
Sustainability Inquiry into Access to Inland Water in Wales

Evidence from the Sports Council for Wales

Dr Rachel Hughes, September 2009

Introduction

The Sports Council for Wales is the national agency with responsibility for the development of sport and physical recreation. Our job is to facilitate increased participation, improved sporting performance, and raised standards in sport and physical recreation.

Wales' lakes, reservoirs and other inland waters provide outstanding opportunities for water, and shore-based sport and physical recreation. In so doing, the Sports Council wishes to ensure that:

- Opportunities for watersports and recreational activities on inland waters are safeguarded and enhanced for the benefits of current users and further generations;
- Watersports and recreation activities take place in harmony with each other, with the natural environment, and with the local amenity and economic interests.

Context

The nature of participation in sport and physical recreation in Wales varies. Our latest research¹ shows, for example, that 45% of the adult population² in Wales participate³ in *outdoor pursuits*, this compares to 27% who participate in *indoor games*, and 14% who participate in *outdoor games* (for definitions of activity types, see *Appendix*). Walking does, however, contribute significantly to participation in *outdoor pursuits*; if we exclude walking, participation in *outdoor pursuits* drops to 9%. Participation in water-based recreation is relatively low (2%); fishing/angling accounts for 1.1% and canoeing accounts for 0.2% of participation (SCW, 2009).

Utilising outdoor spaces for sporting and recreational activities is part of Wales' 'rural heritage' (SCW, 1994). This cultural and political support for outdoor activities is synergised in the Assembly Government's strategy for sport and physical activity, *Climbing Higher*. Their vision is for:

An active, healthy and inclusive Wales, where sport, physical activity and active recreation provide a common platform for participation, fun and achievement... where the outstanding environment of Wales is used sustainably to enhance confidence in ourselves and our place in the world. (WAG, 2005:5)

¹ Sports Council for Wales' *Active Adults Survey*, 2004/05.

² Adult population: 15+ years.

³ Participation in at least one activity in the 4 weeks prior to being interviewed.

This is further emphasised in the associated draft action plan, where one of the priorities is to 'increase the availability and access to high quality local green space, waterways, and countryside' (WAG, 2009: 10).

Access to and Demand for Inland Water

For the most part, sport and physical recreation co-exist happily with other countryside interests. Where conflict does occur, it can arise as a result of access issues and/or competing demands for use of inland waters. In order for the Assembly Government's aims to be realised, these issues must be managed effectively at the local level.

Access for watersports

Recreational access to inland waters often requires access over adjacent land. As most waters and lands are privately owned, access often depends on, and is conditioned by rights of access and navigation, property and sporting rights, and common and statute law. The principle means of access to or over inland waters and adjacent land are:

- Public rights of way;
- Public rights of navigation;
- Statutory agreements and orders;
- Private rights and agreements;
- Recreational lands or waters provided by public bodies;
- *De facto* access.

Access issues are complex and can cause conflicts. By way of example, fishermen and women have to pay a fee for accessing a riparian area. This allows them the right to fish, not the fish themselves. Canoeists, however, are lobbying for the right to access inland water without the need to be licensed.

Potential conflicts and impacts of watersports and recreational activities

In terms of competing demands for use of inland waters, the main potential problems are (*see*. sportscotland, 1997):

- Conflicts between watersports;
- Conflicts between watersports and other activities; and

- Environmental impacts of recreational activities.

Principles for planning and managing watersports on inland water

The Sports Council is committed to the continued development of the optimum use of natural facilities for sport and recreation. In recognition, however, of the pressures the countryside faces, the Council has modified the original policy goal of ‘*access for all*’, as an integral component of ‘*sport for all*’ to ‘*access for all, but not access to everywhere*’. It is recognised also that access is not an absolute right but carries with it responsibilities to the site, landowner, local community, and other users (see SCW, 1991).

The Sports Council advocates the principles, developed by sportscotland, for planning and managing watersports on inland water (see Vignette 1).

Vignette 1: Principles for planning and managing watersports on inland water

Sustainable use

Planning and management should promote the sustainable use of inland waters, including the provision and management of recreational access and opportunities for watersports, whilst ensuring the long-term conservation of the natural environment. Effective planning and management can enable the multiple-use of inland waters and their shores and the creative enhancement of wildlife values.

Open and objective planning process

Management statements, plans and programmes, should be derived from a sound objective understanding of local circumstances, developed in consultation with interested parties. Background information and assessments should be available to all parties.

