

BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL

177-179 Burton Road
Manchester M20 2BB
www.thebmc.co.uk

Tel: 0161 445 6111
Fax: 0161 445 4500
e-mail: office@thebmc.co.uk

14th National Open Forum Saturday 17th April 2010 – Rhossili, Gower

The following notes summarise the 14th National Open Forum meeting, which was held after the AGM and took place between 4.35 and 5.50pm. The meeting was attended by approximately 60 members. The panel consisted of Rab Carrington (BMC President), Morgan Parry (Chair, Countryside Council for Wales), Elfyn Jones (BMC Access & Conservation Officer (Wales) and Dave Turnbull (BMC CEO).

Rab Carrington welcomed everyone to the Forum and invited Elfyn Jones to introduce Morgan Parry, the recently appointed Chair of the CCW. Morgan said that he was happy to answer questions about the work of the CCW. Elfyn explained the role of the CCW as a statutory advisor to the Government, championing the environment and landscapes of Wales for economic and social activity.

Rab Carrington asked if anyone had any questions they would like to discuss.

Parking Issues in Llanberis Pass

Steve Andrews (Climbers' Club) raised the issue of increasing pressure on the Llanberis Pass which had been exacerbated by recent parking restrictions. He felt that some proposals put forward by the Snowdonia Green Key project were creeping in, despite strong opposition to them.

Elfyn Jones replied that there was a need for a thorough discussion within the BMC about policy formation on this matter. There were concerns about urbanisation of the national park, and initiatives being driven by the need to raise income.

Morgan Parry said that the CCW had no official position, but as a former resident of Llanberis he recognised the dilemma of encouraging access and managing the impact. He felt that different approaches needed to be considered, such as the local availability of electric hire cars.

Mike Raine (Chair of BMC Cymru / Wales) said that the BMC had made several approaches to Green Key but that the voice of mountaineers had not been taken very seriously so far. He felt that a sub-group was required to monitor the effects of Green Key initiatives. He had observed many empty buses travelling up the Llanberis Pass, and felt that Green Key was increasing transport problems.

Steve Andrews asked if the Pen y Pass car park fees were enforceable. Elfyn Jones replied that there is no applicable by-law, so you could not be prosecuted for non-payment.

Ken Wilson (Honorary Member) wanted to know if the authorities had studied the typical parking requirements of different types of user groups such as tourists, climbers and hill walkers.

Elfyn Jones said that Snowdon was a victim of its own success, attracting over 700,000 visitors to its summit last year.

Gwyn Evans (Individual / Club member) said that some costs were inevitable in order to be able to protect the area.

There was a discussion about encouraging hitch-hiking in the area, to reduce pressure on parking. The danger of walking up the road from Pen y Gwryd to Pen y Pass, which has no pavement section, was also noted.

Major Challenges for the Future

Dave Turnbull (BMC CEO) asked Morgan Parry what he thought were the major challenges facing CCW and the Welsh uplands over the next 10 to 20 years.

Morgan Parry felt that changes to the Common Agricultural Policy would bring access issues and affect the balance between farming and tourism. Farming could become more intense or could be abandoned.

Elfyn Jones said that the BMC had spent time trying to influence the access provisions in the Welsh Assembly Government's Agri-environment scheme, designed to support the farming community in protecting the heritage of rural Wales.

Coastal Access

Morgan Parry raised the issue of coastal access. He asked whether the planned All Wales Coast Path would give sufficient access, compared to a coastal access zone.

Bill Renshaw (Chair, BMC Access, Conservation & Environment Group) said that BMC's position in England and Wales was clear; we seek access for open air recreation, not just the limited rights to pass and re-pass provided by Highways Law, and the All Wales Coast Path does not address our needs. In many places the path is not even close to the coast; it's more a 'vaguely coastish path' than a coastal path.

Morgan Parry said that he was sympathetic to the BMC's view. Many landowners had been won over in recent years, and further extension of our rights would require a combination of patience, incentives, management agreements, and if necessary legislation. He felt it would be necessary to allow the coastal path to 'bed in' before working on zonal access.

Pat Littlejohn (BMC Vice President) supported Bill Renshaw's statement. In respect of sea cliff climbing the coastal path was "a bit of a joke", leaving huge sections of the coast without access.

Morgan Parry responded that there were some interesting developments relating to land ownership and public access policy by large landowners such as the MOD, Crown Estates and Forestry Commission.

Mike Raine feared that the path would be announced with fanfare in 2012, but we seek assurance of a coastal corridor, and he wondered whether there would be the political will to implement one.

Morgan Parry replied that CCW would advise Government and reflect the views of stakeholders.

CCW's relationship with climbers and hill walkers

Audrey Seguy (BMC Vice President) asked whether CCW felt there were any particular difficulties caused by climbers and walkers.

Morgan Parry said that the BMC was regarded within CCW as an 'exemplary organisation' with a strong access and conservation ethos; although there are issues that need to be addressed he felt that the BMC was well placed to educate climbers and hill walkers and to resolve these issues.

Bird Nesting Restrictions

Terry Gifford (Climbers' Club, and Chair of Mountain Heritage Trust) cited the agreed bird nesting restrictions as an example of successful co-operation between climbers, landowners and conservation bodies. He asked how they worked in Wales and whether there was enough flexibility in the agreements.

