

1 GENERAL RECREATION POLICY



POLICY

- Coillte recognises that forests provide an excellent landscape for a wide range of recreational activities and the company, as the country's largest land owner, has a special place in the provision of access to recreation. As such Coillte seeks to provide low-impact non-motorised recreation to the general public and other specialist activities under special permit.
- The company will continue to provide recreation that is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.
- Coillte welcomes all visitors to the forest and expects them to respect the environmental code for users.
- While recognising its role in the rural community, Coillte does not have a primary or lead role in the provision of tourism facilities in its forest's, but will facilitate such developments within partnership arrangements.
- Coillte sees its primary recreation objective as one of delivering maximum benefit to the most users.

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This policy document sets the general company position and philosophy behind the provision of recreation by Coillte. It forms part of the overall policy document along with policy positions of a more specific nature. However in line with the company's adoption of the Sustainable Forest Management principles, outdoor recreation provision within Coillte forests will be for the most part low impact to maintain sustainability.

RECREATION

Forests are the most important recreation facility in the Irish context. This is because unlike most European countries, Ireland has no 'right to roam' legislation and no designated recreational areas or rights of way such as those that exist in Britain and other European countries¹. There is also considerable tension between outdoor recreation users and the farming community regarding the use of their land for public enjoyment. Therefore Coillte forests provide one of the few areas of extensive access to a general public seeking outdoor recreation.

Forests are also a key part of the recreational infrastructure not only for domestic users, but also for the considerable volume of holidaymakers who come to Ireland to enjoy our natural heritage. Forests are used extensively for the development of long distance walking routes and are increasingly seen by local authorities, local sports partnerships and community groups as a resource for the development and provision of tourism and recreational facilities.

Forests have always had the capacity to deliver multiple use and in particular, recreation. This is due to:

- The robust nature of the forest landscape.
- Their high carrying capacity for large numbers of users – the screening value of woodlands and their ability to absorb noise.
- The fact that they are often in areas of high scenic and amenity value and have many interesting features and habitats, and
- That they are often in public or semi public ownership.

There is a growing awareness internationally and indeed in Ireland, of the vital role forests provide in social and community development through the provision of recreation. The company's forests have been a traditional outlet for recreational use for close to forty years now. For a commercial company such as Coillte, the provision of recreation might seem an unwelcome burden, however recreation provides Coillte with a valuable tool for building relationships with the general public – a key to the development of our businesses into the future. Limiting access could have serious implications for future goodwill towards the company.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF RECREATION IN IRISH FORESTS

It was not until 1966 (prior to this entry onto forest lands was prohibited) that the first forest park in the Republic was opened in Gougane Barra and not without considerable discussion of the risk of fire. At this time the value of forests was increasingly being seen as having values beyond the purely utilitarian one of timber production².

During the 1970's, there was a considerable expansion of the recreation infrastructure when almost all the current facilities were established. These developments reflected

¹ In the UK, the recently introduced Land Reform Act (Scotland) will improve matters in Scotland with a Right To Roam linked to responsible use, and the Countryside and Right of Ways Act in England and Wales will provide increased access over designated areas. In much of Scandinavia, there is a right to roam which allows extensive usage of the countryside. No such legislation is proposed for Ireland.

² Gray, H.J. The economics of Irish forestry (1963) cited by Durand. A IUFRO conference in 1966 examined recreation as one of the main components of multiple use forest management.

the demands and attitudes of the 1970's user as opposed to the modern day outdoor user (See table 1/1). Many users saw parks from a 'suburban' perspective, where a high level of development and maintenance was expected and provided. The Forest and Wildlife Service in the 1970s clearly saw recreation as another forest service. In some cases, the needs of a developing tourist industry³ was the driving force and forest recreation was seen as a major part of the tourism infrastructure. In essence, forest recreation in Ireland followed the general trends worldwide.

