



**MOUNTAINEERING
SCOTLAND
CONSERVATION
STRATEGY**



FOREWORD

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“Scotland has a unique and world class mountain environment. We need to look after it.

Mountaineering Scotland is a recreation and conservation organisation of 14,000 members who enjoy walking, ski touring and climbing. We invite you to consider how to reconcile the challenges of climate change, protection of habitat and wildlife, expansion of renewable energy generation, and sustainable economic development along with keeping our mountains wild and accessible.”

“We’d like to work with you to help look after Scotland’s unique mountain environment. Our Conservation Strategy sets out how we aspire to do that.”



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INTRODUCTION

The perceived naturalness and wild qualities of the uplands are very important to a large percentage of Mountaineering Scotland members. In a survey of members' opinions in 2017, 85% of survey respondents gave a high priority to campaigning to protect the wildness of Scotland's mountain areas. 72% of respondents said that mountain flora and fauna is important to their overall experience.

Most of the uplands have in the past been modified through grazing by wild and domestic animals, drainage of peatlands, expansion of plantation forestry and deposits of atmospheric pollution, reducing the extent of near-natural habitats and the wildlife associated with them. In more recent years the physical and visual impact of major civil engineering work has significantly modified large areas of land.

This reduction in diversity, coupled with lack of connectivity with other semi-natural areas has resulted in the decline of a range of plant and animal wildlife. Global climate change produces rapidly changing environmental conditions; this challenges the ability of plants and animals to respond and adapt quickly enough.

Impacts on the wildlife and wild qualities of the land are often enabled by government policy, through legislation and regulation or economic incentive and subsidy. Sometimes this has a negative impact on wildlife and wildness, sometimes positive, often attempting to mitigate adverse consequences of previous policies, such as peatland restoration projects.

SCOPE OF THE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

"Respecting Scotland's Mountains" is Mountaineering Scotland's vision for Scotland's mountain environment, and sets the overall policy framework for protecting landscape and wildlife while encouraging the development of a sustainable economy in fragile upland landscapes.

It is important to recognise that no part of the environment escapes the impact of human activity – we are inextricably part of it all. The wildlife and wild qualities that our members and supporters enjoy and appreciate are in the places where human activity touches more lightly on the land. Large, remote and semi-natural areas are where these qualities are most evident.

The wild qualities of a landscape include natural processes such as river dynamics and vegetation developing naturally with variations in the physical environment. The encouragement of wild qualities of landscape does not preclude the harnessing or harvesting of natural resources. It is the way that it is done that is the issue.

Mountaineering Scotland recognises that land management and development activities will have impacts and accepts and encourages activities that are sustainable and maintain the wild qualities of the landscape. Partnership and

collaboration are important to build consensus. We will work with other organisations whose policy intention is to maintain or increase the abundance of wildness and wildlife.

GEOGRAPHICAL EXTENT OF CONSERVATION INTEREST

Mountaineering Scotland regards land generally lying beyond the limit of enclosed farmland as the area in which it may consider its conservation interventions in land management policy and practice. In addition, documented climbing crags are included if situated in lowland and coastal areas.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The Strategic Objectives address the most immediate and pressing impacts on:

- **Mountaineering Practice** e.g. access issues due to forestry and fencing, path erosion, climate change, and
- **Mountaineering Enjoyment** e.g. issues affecting the look and feel of the landscape, and the diversity and abundance of wildlife in the uplands

The strategic objectives fall into three areas:

- 1. Land use and Wildlife - We will consult, support and co-operate with others to achieve common aims** in national landscape and wildlife conservation policies that encourage and balance land management, wildlife and wildness in a sustainable way.
- 2. Wild Land & Development Activity - We will seek to influence public opinion** through campaigning and public debate where the qualities of wildness and wild land are potentially at risk.
- 3. Recreational Activity - We will promote opportunities for activity** that aids conservation of the uplands and climbing crags, respecting the interests of others, taking care of the environment, and taking responsibility for actions.





STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: LAND USE AND WILDLIFE

Currently the predominant upland land uses are generally segregated by different ownership objectives and management uses such as sporting use, extensive livestock rearing and forestry. This division of intent can result in visually uniform blocks or areas of monoculture, often with angular edges, and, ecologically, with fragmentation of species-rich semi-natural habitats and their isolation from each other.

The Scottish Government's policy for woodland expansion to cover 21% of Scotland by 2032 will be a significant factor in influencing upland land use in coming years, determining how the landscape looks and how it relates to other users of the uplands.

Current rural support funding ends in 2020. The opportunity exists to refresh the relationship of upland land management with more natural processes, to support land management that improves habitat connectivity and wildlife diversity.

Peatlands and woodlands are recognised as being able to store carbon, contributing to the Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan.

