



Protecting our Mountains

Mountains matter - pass it on!

By Emily Bryce

BACK in August we asked you to share your views on conservation, landscape and access issues affecting Scotland's mountains. What do you notice when you are out on the hill? What are your biggest concerns? What do you think Mountaineering Scotland's priorities should be when it comes to campaigning and representing the mountaineering community?

We were impressed by just how many members took the time (an average of 15 minutes!) to complete our online survey. In fact, over 1000 people spent a cumulative 15000 minutes giving their views, priorities and a broad spectrum of thoughtful and thought-provoking comments and suggestions.

What is clear is that our membership community is intimately connected to Scotland's mountains, hills and crags. 55% of respondents were out in the hills fortnightly or more often over the last 12 months. The vast majority of you are recreational visitors, but over a third of respondents also had a professional connection, including 30 ecologists, 83 mountain guides or instructors, 17 academics in related fields and six gamekeepers or stalkers. That is a wealth of expertise and experience any policy maker would be delighted to gather together. More than 10% of you are also residents in mountain areas, bringing another perspective on the importance of the places we all cherish.

The findings

What is very clear is that the wildness of the mountain environment is very important to our members. How to define that sense of wildness and what might put it at threat is where the debate begins.

The survey results reinforce the priority we give to campaigning against the impact of insensitive, large or industrial-scale man-made development in the mountains – especially new hill roads – which can often appear with little or no planning oversight. 92% of respondents agree that all new hill road construction should require full planning permission, and, 89% agree that wild land areas should receive legal designation to protect them from all large-scale development.

Intensive land management, whether for commercial forestry, deer stalking or grouse moors, and its impact on diversity and vitality of the mountain environment is also a major concern for members, with 78% agreeing there should be improved scrutiny and regulation of deer and upland grouse management and 88% feeling that we should campaign for public

subsidies for land management to incentivise responsible stewardship and encourage public and environmental benefits.

Members also stressed that we don't need to go it alone, but should align more closely with conservation partners who are experts in the sector, mobilising our members' passion and numbers to help make a difference through joint campaigning.

Another strong theme is the need to look closer to home for challenges facing Scotland's mountain environment. Many members observe that growing levels of participation and visitors at some well-loved locations can place a real pressure on sustainable and responsible access – particularly in an age when social media recommendations or a film appearance can be the impetus for huge popularity overnight.

While tourism is a great opportunity for Scotland's Highland economy and many vulnerable rural communities, if not managed and resourced in a sensitive and complementary way, it has the potential to become a destructive

force – or, as we've seen in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, can lead to universal restrictions on access that penalise all. There is a clear mandate for us to be involved in the debates that will come on this subject and a sense that mountaineers are willing to contribute towards investment in essential infrastructure, maintenance and conservation work in the places we love – with the example of nearly 80% of members backing reasonable car parking charges as a way to support landowners and generate income for such infrastructure.

A final strong theme that comes out of the survey, and one that can be connected with so many of the above challenges ahead: two thirds of respondents want us to do more to campaign against further public funding cuts to countryside services like the number of countryside rangers, planning and access staff and outdoor education.

Here is a snapshot of the stats and comments we received in answer to some of the key questions:

85% want us to give high priority to campaigning to protect the wildness of Scotland's mountain areas.

"This is the main reason so many visitors come every year in Scotland."

"The UK has so few really wild areas that we should work hard to protect those that remain from intrusive development, and aspire to re-wild where possible."

"Too many instances of eradicating our wild areas for short term financial gain, without serious consideration being given to the long-term consequences."

"The Scottish Government needs to respect the recommendations drawn up by SNH."

"Don't campaign to preserve the status quo."

"Should not be at the expense of the bigger picture in terms of tackling climate change."

"Wildness is a man made construct."

"Vegetation and wildlife in these areas is not natural or healthy at all due to overgrazing, persecution of predators and lack of trees."

Should we dedicate more resources to campaigning on increasing the diversity and vitality of mountain habitats?

"Absolutely, I could not agree with this proposition more. Wildlife is essential to my mountaineering experience."

39% ■ do more
54% ■ continue as you are
2% ■ do less

"Variety is important - there is little variety in traditional grouse moors and traditional deer areas."

"You're a mountaineering, not an ecology organisation."

"The general public are conditioned to the bare hillsides and glens."

"Much of this is a highly technical and scientifically contested set of issues, in my view best left to SNH and to the nature conservation NGOs."

"Work more with partners who are the experts in this field."

Top five nature conservation campaign priorities:

Growth in native tree cover, natural regeneration and tree planting, aided by a reduction in deer
Conservation of vulnerable bird and animal species
Eliminate illegal predator control
Campaigning for ecologically responsible grouse moor management
Condemnation of large-scale culls of mountain hare

What are the greatest challenges to the wildness of mountain areas? What should we campaign on?

72% of members feel mountain wildlife is very important to their hillwalking, climbing or mountaineering experience

	High or medium risks	Do more
New hill roads:	94%	52%
Mountain wind farms:	92%	44%
Intensive commercial forestry:	90%	33%
Soil erosion & peat degradation:	89%	29%
Unsustainable levels of deer:	88%	38%
Intensive land management to maintain grouse moors:	77%	37%
Climate change:	75%	15%
Run-of-river hydro schemes:	68%	16%

Do you agree with restrictions on universal access rights that penalise responsible walkers and climbers - ie. byelaws?

17% ■ yes
22% ■ not sure
61% ■ no

Minimising our impact and mobilising mountaineers

Top five access campaign activity themes where we should do more:

• Campaign against further public cuts to countryside services	65%
• Raise awareness of responsible access	52%
• Fundraise for mountain path restoration	39%
• Organise practical conservation volunteering	38%
• Promote car free alternatives	27%

Do you agree with car parking charges as a mechanism for landowners to generate income, where this income is reinvested in infrastructure, maintenance or conservation?

77% ■ yes
11% ■ not sure
12% ■ no

Next steps

WHAT is very clear is that members value the chance to be part of a community that speaks up for Scotland's mountains and mountaineers on landscape and access issues and that this is an essential reason why many support Mountaineering Scotland. While there is a range of views and healthy debate out there – there is also a strong consensus that we can build our future policies and mandate around.

While we will build a comprehensive vision and plan for future campaign activities in this area over the winter, our first step is to invest in our team resources so we can dedicate more time and energy to this area. The Board has decided to expand our previous part-time Access Officer post into a full-time Access and Conservation Officer role and is recruiting for the right person this month. So watch this space – and thanks again for getting involved!