the Northern Ireland Sports Forum, the Governing Bodies' independent voice of sport. A Northern Ireland Council for Physical Recreation/ Northern Ireland Sports Forum bias towards competitive curriculum/ Commonwealth Games sports is perceived by countryside sports.

Level of awareness/ understanding/ information availability

- The general public has little awareness of the opportunities that exist for participating and progressing in countryside recreation activities.
- There is a distinct need for a centralised natural facilities data-base which could be used to develop appropriate resource/information/promotional material. Tension exists between users and landowners over the question of **Occupiers' Liability**. There is, however, a desire that the issue should be resolved, and a consensus that landowners should not in general, be expected to be responsible for those on their land for recreational purposes.

Communication

- The difficulty in communicating with non-affiliated participants presents Governing Bodies with significant problems. Access agreements have in some cases been jeopardised or lost because of the actions of unaffiliated users. There is also concern that casual users are often no longer aware of the Country Code.
- There is an inadequate exchange of information about recreational activities between users and landowners/resource managers, together with a piece-meal overall awareness of what activities are currently taking place throughout Northern Ireland.

Structures and Co-ordination

Governing Bodies / Users

- Activities which do not have a recognised Governing Body are disadvantaged because they are not able to demonstrate an ability to regulate/control participation and are absent from any management fora.

Representation/lobby

- There is no significant lobby representing the collective interests of the range of countryside activities. Representation is commonly dependent upon a local 'animateur' acting in a voluntary capacity and concerned primarily with local impacts.
- In the absence of a co-ordinating Governing Body network, Governing Bodies were often found to be working in isolation, regarding many access problems in particular as unique to their sport. Consequently, work is often duplicated in finding solutions, making long term development difficult to sustain.

Key Providers/ Managers

- The research confirmed the absence of strategic and long-term planning for countryside recreation within Northern Ireland as well as the low priority currently attached to countryside recreation by many of the key agencies. Within local government, countryside recreation frequently falls between the remit of Sports Development Officers and Countryside Officers, with neither being able to give it adequate attention.
- Few statutory bodies have policy objectives dealing with countryside recreation. Instead many are working in a policy vacuum. This situation is compounded by the absence of a body prepared to take a lead and co-ordinating role. This inevitably leads to duplication of effort and resources. Agencies such as the Sports Council and Environment and Heritage Service were criticised for having withdrawn resources, or failing to commit adequate resources in the light of other priorities. The case of a district council's potential to link the work of their Countryside Officer/ Sports Development Officer/ Economic Development Officer and Tourism Officer was given as an example within the research programme of the lack of co-ordination in microcosm.
- Resource managers are not encouraged to take a strategic approach in determining the suitability of certain activities and many will react to expressions of demand on a first come - first served basis. One consequence of this is the wasteful or inappropriate use of limited resources.





Section 2

THE STRATEGIC Vision

Consideration of the full research findings by the Working Group and by the wider audience represented in the series of workshops revealed a high degree of consensus amongst the various interests about:

- the obstacles currently restricting countryside recreation development;
- the need for clear direction and co-ordination of interests, and
- the benefits flowing from increased accessibility to the Northern Ireland countryside and a developed infrastructure which promotes sustainable countryside recreation.

However, the most prominent theme to emerge from the workshops was an over riding consensus calling for a new approach which would optimise the countryside's resources for as many people as possible. It was widely recognised that a clear vision was needed on which a framework of action could be based and on which each of the organisations and interests involved could focus.

From the workshops, and discussion at the Working Group, a Vision was agreed:

