

Irish Canoe Union

Submission to Comhairle na Tuaithe

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Introduction

The Irish Canoe Union welcomes this opportunity to submit its views to Comhairle na Tuaithe on the formulation of a National Countryside Recreation Strategy for Land, Air and Water Based Activities

The Irish Canoe Union

The Irish Canoe Union is the National Governing Body in Ireland for the sport and recreation of canoeing.

The Canoe Union has approximately 3,000 members who register primarily with the Union for the purposes of participating in competitive events. It is estimated that there are a further 7,000 individuals involved in non competitive canoeing activities around the country.

Interest in non competitive canoeing activities has experienced considerable growth over the past few years with participation in proficiency training courses increasing by an average of 15% per year.

Canoeing is a diverse sport / recreation with a significant percentage involved in one or more of the 7 different competitive disciplines which are the Olympic disciplines of Canoe Slalom and Flat Water (Sprint) Racing, Marathon (Long Distance) Racing, Freestyle, Surfing, Canoe Polo, and Wild Water Racing.

The vast majority of canoeists are, however, involved in non competitive canoeing activities such as touring, sea kayaking, and white water paddling.

Consequently it is primarily non competitive canoeists that are involved and seek access to a wide range of remote and easily accessible countryside areas.

Recreational canoeing can be divided under 3 headings, namely;

Recreational Touring

Recreational touring is characterised by single or multi - day journeys by canoe or kayak on lakes, canals and placid rivers. The kayak and the open canoe enables paddlers to access and experience many wonderful natural environments in an unobtrusive manner. This form of canoeing may involve camping in remote areas.

Sea Kayaking

Ireland is privileged to possess some of the best coastal scenery in Europe. This, coupled with the abundance of offshore islands makes it an ideal location for sea-kayaking. Kayaking and camping trips between uninhabited islands presents an unmatched wilderness experience.

There are a number of commercial operators along the coast providing training and holidays for sea-kayaking enthusiasts.

Kayak Surfing one of the fastest growing discipline in the sport – in 2003 the World Kayak Surfing Championships were held at Easkey, Co. Sligo. The beaches and reefs around the country, especially those exposed to Atlantic swells are of great recreational value to canoeists.

White Water Touring

The Irish White Water Guidebook (MacGearailt, 1996) details 154 rivers or sections of rivers used by Irish canoeists. Up to 40 of these rivers are paddled on a frequent basis and they offer accessible, high quality white water experiences. The combination of high quality white water features and outstanding scenic values are highly valued by recreational kayakers.

Nineteen of the twenty-six counties have some element of white water ranging from the weirs on the Barrow and the Boyne to challenging runs on the Flesk and the Roughty in Kerry. Most of the rivers are concentrated in mountain areas of Wicklow, Kerry and Donegal. The rivers in the more remote parts of the country are "spate runs" and as such are only navigable during and after periods of wet weather when the amount of water in the river is sufficient to allow the passage of canoes. On larger rivers it is possible to go canoeing at any water level but high water levels are almost always preferred.

Canoeing and the Environment

Navigation by canoe causes no erosion, noise or pollution and leaves no trace of its passing. Canoeing is a clean physical activity enjoyed causing no damage and minimal disturbance to wildlife and landscapes – any erosion if any is only evident around specific access points where canoeists enter or exit the water. The natural environment and clean water are the essential elements sought by canoeists. It is therefore very much in canoeists' interest to conserve, maintain and protect the natural environment.

Canoeing can be a valuable first point of contact with the environment for many people. Not only does canoeing provide the opportunity for healthy, physical activity but also a very quiet means in which to observe our beautiful a natural wildlife.

Development

Both regulated and unregulated developments in and adjacent to rivers, lakes, and canals can be seriously detrimental to the quality of canoeable water. Fords, weirs, dams, flood alleviation and bridges are just some of the developments that can greatly inhibit or even endanger canoeing. The development of hydro electric schemes on mountain and upland rivers presents a serious threat to recreational river users. Even small hydro electric schemes have the potential to destroy the suitability of a river for canoeing as they drastically alter flow levels and can prevent a river reaching its normal flood level.

The Canoe Union would strongly favour a mechanism whereby the Canoe Union is invited to comment on any alterations or developments which are likely to affect a river that is used by canoeists. There is currently no mechanism of notification other than responding to planning notices – if they are seen. It should be noted that the Regional Fisheries Boards are notified of all developments that might affect rivers.

Meeting the Demand

It is generally agreed that there is no overall shortage of water resources for canoeing in Ireland. However, the volume and type of water resources and their availability for canoeing varies considerably between regions. There are many specific "hotspots" where demand is greater than supply, particularly for specific resources such as white water.

Whilst there is anecdotal evidence that suggests that whilst there are no overriding barriers to participation in canoeing, there are significant constraints; the exclusiveness of some clubs, cost, perceptions about pollution and safety, and lack of skills and experience.

In the past few years there has been a growing trend toward participation away from formal club activities to informal and casual participation.

Despite a decline in the number of clubs, participation in and a latent demand for canoeing activities is experiencing significant growth. Many of different types of canoeing are, or have the potential to be socially inclusive and, with a modest level of skills training, can be undertaken by a wide age and ability range.

Pollution

Generally water quality both in, rivers and the sea, is of a high standard. However, instances of E. Coli and Weils' Disease are becoming increasingly prevalent on rivers near large urban areas and in some dam controlled rivers. The cause of Weil's Disease, the virus Leptosproisis is secreted by rodents along river banks and when washed into rivers during flood releases pollutes the river with a highly infectious disease.

