

Croagh Patrick, Helping the Hills meeting , Westport Co Mayo, Tuesday 25th April, 2017

Speakers: Helen Lawless MI, Martin Keating Mayo Co. Co., Chris York Walking -the-Talk.

Helping the Hills (<http://www.helpingthehills.ie>), the first conference was held in Glendalough in 2012, with a focus on addressing the erosion of our hills in Ireland.

Martin Keating, Mayo County Council and Chair of the Croagh Patrick Stakeholders Group:

The Stakeholders Group was established in 2015. It includes the Church, Croagh Patrick Archaeology, Murrisk Community, Mountain Rescue, Shareholders, Tourism interests, Mayo County Council. Their concerns: liability, type of use of the mountain (pilgrims, recreational), numbers, practical impact such as dogs, litter. The Management Working Group identified these concerns and the need to map the mountain professionally. They have produced a brochure with a description of the pilgrim walk, the historical and cultural contexts, safety information, indemnity and leave no trace information, available in the Murrisk Centre. The Stakeholders Group researched ecological assessment professionals and Chris York and Julian, of Walking-the-Talk, based in NE Scotland, were given the job. The Stakeholders Group met on Monday 24th April and approved Chris York's proposal.

Chris York, Walking-the-Talk, <http://www.walking-the-talk.co.uk>

122,000 people climbed Croagh Patrick between 2106-2017. Of those approx 22,000 climbed on Reek Sunday

Walking-the-Talk conducted a Standard Assessment Survey of Croagh Patrick and divided it into 8 sections.

They then compared different sections of the path and measured the extent of the erosion per section, on a scale of 1 = severe, 5 = minimal erosion.

Section 1 – departure from Murrisk car park – is not going to get much worse

Section 2- the area next to the stream is unstable. The stream is a water supply.

Section 3 – people spread out here so it's quite damaged.

Section 4 – the left edge is unstable

Section 5 – a steep gradient of 30-35 degrees, severe damage, rocks unstable and shifting to each side 1 on the scale.

Section 6 – low grade erosion to the col

Section 7 – the shoulder is ok, but the stone graffiti is unacceptable, as are the old shelters, and should be removed.

Section 8 – 1 on the scale, the cone, severe erosion, mobile scree. Very difficult to see how this can be repaired.

Where to start?

Croagh Patrick is unique, easy access from the main road, the spiritual and cultural identity of the mountain, some ill-prepared climbers, an iconic mountain inviting physical challenges. The mountain is the focus, not the people. People will use a path that is comfortable to use.

1. Pathwork, of the highest standard
2. Good environmental practice

The objectives are to restore the mountain to a more natural state, long term care, and to manage visitor impact. People need to understand their impact and why the mountain is being repaired and cared for.

What has been successful?

A path that fits in with the environment and the landscape; use materials that are on site or from nearby; the path should be wide enough for people to pass in both directions; the style should encourage people to stay ON the path; no excessive lengths of stone steps, split the lengths into 'flights' of lower gradient, mix with gravel sections.

There are no boulders in the upper cone. Usually these are used to create anchors for the pathway. The path would have to be 2 metres wide. It takes 1 tonne of stones per metre. Costs: Building by hand €200-250 per metre or €100-150 if using an excavator.

It would take a minimum of €350,000 to complete Phase 1, to the shoulder (Section 7), but unfinished and not landscaped.

Ireland needs to build a team of skilled craft path builders, using an apprenticeship scheme.

Afterwards: ongoing care, monitoring and clearance, surface aggregate and gravel, constructed features to be checked and repaired, remedial action and monitoring of off-path activity.

As a holy mountain it should be treated with respect. It's not a 'free' playground.

Inform and educate the users. Engage them. Do they all need to go to the top? Would some prefer to go as far as Section 5, the first steep climb? If they were better informed about each stage, they might look at their climb differently.

Volunteers: A scheme would have to be well thought out and organised, volunteers recruited and trained as in the Wicklow Mountains. Locals can act as guardians of the mountain.

Next steps:

1. A detailed survey will be completed in April 2017
2. Costings (labour, costs, resources) and drawings (planning permission)
3. Archaeology, cultural and spiritual value but there are no features on the mountain
4. Stakeholder committee to investigate visitor management and ideas.