Rewilding is a concept of lower intensity land use that assists regeneration of plants and fungi and associated animals, supporting a greater reliance on natural processes for soil, water and wildlife. It encourages land management that reduces the impact of human activities on the ability of ecosystems to self-regulate, restoring a dynamic balance to the environment.

Imbalances in predator/prey relationships cause problems with natural plant and animal populations, often requiring human interventions, that come with a financial cost.

Examples of impacts that potentially influence the visual appearance and wildlife richness of the uplands, positively or negatively, include:

- Under or overgrazing by wild and domestic animals affecting the vegetation cover
- The creation of extensive moorland monocultures through excessive muirburn
- Woodland planting, felling and natural regeneration
- Large, single-species forestry plantations
- Modification of peatlands by draining or burning, leading to drying-out, erosion and flooding
- Climate change and atmospheric deposition of pollution

Sustainable land management and wildlife conservation involves detailed scientific and technical research generally beyond the scope of Mountaineering Scotland's remit. This research and evidence is important in order to address ecological imbalances in upland land management and to maintain or restore the wild qualities of the landscape.

The interpretation of research and evidence in relation to public policy requires expert opinion from individuals, organisations, forums and agencies. These views will inform how Mountaineering Scotland responds to wild land and wildlife topics as they arise.



ACTIONS

Mountaineering Scotland will encourage and support policies and activities that lead towards creating a richer and wilder environment for the benefit of nature and people. This includes wild deer and grouse moor management, including culling, domestic stock grazing, peatland management (burning and rewetting) and plantation forestry and native woodland management and expansion. We will encourage initiatives that result in greater habitat diversity and connectivity.

Mountaineering Scotland will engage with landowners, communities, agencies and organisations to counter or reduce the potential impact on wild qualities of the landscape, where wild qualities of land, as perceived by walkers, climbers and ski tourers, are potentially at risk of being damaged or lost by management activities, direct or indirect.

Mountaineering Scotland will work in partnership with organisations, forums and agencies who have ecological and land management expertise and whose intention is to increase the ability of plants and animals to be more self-sustaining.

Mountaineering Scotland will engage in discussions about rewilding that lead to reforms of Scottish upland land use and river policy. We will support moves towards increasing the wild qualities of land and waters as perceived by recreational users, where there is generally broad agreement across sectors of society.

Mountaineering Scotland will support rewilding initiatives to restore natural ecological processes in Wild Land Areas, and sites designated for nature conservation in the mountaineering areas. These are likely to be the least managed places and the genetic diversity of plants and animals will be adapted to the area.

Rewilding initiatives can provide multiple ecological, social and economic benefits.

Mountaineering Scotland will support the regeneration of native woodlands and scrub where the land can naturally support them. Natural regeneration encourages plant growth that has a landscape and genetic fit with the area and can enhance wild land qualities. It may require a longer time frame than planting schemes to become established, and expectations will need to be managed accordingly. The establishment of natural tree lines in Scotland's mountains will be encouraged.

Mountaineering Scotland supports the principles of Sustainable Forest Management. We will advocate multi-purpose forestry management that protects and supports semi-natural habitats and wildlife and fits with landscape character, while meeting economic objectives. This will also include high-quality recreational access through woodlands and forestry plantations, for established paths and the facilitation of new routes to hilltops.

Mountaineering Scotland will advocate that infrastructure used for land management in the uplands, specifically fencing and tracks, be avoided where possible and be kept to a minimum where it is demonstrated to be necessary. Access points in fences will be required for both formal paths and popular informal routes. Fences will be removed when they are no longer necessary. Hill tracks will be subject to more planning control, and be defined by their range of usage for various management activities.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2: WILD LAND AND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY

Wild land and rewilding of land can involve landscape-scale initiatives, in partnership with a range of interests: landowners, communities of place and of interest, and government and its agencies. Sustainable use of natural resources is encouraged, but the impacts of some types of economic development require careful scrutiny.

Mountaineering Scotland's policy for wild land and development activity covers all proposed developments requiring planning permission or allowed through Permitted Development Rights.

The classes of development that may be potentially damaging to the wildlife and wild qualities of landscape and climbing crags include, but are not restricted to:

- Energy production and transmission – including wind farms, hydropower schemes and power lines
- Extractive industries - quarries and mines
- Telecommunications masts
- New commercial forestry plantations and harvesting and restocking existing plantations
- Buildings – domestic dwellings and commercial premises
- Associated infrastructure for land management and built development, including ski infrastructure, hill tracks and fences



ACTIONS

Mountaineering Scotland will engage in the protection of Wild Land Areas through planning policy and legislation. We will also campaign to raise awareness of wild land and rewilding, to inform public opinion.

Mountaineering Scotland will scrutinise proposals that erode the wild qualities of the landscape. We will place particular importance around hilltops that are used by walkers, climbers and skiers. This includes all Munros and Corbetts and the routes to the top. Grahams, Marilyns and other tops will be considered where there may be a significant impact. We will pay special attention to proposed developments in the mountainous areas of Wild Land Areas, National Scenic Areas, and National Parks.

