



# Minimal Impact

## Mountaineering Advice



**The Mountaineering  
Council of Scotland**

[www.mcofs.org.uk](http://www.mcofs.org.uk)



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With the introduction of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003, we have the best access to the countryside in the U.K. Along with these rights are responsibilities. Most of us, whether we think of ourselves as hill walkers, ski mountaineers or climbers, have an appreciation of the landscape and wildlife of Scotland's mountains and crags that means we act in a way that is "responsible" without even thinking about it, however sometimes the impact of actions are not immediately obvious but only become so through accumulation of the effects. This guidance gives suggestions about how everyone can make choices that will benefit the areas where we enjoy our chosen activities.

Many impacts are common to all mountaineers whether they are on skis, feet or crags. This section provides advice that is likely to apply to all mountaineers whatever activity they enjoy. For those rare days you can ski from your car, see the section on winter activities.

A number of sections of this guidance are an introduction to more detailed advice available at [www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp](http://www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp)

The guidance applies across the world, but sections have been included for more details specific to areas outside Scotland.

Cover Pictures Courtesy of Hebe Carus, Al Todd, Roger Wild and Ryan Glass Mountaineering



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## Erosion Minimisation

Our right to responsible access is based on access to area, but humans are creatures of habit and the vast majority follow popular linear routes to crags, summits, through routes etc. These vary through paths worn by feet, repaired linear erosion, and constructed paths.

It is vital that we minimise our impact, especially above about 600m where research has shown that vegetation may never naturally recover from damage. Tens of thousands of pounds are spent every year on upland path work in Scotland. Everyone going into the uplands can do their bit to reduce their impact, repair damage or contribute to the funds for this work. Many ways you can help cost you absolutely nothing.

- Exercise your route planning skills and try a route not in the guidebooks.
- Scree slopes are an important and vulnerable habitat. Avoid damage by finding another route unless there is absolutely no other route you can take.
- If there is an erosion scar, walk within its boundaries to avoid spreading the erosion; alternatively completely avoid the whole area.

- It is far better to follow a zig-zag route rather than cutting corners or going straight up or down a slope; your knees will also last longer.
- Use the lightest footwear appropriate to safely traverse the terrain.

You could also consider volunteering for path repair projects; information about where to find out about these opportunities can be found on the website or from the MCoFS office. Even if you simply cleared the stones and soil from a drainage channel across a path each time you are out, the requirements for maintenance would be greatly reduced. This would have considerable affect if everyone did it. If you find a path suffering from serious erosion, please e-mail MCoFS the grid reference of the start and end of the section of path and a digital image. This will help us focus our efforts on applying pressure to have erosion repaired, or paths maintained.



Picture Courtesy of Hebe Carus

## 2

### Transport

Unfortunately cars are often a necessary evil for climbers and walkers because of the remote location in which we enjoy our activities. However, increasing car use is having an adverse effect on our lives and on the environment. Here are some ideas of how to minimise impacts:

- Use public transport - With some research it can be a fairly straightforward way to a destination and can make a traverse possible.
- Use your bicycle
- If you have to use a vehicle, consider a closer location which may be quicker to reach so more time on the hill rather than in the car, more economical but just as enjoyable.

Try car share through friends, clubs or web sites, consider hiring a mini bus or coach. It can be a lot more fun travelling together and often cheaper.

- Car parking - Use designated parking places, if available, as this will reduce the visual impact and conflict with other users. They may also have useful facilities. Careful parking maximises the useable space. If you do need to park away from a car park, do not block gates or track access.

## 3

### Supporting the Local Economy

The local spending of hill walkers, mountaineers and climbers is vital to the conservation and economic viability of remote communities. Wherever possible, shop locally from independent stores. Money from car parks is often used for environmental work in the area.

Car park attendants are usually local people needing jobs, and they can also offer some security for your car and belongings. A pay and display ticket may be the only money you put into the local economy for a whole day's visit. There have been incidents of dubious charges. Please report any to the MCofS.