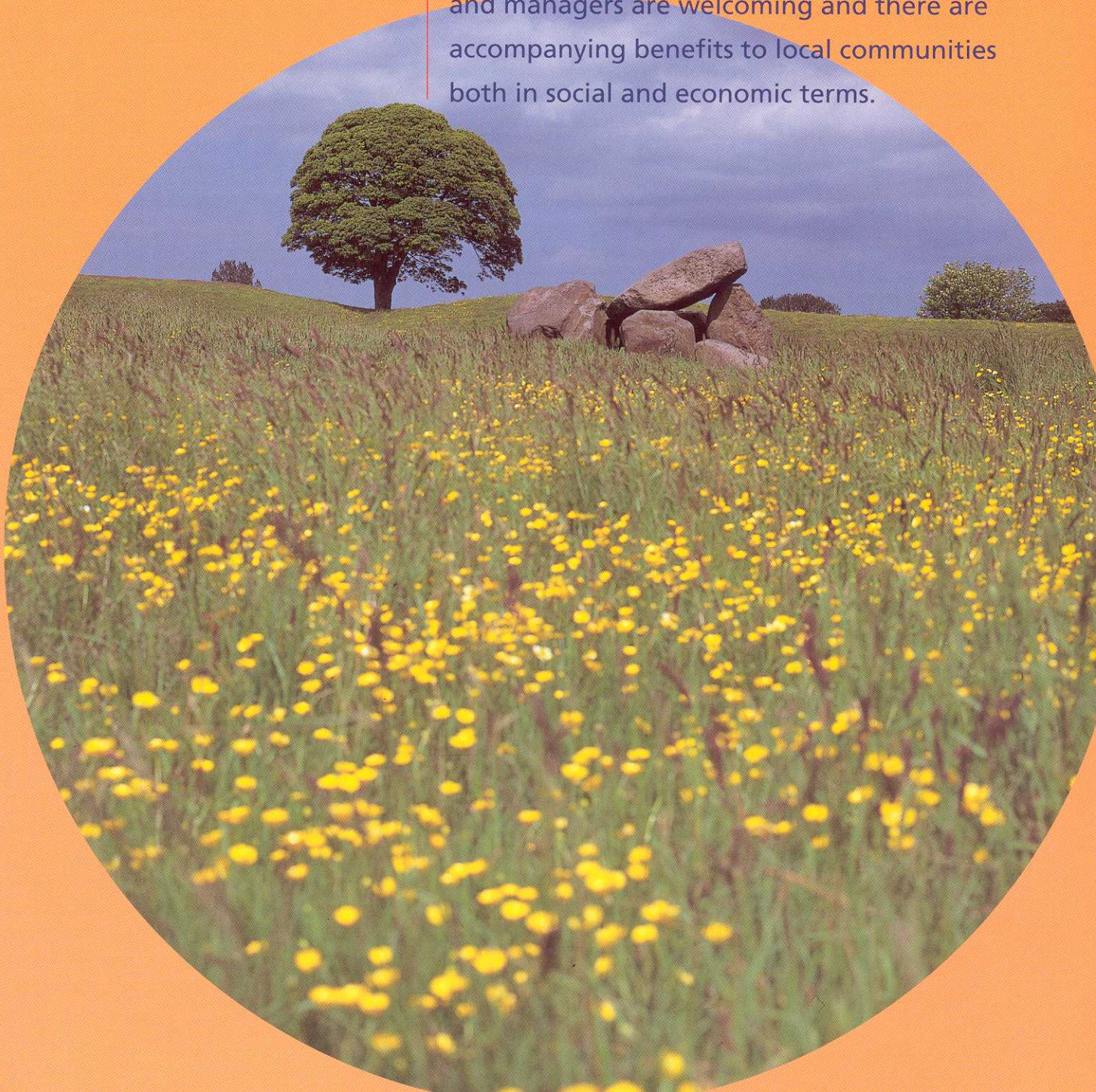
Northern Ireland Countryside Recreation Vision

To develop and sustain a vibrant countryside recreation culture, in which responsible and well informed people enjoy high-quality, sustainable and appropriate activities in an accessible, well managed yet challenging environment; where landowners and managers are welcoming and there are accompanying benefits to local communities both in social and economic terms.

Inherent in this Vision are three underlying values which could, in turn, be achieved through three areas of activity. These 'values' and 'areas of activity' emerged and were agreed by participants at the final workshop.

Northern Ireland countryside **RECREATION** vision

To develop and sustain a vibrant countryside recreation culture, in which responsible and well informed people enjoy high-quality, sustainable and appropriate activities in an accessible, well managed yet challenging environment; where landowners and managers are welcoming and there are accompanying benefits to local communities both in social and economic terms.





2.1 Underlying values

The three underlying values are:

- **Mutual respect between all interested parties; users, providers, managers and landowners.**

It is necessary to move to a position where everyone who uses the countryside is aware of their responsibilities:

- to use the countryside in a way that is responsible and which contributes towards its conservation;
- to promote the intrinsic value of countryside recreation;
- to recognise the constraints that exist in managing the resource, and
- to help ensure that the economic and social benefits are optimised.

Clear lines of communication and prompt resolution of conflicts would be hallmarks of this value in action.

- **Sustainable access.**

In improving the accessibility of the countryside, it will be essential to ensure that access is sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms and that improvements to the range and quality of access opportunities are undertaken in a strategic manner. There is a broad consensus that it is both possible and important to manage the use of the countryside so that most demands for sport and recreation may be accommodated without conflicting with the interests of others, detracting from the quality of the countryside or giving rise to any significant or long term damage.

- **Quality of the Experience.**

Although it is difficult to define precise 'quality indicators', there is a consensus that the current constraints on countryside recreation opportunities in Northern Ireland often result in a comparatively limited quality experience for a large range of activities. Constraints include: the limited availability of information; overall awareness of opportunities; physical access to certain areas; the attitudes of other users and landowners, and the quality of the resource itself, an example being occasional poor water quality in rivers, sea and surf. There is a need to define qualitative requirements and to set standards for activities that are in keeping with what is available elsewhere and which will help to ensure that improvements are made.

2.2 Areas of activity

To realise these values in practice, and enable them to be fully reflected throughout the whole spectrum of countryside recreation provision, we (collectively) need to concentrate our attention on the following key areas of activity.