Mountaineering Scotland will participate in the planning process at local and national levels. This will include actions to influence policy development, replies to policy and pre-planning consultations, responses to planning applications, and representations at appeals and Public Local Inquiries where necessary.

We will determine action on specific development proposals, having regard for:

- The scale of the development – size, position in the landscape, design, restoration potential, timescale
- Usage of the area by walkers, climbers and skiers, and the physical and visual impacts of the proposed development on recreational interests
- Loss of natural capital in terms of the wild qualities and ecological functions of the land, wildlife and water resources
- Plans for reinstatement of damaged land

Mountaineering Scotland will campaign for all hill tracks to require planning permission and follow best practice guidance, be of a specification proportionate to the activity, and be reduced in width or removed when no longer required for their purpose.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3: RECREATIONAL ACTIVITY

The number of participants in hill walking, climbing and snow sports activities, along with other outdoor recreational activities, has increased in recent years. These activities, although individually of light impact can, when all added up put stresses on upland environments. As a result, responsible use of the uplands by recreational visitors is an important part of conservation of the environment.

Many upland and crag-dwelling wildlife species have been declining in range and abundance and may be sensitive to disturbance.



Credit: Angus Hogg

There is potential for walkers, climbers and skiers to help reduce disturbance by being aware of wildlife and its needs.

Hill walkers and climbers may go to remote areas that are rarely visited. There is potential to observe plants and animals and add records of sightings to national databases, contributing to a better understanding of upland wildlife.

Public transport is limited in many upland areas, and reliance on cars is often necessary for journeys.

The volume of traffic at popular walking and climbing destinations can lead to pressures on rural roads and car parks. Car use adds to atmospheric pollution.

The main impacts caused by outdoor recreational pursuits are:

- Path erosion, caused by numbers of people on popular routes over a length of time. Peatlands, springs and flushes are very susceptible to trampling and erosion
- Breeding bird disturbance, which is a seasonal problem for ground-nesting birds near walking routes, often exacerbated if dogs are present, off lead and not under control, and cliff nesting birds with special legal protection on popular climbing venues
- Crag cleaning is sometimes necessary; overly enthusiastic 'gardening' of plants may strip areas of their wildlife interest
- Litter and human waste disposal are widespread issues involving both biodegradable and non-degradable material, much of it taking years to break down, some potentially hazardous to health. Plastic can be dangerous for wildlife





ACTIONS

Mountaineering Scotland will promote the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and communicate the ethos of responsible behaviour while taking access. In landscape and wildlife terms this means taking care of the environment and minimising disturbance, thinking of the impact of activities on land management practices, and on other users of the land. We will promote the reciprocal obligation on landowners to ensure access is enjoyed by all. The ethos and good practice of informal and wild camping will be promoted.

Mountaineering Scotland will communicate with hill walkers through various media on low-impact use of hills and crags and ways to minimise path erosion. We will promote and encourage members to participate in path remediation projects, whether through donation or physical involvement. We advocate checking on the status of wildflowers, mosses and lichens before crags are cleaned.

Mountaineering Scotland will communicate good recreational practice in the bird breeding season, highlighting the effects of disturbance on breeding success and the means of avoiding or reducing the impact on breeding birds either on cliff ledges or ground nesting near paths. We will maintain contact with raptor study groups in order to advise climbers of where protected bird species are nesting on climbing crags, and to promote a voluntary restraint on climbing on specific routes where nesting birds would be disturbed. We will promote awareness of walkers, dogs and ground-nesting birds in the breeding season.

Mountaineering Scotland will raise awareness of littering and human waste encountered in the hills and promote good practice in reducing the impact, for example avoiding single-use items. We will promote good practice in dealing with human waste and its impacts on the environment and on others' enjoyment of the hills. We will raise awareness of litter in the hills and promote a "leave no trace" ethos. We will promote litter clean-ups and encourage our members to participate where appropriate.

Mountaineering Scotland will promote wildlife recording initiatives that are suitable for everyone, enabling anyone enjoying the hills to participate. We will focus on those initiatives that are gathering usable species data for national datasets, to give a more accurate picture of the status of wildlife in the uplands. This can enable walkers, climbers and skiers to contribute information from areas that currently and historically have little wildlife data.

Mountaineering Scotland will encourage members to reduce the number of vehicles on the road and at car parks as much as possible, for example through car sharing, and to reduce the volume of polluting emissions. We will promote travel by public transport where possible and non-motorised active travel if feasible.

Mountaineering Scotland will support funding initiatives to improve car parking and access infrastructure, where they enable walkers, climbers and skiers to enjoy their activities, without excluding low income groups.

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