Whether you are camping, walking or climbing, only things that you are willing to carry out should be carried in. Food scraps, even when buried, attract scavengers, some of which prey on vulnerable nesting birds or displace more specialist animals. Even fruit peel can take years to break down completely.



Picture Courtesy of Neil Doig

All scraps of food need to be carried out. Abandoned bottles can be the future prisons for small animals condemned to death because they cannot escape (6 dead mice have been found in one bottle). Glass bottles can be the source of a fire by focusing the sun's heat.

Dealing with sanitation in a hygienic and environmentally-sensitive way is a vital outdoor skill.

#### The main issues are:

- Human health - Cases of nasty conditions like Giardia are thankfully rare in Scotland. We all need to help keep it that way, and we can do that by following good practices.
- Environment - Some sites are particularly sensitive due to the ecological importance and/or numbers of people leading to cumulative impact.
- Visual pollution and smell

#### Where to do "it"

- at least 30 metres from burns, rivers or lochs
- more than 50 metres from paths and 200 metres from huts, bothies and crags, and never in caves

#### What to do with "it"

Carrying out solids is best. Burying is next best but needs to be done in appropriate places. Urine is less harmful than excrement, but it is safest to follow the same practices as for solids, except obviously carrying out which would be a bit tricky.

If you are not at Cairngorm where there are the specialist equipment and disposal facilities (contact the Cairngorm Ranger Service), you can put together the necessary equipment fairly easily. One option is to defecate on a paper towel (biodegradable), then use a biodegradable dog poo bag to pick it up, then carry out in a plastic sealable canister/box (labelled and kept only for that purpose). The human waste can then be flushed down a toilet as usual, and the bag thrown in the rubbish. The canister should be washed out with hot soapy water and disinfected.

If you have to bury it, do so in a 15cm (6") hole, and if there is snow on the ground, remember that it has to be buried in the soil, not the snow!

Toilet paper and female sanitary items should be carried out - try a zip lock bag.

Further advice can be found in the leaflet compiled in consultation with health and environmental professionals at [www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp](http://www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp)



Picture Courtesy of Hebe Carus





Picture Courtesy of RSPB

Nesting birds can be affected by both walkers and climbers. There are various levels of legal protection from making it an offence to disturb all birds, on purpose or “recklessly,” at their nest to disturbing a nest even if it is not being used (only applies to very few species). Depending on the species, nests can be occupied from February to August. The key things to be aware of are:

- How to get information on where birds are nesting, so where and when you might need to avoid them
- When you are out, what birds might be there and behavioural signs they are being unreasonably disturbed
- To know what to do if you see something that might indicate an unreasonable level of disturbance

#### Pre-visit information

Information availability and quality varies enormously. The MCofS has information about sites known as current or past breeding locations, and often relies on feedback from climbers and walkers. If you can update us on the status of sites, please contact us so

we can pass the information on. We post information on our website. Local hostels, hotels, campsites and outdoor shop staff may be able to help, as can local noticeboards aimed at outdoor activities.

### What to look out for when you are climbing / walking

Some species of birds, if disturbed at the nest make it perfectly clear they are upset by dive-bombing you and screaming, but others quietly fly away and you do not even realise there is a nest nearby. It is useful to build up some understanding of what birds might be where and what to look out for.

### What to do

If you become aware that you are disturbing a nest then what you do will depend on where you are, and the activity you are doing. When out walking you should be able to walk to a safe distance where the birds are no longer disturbed. If you have a dog then make sure it is under close control or on a lead. When you are climbing, it is always important you assess the situation on the walk in, and if you will have disturbed a bird, then choose a climb where they are no longer disturbed. Should you unwittingly find yourself part-way up a climb before

realising you have disturbed a nest, then you will need to make a balanced assessment based on your safety, not just the quickest way off, either up or down.