A serious outbreak of Weils occurred in 2002 at a whitewater site in Lucan Co. Dublin. There has also been several isolated cases in different popular rivers around the country.

The Canoe Union would envisage that Comhairle na Tuaithe would be able to offer a forum where such water quality issues can be addressed between recreational users and the relevant public authorities.

Access

Generally Irish canoeists have faced relatively few access difficulties. The potential for conflict, however, does exist and access related issues are on the increase. There are many rivers that are highly valued by canoeists that can only be accessed over private land – technically trespassing if permission has not been sought. The ease of access varies depending on variables such as landowners' attitudes, practical accessibility and the behaviour of those who have accessed the river in the past. There is also the question of whether canoeists have a right to be on a river (even when accessed from a public road) when the river then passes through private land.

In Ireland access issues have tended to be localised and generally non confrontational. Canoeists generally tend to act in a responsible manner and the numbers accessing any particular river are generally low enough as not to create any significant conflict with landowners.

Where conflict has occurred it has been either with anglers or fishing officers/bailiffs. There is regular anecdotal reports about canoeists being asked or told to leave a river particularly during the fishing season. The argument has been put forward that having power over fishing rights to a stretch river allows bailiffs to prevent canoeists from accessing or making their way down a stretch of river. It is the belief of the Canoe Union that both activities can co-exist, a balance between the needs of anglers and canoeists can be found through co - operation and mutual understanding of the needs of each group.

Having seen an escalation of access difficulties and controversy surrounding occupiers' liability in relation to other recreational activities it is important that the issue of access for canoeing be addressed before serious problems arise; as there is a growing perception that whilst there is no significant issues relating to access at present the extent and permanency of access to inland water for recreational canoeing is decreasing.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

There are many contradictory claims about the extent of conflict occurring between people on some inland water resources and there is little independent evidence to substantiate what claims do exist.

As a first step towards avoiding conflict situations about access to canoeing waters there is a need to establish accurate facts about current levels of participation at specific hotspots and to determine the extent of access problems both actual and anecdotal that exist.

Access Agreements

Case studies conducted the UK in 2003 established that it is feasible, in some conditions, to negotiate agreements to improve access for white water canoeing and canoe touring. Negotiated agreements also offer the potential to address user conflicts and regulate the possible environmental issues connected to recreational canoeing.

Research suggests that extending access based on negotiated voluntary agreements might be appropriate as an alternative to proposals that a statutory right of access to all waters should exist.

Access to canoeable waters must be a component within the broader context associated with the delivery of recreational and socio-economic benefits accruing from participation in countryside activities. These benefits include:

- Economic benefits to rural communities;
- Access to the countryside for socially-excluded groups;
- A more active and healthy population; and
- A conservation of flora and fauna, especially in designated areas.

The role envisaged by the Canoe Union for Comhairle na Tuaithe?

- Develop a National Countryside Access Code for all recreational users and landowners.
- Recognise and promote the need for reasonable public access to private land for recreational purpose.
- Ensure that Codes of Practice are developed by bodies representing both recreational users and landowners.
- Provide and support the dissemination of access information to the general public.
- Recognise that canoeing is a valuable, healthy and sustainable recreational activity.
- The Canoe Union favours a common sense approach when dealing with the issue of occupiers liability and the recreational land user.

How can the needs of recreational canoeists be met?

- Provide suitably located stiles to assist access and egress when fences or walls have to be crossed.
- Agree with landowners about the use of suitable access and egress sites for rivers.
- Consultation on plans and developments which will alter course or water supply of a river
- Provide toilets and parking at "hot spot" locations.
- Educate canoeists about the use of agreed sites.
- Discourage farmers from putting fences across rivers that are used by canoeists.
- Where possible allow access to real time flow information on water levels collected from gauges installed on rivers. This would increase the chance of canoeists being able to make use of the times when spate rivers have sufficient water to be navigable.
- It is of great importance that a high standard in water quality is achieved for all water used by canoeists.

What can the Irish Canoe Union do with regard to Access?

- Develop the role of an Access & Environmental Officer.
- Draw up and implement an Environmental Policy & Code of Practice for canoeists with particular regard to access and responsibilities.
- Education and awareness campaigns to be included in instructor and personal proficiency courses.

Best Practice

The **Scottish Outdoor Access Code** provides guidelines for how the right of access should be exercised as to cause no unreasonable interference. It also guides local authorities in managing access, and advises land managers as to how to facilitate the access rights. Governing bodies of sport also have a responsibility to guide and advise their members on how to exercise the right of access – much of this work is currently undertaken via training courses, the press and websites, education, peer group pressures and Codes of Conduct.

www.canoescotland.com/downloads/access/Access%20Leaflet.pdf

The Canoe Association of Northern Ireland (CANI) in conjunction with The Countryside Access and Activities Network Northern Ireland and the relevant local authorities are developing a network of 'Canoe Trails' throughout the province. The aim is to promote the sport of canoeing and encourage tourism.

www.nicanoeing.com

Websites providing links water flow gauges can be very useful for canoeists. These gauges are usually installed by local authorities or Central Fisheries Board but the information is not currently available to canoeist. This is one site from the United States.

www.dreamflows.com

Releases (or floods) on the River Liffey can be organised - through the Irish Canoe Union - for competitions or races. There is however no reliable way for recreational canoeists to find out when the river is in flood. Information on the water release schedules on dammed rivers such as the Liffey would greatly assist canoeists in planning when to paddle. One good example of co-operation between Hydro-electric operators and canoeists is on the Wairoa in New Zealand. Here, releases are scheduled Sunday afternoons every second week, the schedule is available on the internet,

www.rivers.org.nz/events/#event418