- **Management Structures.**

Countryside recreation in Northern Ireland is falling short of optimising its available natural, physical, human and financial resources. We need to take a fresh look at how these resources are managed and identify what improvements need to be made at local, regional and national level. For the vision to become a reality, effective, efficient and appropriate management structures will need to be established, together with improvements to the overall co-ordination and strategic planning of all available resources.

In improving the accessibility of the countryside, it will be essential to ensure that access is sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms.

- **Educating and training for managers, users, owners and the public.**

Limited awareness, low levels of understanding, lack of appreciation, unsafe practices, restricted sharing of information and limited technical knowledge are all evident, both in our participation in, and management of, countryside recreation at present. Tackling these issues will require broadly based, comprehensive programmes of education and training, tailored to the needs of the diverse range of interest groups.

- **Planned development.**

The small size of Northern Ireland means that it is realistic to aim to facilitate opportunities for all legitimate recreational activities to be carried out within reasonable reach of potential participants. This does not mean that all areas should be available for use. Foreseeable demand, even allowing for activities where high quality of environmental experience is important, can almost always be catered for without using fragile environments or harming other interests of acknowledged importance.

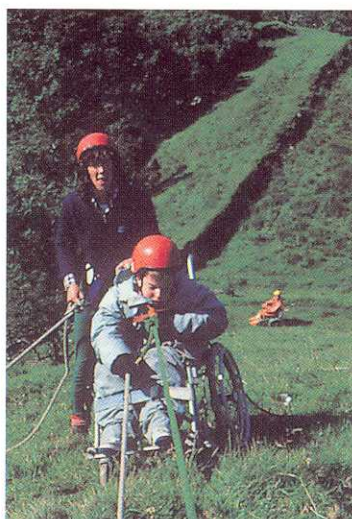
This approach is encapsulated in the working principle:

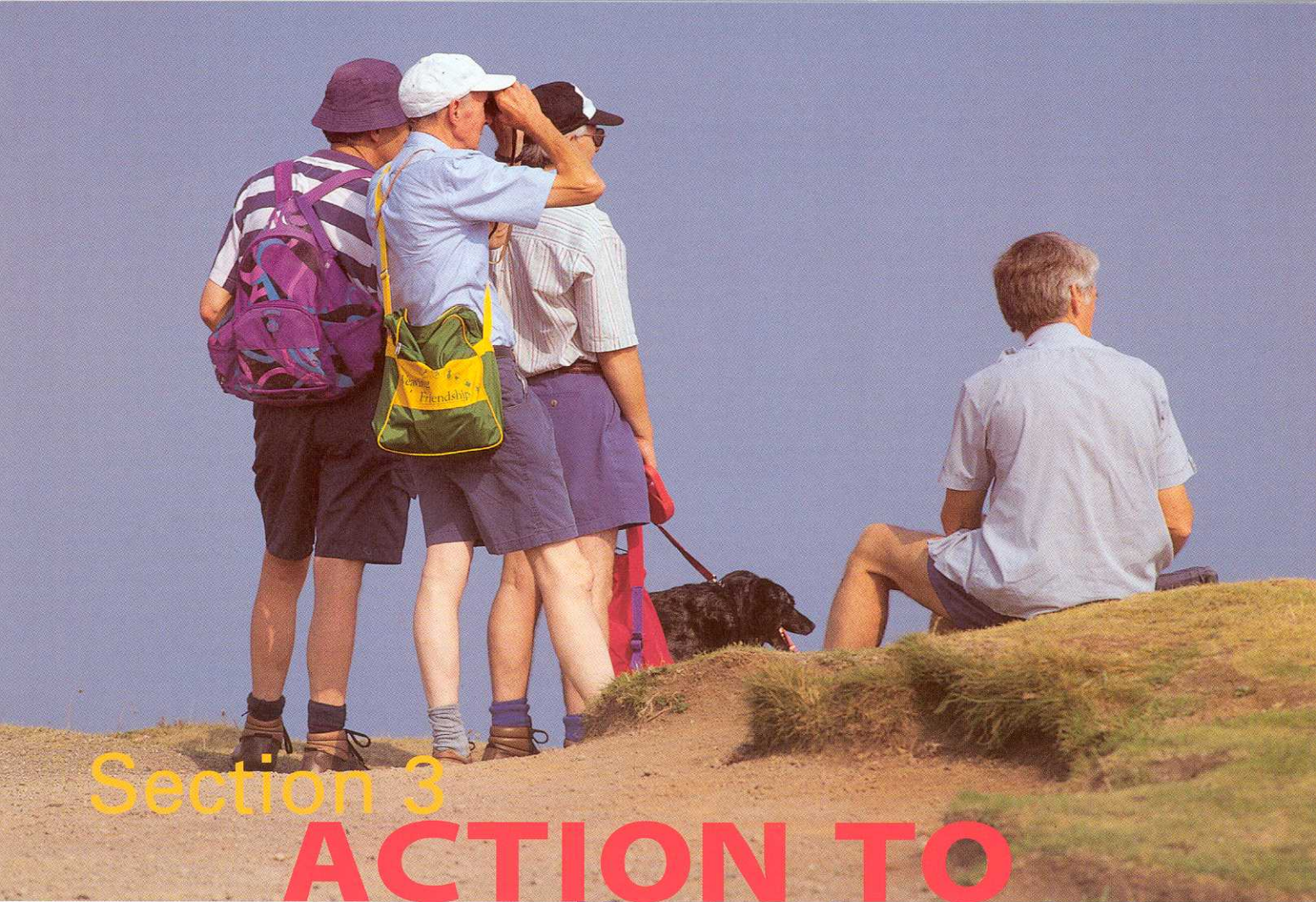
“ Access for all, but not access to everywhere”.