Elfyn Jones replied that we had fought hard to make the restrictions voluntary. Some climbers don't adhere to them, but usually by mistake rather than by intention. Some are too restrictive, and part of his role is to conduct an educative approach that removes the need for blanket bans.

Morgan Parry referred to the buzz phrase 'ecosystems services' and the need to demonstrate the value of actions to create public support for them. He felt it was much better to educate users about conservation than to simply ban access.

Steve Quinton (BMC Access Rep for Pembroke) said that the system had improved in the last couple of years. Regular updating of the BMC Regional Access Database enabled more realistic restrictions to be agreed and publicised.

The Balance of Access and Conservation

Martin Wragg (Individual Member) said that the concepts of access and conservation were diametrically opposed, and asked how the CCW achieved a balance between them.

Morgan Parry replied that access had to be permitted in order to get support for conservation. In some cases sites might have to be 'fenced off' to permit species survival.

Dave Turnbull said that promoting both access and conservation had not been problematical for the BMC.

Bill Renshaw said that he was pleased to hear that CCW's thinking is similar to the BMC's policy on this issue; it is possible to have access and conservation benefits running alongside each other. The BMC has been encouraging Natural England to move in this direction.

Bob Pettigrew (Honorary Member) said that the UIAA, the international mountaineering federation had failed to understand that it is possible to have 'access and conservation' a term coined by former BMC President Alan Blackshaw during his presidency of the UIAA.

CCW Support for the BMC

Dave Turnbull noted that in the mid-1990s CCW had part-funded a BMC Officer post. He wondered what opportunities there might be for similar financial support in the future.

Morgan Parry replied that the idea wasn't a non-starter, and that European Funds managed by CCW might be appropriate for the BMC. The CCW faced funding challenges in deciding how to 'slice its cake.'

Llanymynech Quarry

Neil Foster (Individual Member) asked for an update on the access situation at Llanymynech, south of Oswestry on the Powys / Shropshire border.

Elfyn Jones replied that there were two separate issues affecting the quarry. In parts of the crag managed by Shropshire Wildlife Trust climbing has occurred on a permanently restricted section of the crag. On the Montgomery Wildlife Trust side, there are concerns about rock stability, recent bolting activity and liability issues. Negotiations with both Wildlife Trusts are ongoing – access to some sections of the quarry might be lost.

Dave Turnbull asked Morgan Parry what role CCW undertook in reassuring landowners on the question of occupiers liability. Morgan said that he wasn't sure, but that the CROW Act does not set precedents. Elfyn Jones mentioned an internal CCW advisory document, which if made public, would be very useful for discussions with landowners.

Footpath Restoration

Neil Foster asked if the BMC was aware of the work of the Fix the Fells project in the Lake District, which has done some great repair work on paths, but also some very intrusive and disturbing footpath maintenance. He cited one particular path high up on Scafell Pike which he felt was out of character.

Bill Renshaw responded that the BMC was in constant touch with Fix the Fells and also involved in the Lake District Mountaineering Liaison Group. He said that Neil's concerns were shared by

many, and felt that footpath maintenance should be about providing the minimum of protection, not over-engineered solutions.

Elfy Jones said that he had worked for the National Trust for 20 years and had lots of experience of footpath maintenance. He referred to *Mending our Ways, the quality approach to managing upland paths*, a booklet produced by the British Upland Footpath Trust in 1998. A re-vamped version of this booklet will be published in the next 12 months. The funding cycle for footpath maintenance can be an issue, with big grants then long intervals with no funding. Smaller amounts of funding more frequently would be a better system.

Mike Parsons (Alpine Club) cited Patterdale as an example where some of the path maintenance was changing the character of the area.

Leicestershire Quarries

Rab Carrington invited Graham Richmond (Club/Individual Member) to talk about an initiative to develop some Leicestershire quarries as climbing venues when quarrying activity ceases at them.

Graham reported that some quarries had ceased activity, and others would continue to be active for the next 30-60 years. A restoration policy was needed in order to make them viable as future climbing venues. This was not in place for most of them, and planners appear not to want to enforce such a policy.

Dave Turnbull said that there were lots of issues to be addressed, including liability and the Mines and Quarries Act. There was also some positive news about quarries, such as the dedication of Millstone Edge in the Pead District as open access land by Sheffield City Council.

Rich Mayfield (South Devon MC) asked Graham Richmond whether disused quarries came under the CROW Act. Martin Wragg replied that they did not, as they weren't natural features.

Overgrown crags

Ken Wilson felt it was worth recording some success restoring overgrown crags, such as Stoney Middleton and Cratcliffe Tor. He also felt more needed to be done, and cited an article in the latest issue of *Climber* which showed the encroachment of trees at Gardom's Edge. He also thought that Brimham Rocks had a problem with Silver Birch, but Mick Johnson (Fell & Rock CC) said that a lot of work had already been undertaken there and disagreed about the extent of the problem.

Dave Turnbull cited other successes, including High Rocks, Cheddar Gorge, Tremadog and Dovedale. He said that the BMC needed to continue to plug away at a local level to encourage individual landowners to support such initiatives.

Ken Wilson thought we needed a special taskforce, and more clean-ups soon. Bill Renshaw said that most clean-ups were local initiatives, and if Ken felt more needed to be done nationally Bill would be happy to invite Ken to get involved. Mike Raine advised that proposals should be taken to the relevant area meetings.

Thank you to Morgan Parry

Rab Carrington gave special thanks to Morgan Parry for his contribution to the forum.