TABLE 1/1
Contrasting the 1970 user with the modern user

1970	2005
Forests and forestry seen as a 'good thing'	Modern user much more 'critical' /questioning of forest practices.
Most forest users casual sports.	Many forest users now well equipped for active recreation
Mainly walking and picnicking	Now wide variety of activities, some which cause conflict.
Small numbers with concentration on forest parks	Larger numbers – causing congestion, litter and erosion close to centres of population.
Unsophisticated view of outdoors and environmental issues and ethics	User more conscious of own role in environmental management

THE CHANGING RECREATION 'MARKET'

The user of the late 1960's and early 1970's invariably arrived to a forest recreation site by car⁴ and the primary function was passive outdoor recreation, picnicking or other similar activities. While the development of nature trails encouraged users to leave the car park and explore the wider forest, most users did not possess outdoor equipment to venture more than a mile or two.

Since then, Ireland has seen a huge increase in outdoor recreation (See table 1/2). This development can be attributed to several factors, increased car ownership, more disposable income, a more active life style and a considerably larger urban population⁵.

Many modern visitors use the forest as a centre for their particular activity such as mountain biking and orienteering or as access to other open land or as part of long distance trails. There are fewer requirements for nature trails etc.

In the last decade, people have become more aware of the environmental impacts of forests on the landscape and in many cases are more critical of forestry practices and developments. Many of the current users have a strong interest in the environment (albeit some have a relatively simple view of forest activities).

³ The development of Lough Key where Bord Fáilte had a major input in the planning and financing of project is a case in point.

⁴ It is interesting to note that the primary 'attraction' of Gougane Barra Forest Park was the motor road.

⁵ Over 70% of the Irish population now live in Urban Areas – Census of Ireland CSO.

TABLE 1/2**Contrasting the 1970 user with the modern user**

1970	2005
One or two 'army surplus' stores providing outdoor equipment	Many towns now have speciality outdoor stores offering a wide range of specialist equipment
Small number of walking clubs operating in greater Dublin area.	Large spread of active clubs throughout the country – Mountaineering Council now represents over 8,000 members (an estimated 10% of all hill walkers).
First 'long distance walk' the wilderness trek established in Crone/ Djouce area of Wicklow.	Extensive network of long distance trails throughout the country.
Association For Adventure Sports founded in early 1970's and opened Tiglin – the first outdoor pursuit centre in Ireland.	Many outdoor pursuit centres operating both commercially and in the state education sector through out the country
Orienteering virtually new sport	In excess of 20 clubs affiliated to national body with weekly events
Cycling and quad use non existent	Mountain bikes increasingly using our forests and a huge increase in quad and scrambler use.

RECREATION – AN IMPORTANT PUBLIC RELATIONS PLATFORM

In 1989, Coillte inherited a major recreation infrastructure. While the general visitor now has alternative sites – National Parks and Wildlife Service and local authority properties – the forest provides an extremely important recreation resource to many millions⁶ of users each year. Given the current debate over access it is evident that the use of the forest for recreation is increasingly important.

The present Open Forest Policy allows free access to forest lands on foot for recreation; however the facilities and policies have not changed significantly to meet the changing demands in recreation. There has been an increase in local community initiatives in relation to the tourism and recreation potential of our forests. Managing these initiatives is essential to ensure company objectives are met in any such arrangements⁷.

RECREATION – DELIVERING SOCIAL BENEFITS

Forest organisations in other countries are increasingly seeing the provision of recreation services (along with timber production) as a key part of their management objectives. The trends in the developed countries are for forests to provide recreation as a key part of delivering on government policies, be they education, physical recreation, health or tourism. They also create a positive attitude towards the forest industry. However, increasingly the delivering agencies are being 'paid' to deliver these services. In Finland, Metsähallitus⁸ recognise... 'Finnish people who enjoy outdoor activities'... as the

⁶ Coillte estimates this to be over eight million visitors annually.

⁷ This topic is covered under the policy relating to partnerships.

⁸ Metsähallitus annual accounts 2001 and 2002 – www.metsahallitus.fi/annualreport2002/

'largest customer group', and value this benefit to society at €67 million (in 2002).

In the UK, the Forest Enterprise uses recreation to deliver on government policies such as tourism, health or nature conservation and these are increasingly part of forest objectives.

The direct and indirect return to society from such investment is considerable. A recent study in the UK showed the 'aggregate total annual value of social and environmental benefits of forests in GB amounts to £1 billion' and 'is dominated by recreational and biodiversity values' (see table 1/3).