However, we must also recognise that, just as there are areas of agreed special importance for wildlife or landscape, so there are natural facilities for sport and recreation which cannot be replaced. The key will be in ensuring that we can adopt a strategic approach in the way that new and developing facilities for countryside recreation are resourced, supported, provided and managed. This must include,

for example, consideration of the extent of the resource, the demand, and the nature of the demand, for each activity and the competing, conflicting or complementary nature of different activities.

The Working Group agreed that it is the first of these three areas that is the most important, and which should therefore be regarded as having priority. It will be essential to ensure that appropriate management structures are put in place at an early stage, and that they continue to be maintained and adequately resourced. Only then will it be possible to ensure that the other essential components of the vision, the planned development of recreation provision and education and training, are also realised.





Section 3

ACTION TO 'realise' the vision

Achieving the vision will require sustained programmes of action for each of the three areas of activity. All those that have contributed to developing the vision, and the organisations and groups they represent, must now be willing to play their part by working in partnership to further develop the commitment and the goodwill that exists towards making the vision a reality.

These programmes of action form the core of this Strategy.

Programme 1 - Management Structures

The strategic objective is:

to ensure that recreational use of the countryside is managed in a way which provides a high quality and consistent experience for all recreational users within an environment where providers, managers and landowners are welcoming and where close co-operation exists between all interested partners.

This strategic objective will be attained through the achievement of five goals:

- networking and liaison between all relevant interests;
- a sustained policy commitment from key players;
- structures to support and reflect the above;
- adequate support for such structures, and
- an effective and well respected legislative framework.

Action programme for Management Structures:

- It is recommended that:
 1. A 'Countryside Access Liaison Group' is established comprising representatives of Government Departments, Public Agencies and Local Authorities with an interest in managing countryside or water recreation resources. The Liaison Group's main role will be to co-ordinate policy and action by its constituent members.
 2. Each body represented on the Liaison Group should develop a countryside recreation policy framework or statement identifying its input into the management process.
 3. A countryside recreation/adventure activities lobby group is formed to represent the interests of the governing/ representative bodies. *The N.I. Sports Forum has recently set up standing conferences on Countryside, Water and Air Sports to form this lobby.*

In setting the strategic objective for management structures, it is recognised that there is an over-riding need to develop much closer co-ordination between all the agencies, the user groups and other interest groups.

4. A 'Countryside Access and Activities Network' be established as an umbrella voluntary body to co-ordinate the views of all countryside recreation governing bodies, statutory agencies, environmental bodies, landowners representatives and other appropriate groups throughout Northern Ireland.

5. An 'Access and Activities Development Officer' be appointed to support and facilitate the Countryside Access and Activities Network.

6. Further local management structures are established to ensure that landowner representatives and rural community representatives are involved in planning for recreation provision.

7. Countryside recreation sports development planning should be included within the terms of reference of the regional area sports bodies that are being developed as a consequence of the Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport.

8. Steps should be taken, including, if necessary, the amending of existing legislation:

- **to resolve the current widespread concerns about Occupiers Liability;**
- **to ensure that the wider framework of legislation governing countryside recreation provision is fair, effective and workable, and**
- **to consider ways of extending or improving access to open countryside mindful of what is proposed in the rest of the United Kingdom.**

Delivering the Management Structures action programme

In setting the strategic objective for management structures, it is recognised that there is an over-riding need to develop much closer co-ordination between all the agencies which have an interest in managing countryside or water recreation resources, the user groups and other interest groups, including those concerned with education and with the environment. This requires action both in the planning of policy and the establishment of new structures.

Inter-agency liaison underlying the establishment of the 'Countryside Access Liaison Group'

For the statutory agencies, it will be important to address countryside recreation issues through the production of policy frameworks which detail each agency's priorities and programmes. The process should be an interactive one in which each agency works with other partners to identify its particular role and responsibilities within the overall context of the Northern Ireland Strategy and seeks through co-ordination and co-operation to achieve the best use of resources.

The establishment of the inter-agency Liaison Group is designed to support this interactive process. The functions of the Group should include:

- the representation of countryside sport and recreation interests in public sector decision-making;
- the development of countryside sport and recreation planning and management skills and of good practice within the agencies involved;

- the sharing of information and the undertaking of joint initiatives (e.g. research, management strategies, information programmes);
- securing progress, funding and support for joint initiatives and for the proposed Countryside Access and Activities Network;
- the representation of Northern Ireland interests at U.K., Irish and wider fora.