Comprehensive advice about what birds to look out for, how to spot a bird that is distressed and the relevant laws can be found at [www.mcof.org.uk](http://www.mcof.org.uk)



Picture Courtesy of RSPB



Scotland's outdoors is a great place for dogs and owners, but they can cause many problems especially with respect to farming, wildlife and other people. Dogs should not be taken into fields where there are young animals, vegetables or fruit unless you are on a clear path and your dog keeps to it.

If there are livestock, keep your dog under close control and as far from them as possible. In the event of the livestock acting aggressively let your dog go and move away. During the bird breeding season (February to July) keep your dog under close control or on a lead. Be honest with yourself, and if the dog does not walk close to heel then put it on a lead before it is too late. Landowners are legally empowered to shoot any dog that is causing distress to grazing animals if they believe this is the only way to stop it.

Dogs can cause other problems such as barking which disrupts the quiet enjoyment of other users, defecating near paths or along the bottom of cliffs. Always consider the interests of others who use the land, and remember not everyone will love your dog as much as you do.



Picture Courtesy of Hebe Carus

## Human Artefacts

Evidence of human activity can range from archaeology to graffiti. This section will help you make informed decisions about what you encounter and leave behind.

### Memorials

While everyone sympathises with the grief and loss of bereaved friends and relatives, feedback on this issue shows that most mountaineers believe permanent artefacts should not be a feature of the mountain landscape. It is also within the rights of landowners to remove objects left on their land. We would therefore encourage consideration of the issues below:

- Express your views - It is hard to predict the responses that grief will produce, so if you have personal views about memorials on mountains, make these known to those close to you, or write it in your will.
- Other ways to commemorate - Consider contributing to a good cause to benefit the mountains.
- Ash scattering - On very popular locations, regular ash scattering has been observed to impact on the natural vegetation, so consider scattering in a corrie, along a ridge or beside a tree on the lower slopes.



Picture Courtesy of Will Boyd-Wallis

### Cairns

Some cairns have historical significance or are important landmarks. Most are an unnecessary intrusion and detract from the feeling of wild land. Building cairns exacerbates erosion and should be avoided. Do not destroy a cairn unless you have consulted the land owner and discussed your intentions with the mountaineering community, the MCofS is the best first point of contact.

### Boundaries

Boundaries such as dry stone walls are traditional structures, and easily damaged. Fences are not usually erected to keep people out but to control the movement of wild animals and livestock, either for conservation or farming purposes. Climbing over boundaries may damage them. Make an effort to find stiles and gates. If you need to go over one, make sure you do so near to fence posts or where the wall looks strongest. Gates should be left as you find them.

Camping wild is a great way to experience Scotland's hills, glens and coastlines. It has minimal impact when done responsibly. Minimum impact camping is a skill worth learning for the benefit of yourself, others and wildlife. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code (the Code) is the starting point and the details are available at [www.outdooraccess-scotland.com](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com)



Picture Courtesy of Chris Townsend

### Wild camping

True wild camping takes place well away from roads and buildings, is part of a non-motorised journey, usually using lightweight tents and usually only one or two nights at the same spot. Group sizes tend to be small. You need to consider your impact, but also that impact adding to those of others over time.

### Protect vegetation

The vegetation is damaged by repeated camping on the same spot over a

number of nights or by different campers over time; aim to move frequently and seek out your own remote spots. Even dead wood is an important habitat, so it is best to avoid fires completely as they often leave a scorched patch and there is the risk they will get out of control.

### Minimise disturbance to wildlife

Choose your camp site carefully, and be prepared to move if you are disturbing nesting birds or animals. Food scraps, even when buried, attract scavengers which may prey on vulnerable nesting birds or displace more specialist animals, so carry everything out.

### Roadside camping

Any form of roadside camping that leads to a deterioration of the condition of the area is irresponsible, and should be avoided.