Involvement and co-operation

Voluntary arrangements will underlie most successful management schemes and will require the understanding, co-operation and active involvement of landowners, riparian interests, local residents, water users and other interested parties. Information should explain the need and intentions of management schemes and encourage support by users.

Safety

Management arrangements should provide for, enhance and ensure the safety of watersports participants and other users of waters and adjacent land.

Watersports for all

Opportunities for watersports should be available to all members of the community, not just those who are economically advantaged or physically able.

A balanced approach

Strategic plans for watersports should make provision for those wishing to enjoy tranquillity, information recreation and active watersports, including motorised watersports. Local management plans should seek a balance between all those with legitimate interests in specific waters, especially owners and managers, those with riparian rights, residents and commercial, recreational or conservation interests.

Consideration of wider contexts

Management schemes for specific waters should be developed within wider strategic frameworks. Proposed restrictions on watersports at one site should take account of the potential displacement of activities to other waters, which may not be managed effectively and may be environmentally-sensitive.

Fit for purpose and clarity

Often simple, informal management arrangements will suffice. Where required, management statements or plans should have explicit and realisable objectives and set out programmes and projects intended to achieve each objective. Management schemes should be designed to suite specific contexts, the objectives which they seek to achieve and the issues they seek to resolve. Management schemes should not impose excessive restrictions, but apply a proportional response; for example, restrictions on watersports may only be required at peak periods and specific locations.

Source: sportscotland, 1997

Satisfying these principles would enable pro-active and anticipatory management strategies for access to inland water in Wales.

Good practice

Insufficient consideration has been given to the numerous constructive efforts that have been made to accommodate and integrate differing sporting activities within particular localities and at particular sites. The Sports Council, along with the Countryside Council for Wales, published a study which sought to redress this imbalance by reporting on examples of 'good practice' in various parts of Wales (see SCW, 1994). Whilst this study is 15 years old, the principles it outlines still hold true.

Good practice is seen to manifest itself in various forms; there is no single normative model or approach to suit all circumstances. It is a multi-faceted and multi-layered process that requires co-operative effort and understanding at all levels. Like the concept of sustainable development, good practice should be conceived of as an active condition rather than a place one can reach; a journey rather than a destination.

The Sports Council believes that through the dissemination and advocacy of good practice, together with pro-active and anticipating management strategies, we will enable opportunities for watersports and recreational activities on inland waters to be safeguarded and enhanced for the benefits of current users and further generations, and that watersports and recreation activities take place in harmony with each other, with the natural environment, and with the local amenity and economic interests.

References

SCW (1991) Changing times, changing needs: a strategy review, Cardiff: SCW

SCW (1994) A Sporting Chance for the Countryside, a joint publication between the Sports Council for Wales and the Countryside Council for Wales, Cardiff: SCW

SCW (2009) Adult Participation in Sport, 2004/05. *Sports Update 65*, Cardiff: SCW

sportscotland (1997) Calmer Waters: guidelines for planning and managing watersports on inland waters in Scotland, Edinburgh: sportscotland

WAG (2005) Climbing Higher: the Welsh Assembly Government strategy for sport and physical activity

WAG (2009) Climbing Higher: creating an active Wales – a 5 year strategic action plan consultation document. Cardiff: WAG

Appendix: definitions of activity

Outdoor games/activities

This includes: archery; athletics; baseball; basketball; bowls; cricket; golf; hockey; lacrosse; road running/cross country; jogging; netball; rugby; soccer; target/clay pigeon shooting; tennis; tug-of-war; volleyball.

Indoor games/activities

This includes: aerobics/step aerobics; badminton; basketball; billiards/snooker; bowls; boxing; circuit training/keep fit; cricket; curling; folk dancing; fencing; gymnastics; hockey; ice-skating; judo; karate; other martial arts; movement/dance; netball; squash; swimming; table tennis; target shooting; trampoline; 5-a-side soccer; multi-gym/weight training for fitness; competitive weight lifting; volleyball; yoga.

Outdoor pursuits

This includes: BMX; canoeing; car rallying; caving; cycling; fishing/angling; game shooting; gliding; hand gliding; horse riding/jumping; lifesaving/surf-lifesaving; motocross/scrambling; mountaineering; orienteering; rambling/hill and fell walking; roller blading/in-line skating; walking (over 2 miles); rowing; skateboarding; skiing; sub aqua; surfing; wind surfing; sailing/yachting.