It is envisaged that membership of the Liaison Group would comprise representatives of: the Sports Council for Northern Ireland; Environment and Heritage Service; the Northern Ireland Tourist Board; the Rivers Agency, Forest Service and Rural Development Division of the Department of Agriculture; Planning Service of the Department of the Environment; Education and Library Boards; local authorities, and any other statutory bodies with an interface with or involvement in countryside recreation.



The need for a countryside recreation lobby

It has long been recognised that many of the Governing Bodies of countryside sports are small and fragmented and do not present an effective lobby.

The Northern Ireland Sports Forum has recently set up standing conferences on Countryside, Water and Air Sports, made up of representatives from the relevant Governing Bodies. It is proposed that the three Chairs of these conferences will represent the interests of voluntary sport on the Network, subject to consensus within the relevant Governing Bodies.

Factors underlying the establishment of the 'Countryside Access and Activities Network'.

This proposed umbrella body, representing a full cross-section of countryside recreation and other relevant interest groups, is designed to link the lobby group for countryside recreation with all the other users. The need to develop better communication with other interest groups, led to a consensus between parties involved in the workshops that a new voluntary Countryside Access and Activities Network is required. Such a Network would be wider than any lobby or collective grouping of countryside-based Governing Bodies of Sport.

The functions of the Countryside Access and Activities Network would include:

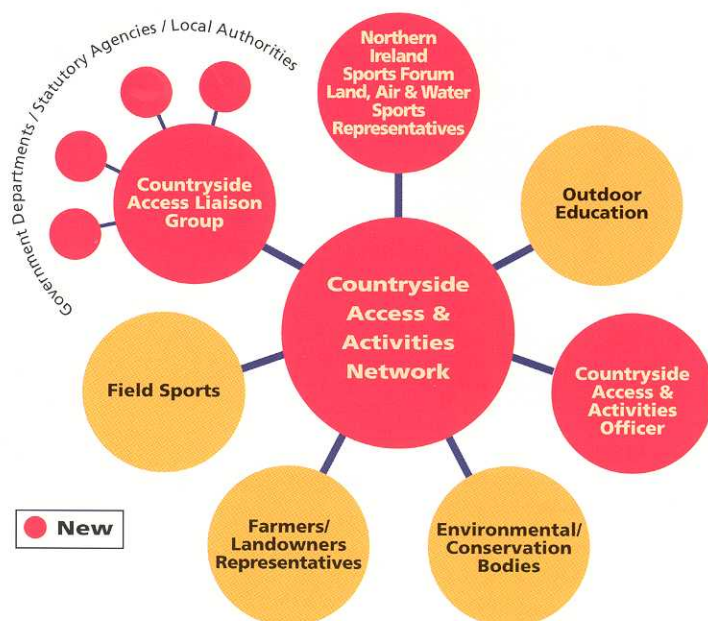
- to jointly represent countryside sports and recreation interests, for example as a consultee on policy issues and as a lobby for improved access;
- to promote the provision, awareness of, and participation in, countryside sports and recreation and to encourage responsible access and safety;
- to promote good practice and joint initiatives in the provision, marketing and management of countryside activities e.g. access agreements, joint codes of practice;
- to promote agreement and reconcile conflicts between countryside users;
- to secure funding for joint initiatives and to prepare and publish appropriate publications.

Membership would comprise of: representatives of countryside sports (either individually or collectively through the N.I. Sports Forum), outdoor activity centres, education, youth and community organisations, farmers/landowners representatives (UFU, NIAPA,) and conservation interests (e.g. RSPB). In the short term, the Network should consider the advantages of incorporation as a Trust or similar charitable body. The Network is recommended to undertake a 3-year Development Plan identifying its aims, objectives and action programmes. Statutory agencies would be encouraged to invest in identified programmes of mutual interest from the Plan.

Appointment of a Countryside Access and Activities Officer

The catalyst in creating an effective Countryside Access and Activities Network lies in the appointment of a skilled Countryside Access and Activities Officer. This person's primary role will be to establish, promote and run the Countryside Access and Activities Network and to work towards its establishment as a free standing Trust or similar body. **This appointment is considered fundamental in animating the whole process and making things happen.** The Working Party were adamant that the person concerned should be of sufficient status and ability to operate effectively with the broad range of groups, departments and agencies involved. On the basis of their recommendations, and in the desire to make this Strategy effective, **the two sponsors have agreed to begin recruitment for this post immediately.** To enable this to happen, the Mountaineering Council of Ireland (MCI), an established body recognised in the 1993 Access Order and by the Sports Council, have agreed to act as 'host' employer, a nominal role pending the establishment of a free standing Trust or similar body.

Proposed Management Structures



Many organisations will have direct representation on the Network as well as on their respective liaison or interest group. Smaller bodies and peripheral interests will often only be represented through another grouping.