Further advice about how to keep impacts to a minimum, and an explanation of the legal position and the code can be found at [www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp](http://www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp)

Crags are home to flora and fauna that has retreated from heavy grazing and disturbance, or because that is their only habitat. A Climbing in Scotland Statement ([www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp](http://www.mcofs.org.uk/advice-and-policies.asp)) has a more detailed explanation about the best practice for participating and was prepared to pre-empt difficulties that have already occurred in England and parts of Scotland.



Picture Courtesy of Ryan Glass Mountaineering

The main issues are:

### Erosion

- On approach and descent, use existing paths if possible and if no path exists then choose a line that avoids soft vegetation which is prone to erosion.

- Avoid chipping, scratching, arrows, cairns or other graffiti.
- Bottom roping needs very careful management by ensuring that both the crag edge and any trees used for belays are protected by suitable padding or slings long enough to drape over the edge.
- Avoid abseiling down climbing routes if at all possible.

### Vegetation

- Avoid gardening or removing any vegetation, including lichen, by brushing or chemicals is illegal as all plants are protected by law and permission is likely to be required. The local office of Scottish Natural Heritage ([www.snh.org.uk](http://www.snh.org.uk)) should be consulted on the circumstances for a specific site.

### What you leave behind

- Chalk should be used sparingly, and resin avoided.
- Bolts - These are acceptable in some places, but not others. The appropriateness of a location depends on subtle characteristics of the venue, and if considering bolting, you are advised to read the guidance on [www.mcofs.org.uk](http://www.mcofs.org.uk) and contact MCoFS to discuss.

- Pegs - These should be avoided except for emergencies.
- Slings and Wires – Where possible these should be removed after use.

### Group use

- Some crags are not appropriate for groups due to issues with access, parking, sensitive nature interest or monopolising route. Groups should choose crags or routes not likely to be popular and in particular avoid classic climbs. Try not to overuse one venue.
- Abseiling should be concentrated on areas of crag that are not usually climbed or on crags that do not provide good routes.
- Leading should be given priority over top-roping or abseiling.



Picture Courtesy of Allen Fyffe

Scotland is affected by variable conditions, with incomplete snow cover and thawing ice often frustrating enjoyment. This presents a challenge to winter mountaineers and means careful assessment of the conditions, both for your enjoyment and to protect the environment.

### Winter climbing

Many of the best winter climbing venues are north-facing cliffs, which hold considerable amounts of vegetation. Some are the locations of rare alpine plants, which are not to be found elsewhere in the UK. For this reason it is important that vegetation and turf is completely frozen to minimise damage. The cliff will have a 'winter appearance' with snow, hoarfrost, rime-ice or verglas completely covering rock, not just snow on the ledges.



Picture Courtesy of Kevin Howett

In cases where snow and ice is so sparse, it may be effectively dry-tooling, then different best practice applies and many winter climbing venues are likely to be inappropriate for dry-tooling as it would seriously damage the vegetation.

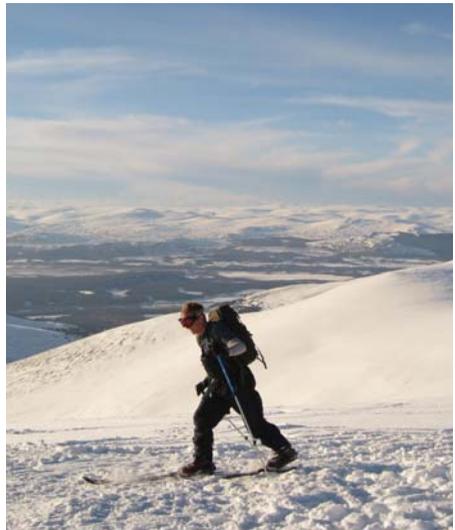
Winter ascents of summer rock routes, by the use of crampons, peg placements and axes in cracks can cause damage, in particular chipping of the rock. This potentially ruins the rock route. Rock routes should only be attempted in winter when fully coated with snow and ice in order to prevent damage to the underlying rock.

### Snowholing

Popular sites are suffering from litter and excrement appearing when the snow thaws. You should be prepared to carry everything out that you carry in.

