

**COUNCIL FOR NATURE CONSERVATION
AND THE COUNTRYSIDE**
An Advisory Council to the Department of the Environment

1st Floor, Calvert House, 23 Castle Place, Belfast, BT1 1FY

Tel: 028 90254835 Fax: 028 90254856

secretariat-hillst@doeni.gov.uk

www.cncni.gov.uk

via email

22nd March 2010

Forest Service Headquarters
Dundonald House
Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast
BT4 2SB

Dear Sir/Madam

Consultation – A Strategy to Develop the Recreational and Social Use of Our Forests

CNCC welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the above consultation. The mission statement highlights the different public perceptions and expectations and the potential for recreational and leisure pursuits to the benefit to health and well being. It focuses on a major development, The Global Geo Park which underscores the need for, and benefits of partnerships. The potential use of forestry land in this context is significant given that some six percent of N. Ireland is under the management of the Forest Service.

Historically there have been good examples of organised recreation and sports events which were negotiated through local partnerships and personal contacts. The strategy which now recognises formally that recreational and social use should be “an important part of the Forest Service” is to be welcomed. While this statement is encouraging the reliance of the strategy on the devolvement of power to District Councils does not engender confidence. The commitment to seek involvement across the range of Government Departments and Agencies to develop the potential length of the new strategy must be led by Forest Service and needs specific targets and outcomes. Community participation and involvement is critical to achieving the aims of the strategy and must go beyond a Stakeholder Forum. The participation of the Forest Service in the NI Outdoor Recreation Strategy is to be welcomed.

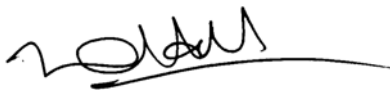
There is great inconsistency regarding charging for access and the statutory right to access is a step in the right direction. Statistics would indicate that on unmanned sites only 17% of users pay the entrance fee. NIEA County Parks are free to access and provide free parking, and these localities are generally well maintained with good public parking and facilities for refreshment and activities.

Continued/

The Forest Service needs to recognise that the car is the key to access to most recreational and sport activities, therefore entry & parking should be free, other than for specific special events, as costs deter local visitors and are often not in line with the facilities on offer i.e. in one forest park it costs £3.60 to enter and the only public facilities are a public lavatory. Locals will find a way of avoiding charges; there are numerous examples of this happening. In the broad context Tourism in NI will only be sustainable with support and engagement with local communities and will depend on the coordination of social, sporting and recreational activities that attract families on a regular basis. The Forest Service needs to play its part.

The Strategy provides a welcome focus on access and amenity development, but the statement and challenges outlined in the document will require creative thinking, new partnerships and the development of unique and challenging development opportunities with real engagement with local communities and a wide range of activity and cultural pursuits.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mervyn Hill', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Mervyn Hill
Chair
CNCC Access Working Group