Co-ordinating structures

The close co-operation that will be required between the Liaison Group and Countryside Access and Activities Network would best be managed through the establishment of joint working groups on issues of mutual interest. The consultation programme has produced a number of areas and key issues which could appropriately be incorporated into terms of reference for a range of such groups. For example, the development of a Long Distance Routes network would justify a separate platform. Other examples include: access for noisy sports; the development of regional access strategies, and agricultural related projects.

Existing area-based management structures, such as those for the Mourne, Lower Bann and Lough Neagh, have highlighted the need for recreation and tourism planning to be a significant element in the strategic management of their natural resource base. These existing bodies, and any new local bodies that may be established, also have an important role to play in ensuring that the rural community is involved, and that their wishes are taken into account, in planning for the management and servicing of countryside users.

Changes to legislation

Underpinning any management structures is the framework of legislation within which access to the countryside takes place. Two key areas were consistently highlighted in the consultation process as working against achieving access. These were: the implications on any landowner of the current Occupiers' Liability legislation, and the difficulty in determining whether a path should be regarded as having become a public right of way under the terms of the 1983 Access Order.

Recent changes to legislation governing Occupiers' Liability in the Republic of Ireland have clarified the occupiers' position there and are based on the principle that the user should primarily be responsible for his or her own safety. This was widely recognised by both the Working Party and those involved in wider consultation as providing a model for potential changes which might be made to Northern Ireland legislation, changes which are urgently needed to resolve current widespread concerns. It is recognised that whilst the Republic's legislation has not provided a complete solution to this issue, it merits close examination and **the Strategy recommends that the Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland commission a specific study in this regard.**

Similarly, there is much interest in the Department of Environment's proposed review of the implications of facilitating the Government's 1997 election manifesto

commitment to give greater freedom of access to open country. It was felt that the proposed consultation paper should also take the opportunity to allow a wider assessment of changes needed to the Occupiers Liability legislation and the difficulties of implementing the current provisions of the 1983 Access Order in relation to rights of way and creating public paths.

The nature and degree of any changes to primary legislation depend on the outcome of full and proper debate and consideration by the new Northern Ireland Assembly. Whilst legislative matters are outside the scope and remit of this Strategy other than by way of considered recommendation, they are fundamental to the issues raised. It was widely felt that the establishment of the structures proposed in this Strategy would facilitate debate and informed input into consideration of any legislative changes.

It was strongly held, however, that the principles embodied in this Strategy should be reflected in any new legislative proposals brought forward for consideration and that the Department of the Environment should strive to ensure that any such proposals have the widest possible degree of support amongst all countryside recreation interests. It was also felt that any subsequent legislative changes should be widely publicised through the production of appropriate information including technical advice and guidance to local authorities and advice targeted at the farming community. Countryside users will also benefit from information and guidance on the implications of any changes.



Programme 2 - Planned Development

The strategic objective is:

to ensure that new and developing facilities for countryside recreation are resourced, supported, provided and managed in a strategic way which considers the extent of the resource, the sensitivity and carrying capacity of the resource, the demand and nature of demand for each activity, and the competing, conflicting or complementary nature of different activities.

Action programme for Planned Development:

In order to establish a framework within which planned development can take place, it is recommended that appropriate and effective steps be taken to:

- audit the countryside recreation resource;
- audit the extent and nature of use of the countryside resource;
- identify strategic facilities requirements, and
- identify strategic management needs.

Existing facilities should be supported, managed and developed, and new facilities should be provided as appropriate within the framework that is determined in the light of this comprehensive assessment.

It is also important to ensure that the considerations of this Strategy are taken account of and introduced into other strategic planning mechanisms such as the Regional Physical Development Framework, the Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport, Area Development Plans and Local or Subject Plans. The establishment of the proposed Liaison Group, the proposed Network, and the appointment of the Countryside Access and Activities Officer will all help in this regard.

Delivering the Planned Development action programme

The research has highlighted the primarily reactive approach currently characteristic of countryside recreation planning and practised by the majority of managers and agencies. The increasing demand for new access opportunities, limited resources, and the underpinning need for development to be sustainable, all mean that a more structured approach must be adopted.

Key planning elements

The following key planning elements, identified by the consultation process, are conspicuous by their absence from the system at present:

- **A natural facilities database.** Such databases have already been developed in England, Scotland and Wales. It is recommended that **a database for Northern Ireland should be commissioned by the Liaison Group.** When linked to a suitable Geographical Information System, this would provide an accurate and dynamic picture of, for example, existing facilities, the level and nature of their use, their carrying capacities, and existing or proposed environmental designations.
- **A register of natural resources.** There is currently no register of the range of natural resources which would potentially lend themselves to accommodating new or additional activities. **A scoping study is needed with the results encompassed within the natural facilities database.**

- **Strategic development Plans.** The recreation Governing Bodies have, at present, no strategic Plans for their respective activity. As a result, many statutory agencies are unaware of the aspirations of many countryside activities or the facilities that are needed. **The Countryside Access and Activities Network should be tasked with facilitating the production of any Plans that are needed.** Such Plans should include a hierarchy of existing facilities, the prioritisation of natural facilities needed to meet strategic needs, and the sports development programmes required to underpin facility development. These Plans would be used to inform the planning function of the Liaison Group, the agencies and bodies represented on that Group, and the Area (Regional) sports bodies. They could also be disseminated to the rural development and community networks in order to inform and encourage possible partnerships in the development of facilities and to secure physical access for such activities.
- **A shared understanding/ awareness of quality standards for activities.** Planning guidelines need to be determined which will help to inform managers of the quality standards which can reasonably be expected when participating in an activity at recognised sites. Commensurate specifications should subsequently be built in to facility planning.