TABLE 1/3
Non Timber Values of UK Forests

Benefit	Annual Value £M (2002 prices)
Recreation	392.65
Landscape	150.22
Biodiversity	386.00
Carbon Sequestration	93.66
Air pollution absorption	0.39
Total	1,022.92

These trends indicate there is a good case to be made for support from the central exchequer to pay for the provision of these social services. In Ireland, other organisations charged with the provision of recreation on a statutory basis will need to consider what resources they can contribute to unlocking the potential of this valuable resource and Coillte sees the provision of recreation in the future as one based on a proper value being put on this service.

FOREST RECREATION – DELIVERING GOOD COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The provision of recreation is not limited to state-owned or controlled forests. Recent studies in the US show a relative decline in the importance of economic forest values and an increase in other values on **both public and private forests**⁹. Increasingly timber producers are recognising the value that recreation provides in creating a better operating environment for their industry¹⁰. The issue now is one of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In New Zealand the question is posed 'is the industry so independent of the community that it can afford to isolate itself from the contemporary movement towards CSR?'¹¹

Similarly, in the UK the commercial forest owners have accepted that the public requires forest owners to provide a range of services along with timber production and that 'It is increasingly clear that the market value of timber and its products is merely the tip of the iceberg of the real value of a region's woodlands.'¹²

⁹ Tarrant et al : PVF – a scale to measure public value of forests; Journal of Forestry 2003.

¹⁰ In New England (USA) private forest owners recognising the need to manage recreation created the North Maine Woods Inc – www.northmainewoods.org. This has created positive support from recreational users for the forest industry in a state that relies heavily on the forest sector.

¹¹ Salmon, G: Towards a strategic vision for forestry: The environmental and social context. NZ Journal of Forestry, Aug 2003.

¹² Professor Paul Selman, Professor of Environmental Planning at the University of Gloucestershire in his paper 'Putting a Value on Woodland' published in July 2003 by the Royal Forestry Society of England Wales and Northern Ireland.

The industry is now asking who should be paying for these other services that forests provide and argue that – ‘Forest owners should be able to receive adequate remuneration for the provision of public benefits’.

These trends clearly demonstrate that both private and state forestry recognise that the provision of non-timber benefits, in particular recreation are key to maintaining a suitable operating environment.

FUNDING RECREATION

These trends also highlight the fact that the full potential of this contribution will not be realised, in the absence of tangible, financial recognition of the investment that is being made in the provision of these benefits.

In Finland, Metsähallitus received over €25 million for the provision of over €67 million worth of outdoor recreation. In Denmark, special provision is made in budgets to provide this service¹⁴. The Forest Enterprise is getting significant support from national exchequers to deliver recreation benefits, for example the Welsh Assembly has given the Forest Enterprise Wales €1.2 million to provide mountain biking on a national basis. In Maine (USA) recreation on the predominantly privately owned lands is funded through user payments and easement arrangements managed by a number of different organisations.

THE CASE FOR COILLTE INVOLVEMENT

The SFM public consultation¹⁴ illustrated that one of the important social benefits that Coillte delivers is recreation. Coillte’s mandate is one of managing the forests in a commercial manner with due regard to amenity.

The provision of recreation will help to cultivate a positive operating environment; however the full potential for this benefit will only be reached when other organisations and agencies see the benefits that forests can deliver. It is essential that we clearly illustrate the value of this service and that it is delivered in a professional and value for money way.

Given that other agencies have entered the recreation field in recent years, the unique selling point of the Coillte estate for recreation is its size and distribution. Coillte can best deliver access to a large number of different user groups and with the nature and distribution of the estate should concentrate on delivering low impact extensive recreation.

Coillte’s involvement in recreation can continue to deliver many benefits to society and also demonstrate to the general public the many benefits of a vibrant forest industry.

¹³ Experiencing the state forests – Ministry of Environment and Energy, National Forest and Nature Agency 1995.

¹⁴ In the early Coillte consultation process for the SFM initiative, many organisations raised issues relating to recreation and the company’s largest stakeholder group are the recreational users.