### Ski mountaineering

Skiing on incomplete snow cover can have the effect of skis slicing through the vegetation. Compacting remnants of snow can be damaging, and affect the vegetations' survival. To avoid damage, only ski when you are sure conditions are generally good, and keep to stretches of complete snow cover.



Picture Courtesy of Hebe Carus



The preceding advice applies as good practice wherever you go, but the legal basis and details of your rights are different in areas outside Scotland. This section introduces the basic differences and where to get more detailed advice.



The BMC has worked hard to negotiate access to areas of high conservation as well as high recreational value in England and Wales, and always manages access in a way that is of mutual benefit to recreation and conservation. Check the BMC website ([www.thebmc.co.uk](http://www.thebmc.co.uk)) in advance and take account of any restrictions when planning which crag you are going to visit.

The Countryside Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW) is the main piece of legislation governing access to the uplands of England and Wales. The CRoW Act defined areas of mountain, moor, heath, down and registered common land as open access land.

If you are unsure of your rights and responsibilities or where you can go, please visit: [www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk](http://www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk) and [www.openaccess.gov.uk](http://www.openaccess.gov.uk) in England, [www.ccw.gov.uk](http://www.ccw.gov.uk) in Wales.

The restrictions that are sometimes used on CRoW access land do not affect public rights of way (so you can walk along them even when surrounding access land is closed). However, public rights of way can sometimes be diverted, removed, created or have the rights suspended but only by the local highway authority.

Official signs, posted by the authority, will be found on the route to tell you if there are any changes to the local network. Under the CRoW Act 2000, wild camping is not permitted by right on open access land in England and Wales without express permission of the landowner.

The BMC publishes an annual list of agreed climbing restrictions in England and Wales to protect nesting birds. For a full list of climbing restrictions in England and Wales visit [www.thebmc.co.uk/bmcrag/](http://www.thebmc.co.uk/bmcrag/)



The Mountaineering Ireland (MI) promotes the seven principles Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics to encourage responsible outdoor recreation. This programme introduces the recreational user to techniques designed to minimise the social and environmental impacts to the Irish environment. The Seven Principles of Leave No Trace are:

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Be Considerate of Others
3. Respect Farm Animals and Wildlife
4. Travel and Camp on Durable Ground
5. Leave What You Find
6. Dispose of Waste Properly
7. Minimise the Effects of Fire

Practising a Leave No Trace ethic is very simple: Make it hard for others to see or hear you and leave no trace of your visit. For more detailed information on the Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics visit the website at [www.leavenotraceireland.org](http://www.leavenotraceireland.org) or contact the MI office at +353 (0)1 6251115.



The UIAA is the World Federation for Climbing and Mountaineering representing more than 60 national federations worldwide. The UIAA has both an Access and Conservation Commission and a Mountain Protection Commission that work on issues of access, conservation and the protection of mountain environments across the world.

From the UIAA website [www.theuiaa.org](http://www.theuiaa.org) you can keep up to date with international access and conservation issues and initiatives and download publications on: responsible access; best practice ideas for setting up working groups to collaborate with landowners and conservation organisations; as well as practical advice on the sustainability of mountain cultures and environments.

Protection of our mountain environments needs the attention and action of all mountaineers locally and globally.

This leaflet was produced with financial assistance from:



## Further Information

The legislation most relevant in Scotland:

- Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 & Scottish Outdoor Access Code ([www.outdooraccess-scotland.com](http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com))
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 ([www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1377](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1377))
- Nature Conservation (Scotland) Act 2004 ([www.jncc.gov.uk/page-3148](http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-3148))

Join the MCofS and support our work - see [www.mcofs.org.uk](http://www.mcofs.org.uk)

## Contact Us

For further advice, or to discuss any of these issues contact the Access & Conservation Officer:

MCofS, The Old Granary  
West Mill Street, Perth PH1 5QP  
01738 493942  
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