Programme 3 - Education and Training

The strategic objective is:

to raise the public's awareness of countryside recreation opportunities and encourage participation in countryside recreation by well-informed users who demonstrate appropriate conduct in the countryside, consistent with good practice in their activity, and consistent with the management practices of landowners and managers.

Action programme for Education and Training

It is recommended that the Access and Activities Officer and other relevant interests should:

- work with representative bodies of activities to develop access information and 'responsible user' information for their activity and encourage wide dissemination to affiliated and casual users;
- work with landowner representatives to identify or negotiate acceptable practice by recreational users, for different kinds of terrain, water bodies, riparian land and land subject to particular farming practices;
- establish a central information point on countryside access opportunities and provide public information at a number of levels on accessibility and good practice;

- identify and monitor the impacts of countryside activities on land and water in order to make informed decisions about provision and management;
- seek to establish quality standards for each activity, and
- work in liaison with countryside managers in providing for the requirements of recreational users.

Delivering the Education and Training action programme

The low level of priority attached to countryside recreation, together with poor co-ordination between those involved, has undoubtedly served to restrict both the level of awareness of opportunities and the level of appreciation of the countryside. While the formal education sector has played a part in raising awareness, much action is needed in the broad area of education and training if the values of mutual respect, appropriate conduct, good practice, and a quality experience embraced within the strategic objective are to be realised.

The aim is not, however, to attempt to generate a mass participation campaign. Rather, it is to improve awareness and understanding about the opportunities that exist; to ensure that everyone who uses the countryside does so with care and consideration for others and to further ensure that countryside recreation can be effectively and professionally managed.

The background research has identified a diverse range of audiences and needs which the education and training programme must address. This can be achieved through the remit of both the Access and Activities Officer and through the formal education sector. Matters include:

- **Education for awareness of opportunities.**

There is a low awareness amongst the public of many of the current recreation opportunities. There is, in particular, a need to target specific groups such as the less-able and young people that are currently under-represented in countryside recreation, and to provide more information on specific countryside activities. Information on the geographical location of sites, for example, is important not only because people often fail to realise that sites are available but in helping to manage and control access and in deflecting demand away from areas which are overused.





- **Education for social accountability.**

Educating recreation users in safe practice and responsible use is vital, not only to ensure their own safety but to ensure the safety of those sharing the same resource base. It can also secure the harmonious co-existence of different activities. There is, in addition, a need for education on the most effective ways of maintaining or developing good relations with landowners and resource managers, particularly amongst those activities which are commonly perceived as causing a nuisance to others or as having a detrimental impact on the environment.

Underpinning this programme of specific training is the need to specifically develop young peoples' appreciation of the countryside resource and to do so as part of the education process. Good examples of curriculum based outdoor activities within the school context have been developed in, for example, New Zealand and Australia. These offer valuable lessons which can be applied to the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Similarly, the strengthening of links with and between educational and commercial countryside activity providers is imperative. These matters will be an important function of the Access and Activities Officer.

- **Educating for resource management.**

There is a need to educate the providers and managers of recreation on the real impacts that countryside activities have on the environment as opposed to the perceived impacts. Education programmes are also required: to illustrate practical management techniques; to show the need to provide recreation opportunities for all sections of the population, and on how to provide a reasonably safe environment for the public.

- **Education on the benefits associated with countryside recreation.**

While countryside recreation has the potential to bring economic regeneration to many rural areas, particularly through activity tourism, the research has shown there is a need to educate rural communities about such benefits, including the indirect contribution that such recreation can make to the wider community. There is also a growing understanding of the need to educate in order to encourage and promote sustainable tourism, that is tourism which recognises the need to conserve the physical environment, assists local economies and supports distinctiveness.

The education and training programme highlighted here is extensive. For much of it, the Access and Activities Officer can largely act only as a catalyst. Further consideration must be given to resourcing and implementing the full range of education programmes. Developing partnerships with governing bodies, existing education and training programmes and the commercial sector could lead to substantial progress in delivering this recommended action programme.



CONCLUSION

The preparation of this, the first Northern Ireland Countryside Recreation Strategy has presented both a challenge and an opportunity. Consideration of the list of activities considered, as scheduled in Appendix 1, will not only highlight the huge range of activities which depend on the finite resources of the countryside but also the diversity of those activities. Many of these activities can have adverse impacts on the environment and on the operations of landowners. Thus the challenge has been to create a common vision, to agree shared values and areas of activity, and to establish goals and co-ordinated action programmes which not only increase the potential for recreation but also reduce the potential for conflict or environmental damage.

This Strategy is the proof that we have risen to this challenge and, in so doing, have created a host of opportunities. It is the determined hope of the Working Party that the spirit of partnership and co-operation that they themselves have established can be carried over into the operation and activities of the new Groups recommended by this document. This will better enable opportunities to be grasped that will help realise our common vision. After all, we all live, make our living, and take our recreation in what is really a very small area of land and countryside. It is in all our interests that we plan and act in a strategic fashion that moves us

"towards a sustainable countryside".

Countryside **RECREATION** Indicative Action Programme

Programme 1 - Management Structures

Recommendation	Bodies involved	Time frame	Progress to date
1. Establish a Countryside Access Liaison Group	EHS*, SCNI, NITB, Rivers Agency, Forest Service, DANI Rural Development Division, Planning Service, Education and Library Boards, Local Authorities, etc.	short term	
2. Each body represented on the Liaison Group to develop countryside recreation policy frameworks	As above	short/medium term	
3. Establish a countryside recreation activities lobby group	The Northern Ireland Sports Forum have established standing conferences for land, water and air sports.	short term	Establishment completed. Phase 2 = encouraging widespread membership
4. Appoint the Countryside Access and Activities Officer	SCNI, EHS and host employer	immediate	Appointment process in place MCI= host employer
5. Establish Countryside Access and Activities Network	Countryside Access and Activities Officer (CAAO)*, SCNI, EHS, NISE, UFU, NIAPA, Liaison Group, various other representative bodies	Network constituted - short term Network working towards Trust status short / medium term	
6. New natural resource local management structures	relevant statutory, landowner and rural community representatives for specific areas of countryside	short / medium term	
7. Countryside recreation planning function included within evolving regional consortia local authority sports bodies	SCNI, LA's	medium term	
8. Consider amendments to existing legislation:	DoE (NI)* / other statutory agencies / Liaison Group / Access and Activities Network / public consultation / LA's / NI Assembly	short / medium term	

* Denotes lead body

short term - year 1

medium term - years 2 & 3

Programme 2 - Planned Development

Recommendation	Bodies involved	Time frame	Progress to date
1. Develop a natural facilities database	Liaison Group to commission	medium term	
2. Undertake a scoping register of natural facilities	Liaison Group / Access and Activities Network to commission	medium term	
3. Strategic development plans	Access and Activities Network, Governing Bodies	medium term	
4. Develop planning guidelines - benchmark standards	Access and Activities Network, Governing Bodies, managers	medium term	

Programme 3 - Education and Training*

Recommendation	Bodies involved	Time frame	Progress to date
1. Develop access information and codes of conduct	Access and Activities Network, Access and Activities Officer, other relevant interests	short / medium term	
2. Establish a central information point on countryside access opportunities	Access and Activities Network, Access and Activities Officer	short / medium term	
3. Carry out recreation impact monitoring programme	Access Liaison Group, Access and Activities Network, Access and Activities Network	medium term	

* Denotes lead body

short term - year 1

medium term - years 2 & 3

- Further consideration must be given to resourcing and implementing the full range of education programmes. Developing partnerships with governing bodies, existing education and training programmes and the commercial sector could lead to substantial progress in delivering the recommended action programme.

Appendix 1

List of Activities considered by the Strategy

Land-based Activities

Caving
Clay Pigeon Shooting
Fell Running
Field sports
Two-wheeled Motor Sports
Four-wheeled Motor Sports
Horse Riding
Mountain Biking

Mountaineering
Orienteering
Rambling
Two-wheeled Motor Sports

Recognised representative body

Speleological Union of Ireland
Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association
Northern Ireland Fell Runners Association
British Association for Shooting and Conservation
Motor Cycling Union of Ireland - Ulster Centre
Northern Ireland Association of Car Clubs
Ulster Rural Riders Association / British Horse Society
Ulster Cycling Federation
Northern Ireland Cycling Federation
Mountaineering Council of Ireland
Northern Ireland Orienteering Association
Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs
Motor Cycle Union of Ireland, Ulster Centre

Water-based Activities

Canoeing
Coarse Angling
Game Angling
Jet Skiing
Rowing
Sailing
Sub Aqua
Surfing
Water Skiing

Canoe Association of Northern Ireland
Ulster Coarse Fishing Federation
Ulster Angling Federation
Wet & Wild Jet Ski Centre
Ulster Branch, Irish Amateur Rowing Union
Royal Yachting Association, N.I. Council
Northern Ireland Federation of Sub Aqua Clubs
Northern Ireland Surfing Association
Irish Water Ski Federation – N.I. Region

Air-based Activities

Aeromodelling
Gliding
Hang Gliding & Paragliding
Microlight Flying
Parachuting
Popular Flying

Northern Ireland Association of Aeromodellers
Ulster Gliding Club
Ulster Hang Gliding & Paragliding Club
Ulster Microlight Club
Jumpmaster
Ulster Flying Club