

## Report on CCW Seminar Held at PYB 9<sup>th</sup> April 2008

### Gorges in North Wales – Reconciling Conservation & Recreation

The meeting was chaired by John Cousins who did the introductions and also dealt with emergency fire exits etc.

#### *Introduction to the Seminar – Barbra Jones of Countryside Council for Wales*

Barbra introduced herself as a past instructor who now works for CCW. She recognised that gorge walking was an old and well established activity. She noted that newer activities such as extreme kayaking were now taking place in gorges and that some gorges such as Trawsfynydd are SACs (Special Area of Conservation). There are also gorges in the Brecon Beacons that have the same designation. She stressed that CCW does not wish to:

- Stop access for recreation but wished to continue protecting gorges.
- Discuss access or future access arrangements.

#### *Gorges & Ravines – A Special Environment – Ray Woods – Plantlife*

Ray is a very charismatic speaker. He started his talk by showing a photo on one of his local valleys near Rhyadyr. He described it as it is today after many generations of traditional agriculture and stated boldly that 'its knackered' and that most of the natural plant life no longer exists in the area, This was typical of most agricultural land in the UK.

Due to the degradation of so much land due to agricultural practices Ray stressed the importance of gorges which because they are of no real use for agriculture have become the last havens of many of the once more common plants. He stressed the importance of many ferns and mosses that continue to inhabit these havens but was concerned that recreational use of gorges could further endanger them.

Ray used the Glanllywd Valley as an example of an area that harbours a number of mosses that are not otherwise found south of the Scottish Highlands. He showed photographs of several of the rarer species that need protection.

Ray noted that rare plants such as the Killarney Fern are frequently stolen by collectors.

Rather than hiding the presence of rare species Ray was keen to enlist the help of leaders of activity groups to learn about the presence of rare species and to help protect them.

Ray answered a few questions at the end of his talk.

- Example:     Q. Which offers the greatest threat to plant life, gorge walking or global warming?
- A. This is hard to quantify however as ravines are generally sheltered damp environments they will resist the effects of global warming and remain havens where many forms of plants and mosses will continue to survive the warming effects.

*The Impact of Recreational Use of Gorges – Doug Oliver – Senior Reserves Manager, CCW*

Doug's main area of operation is in the reserve that contains Trawsfynydd Gorge. Doug talked initially about what is to be found in his reserve and the steep, narrow and deep nature of the main gorge. It is a very damp & humid environment. Part of the gorge is an SSSI and a haven for trees, bats, lichens, mosses etc. Much money has been spent on Rhododendron control - £200,000 in 10 years. Large sums have also been spent on improving public access in the form of bridges and paths. Doug expressed his concern about rare species being vulnerable to the passage of gorge users.

With illustrations Doug showed many examples of vulnerable areas and examples of where erosion and where change have possibly occurred. The obligations of the CCW under European law were stressed and Doug showed photographs of the notice boards that give visitors guidelines for use of the reserve.

Prior to this seminar Doug had made a survey of what he considered to be areas of vulnerability within his reserve but was heartened by the fact that he could not detect any evidence that recreational use had caused any damage since his last major survey about 10 years ago. However he had fears that organised events and the publicity generated would increase use and the risk of damage.

*Outdoor Education Use of Gorges – Karl Midlane, Sustainable Use of Snowdonia*  
Karl explained from an educational standpoint the reasons for and benefits of gorgewalking and how these contribute to child development in line with government strategies.

Karl went on to explain the role played by SUS in developing Best Practice Guidelines, erecting notice boards in gorges (away from car parks so as to not attract additional visitors) to advise group leaders on good practice. SUS had also produced a very informative (waterproof) booklet on the Afon Ddu gorge for group use, been involved in bank stabilisation projects and organised fund raising events to finance these developments. SUS are in addition looking for additional projects where the environment can benefit from the experience gained by its members.

*Commercial Use of Gorges – Rich Wyatt, Adrenalin Antics*

Rich at first talked in general terms on how the commercial use of 'Canyoning' as a pastime started. Then he explained in greater detail what his company does within gorges and listed the reasons for doing so:

- Fun
- Education
- Personal development
- Skills acquisition.

Rick stated his belief that canyoning had already peaked as an activity. It was however beneficial to local economies and he believed a 'carbon free' activity.

*Canoeing Activities in Gorges – Ashley Charwood, Welsh Canoeing Association*

Ashley talked about how canoeing & kayaking use of gorges had evolved and showed a short video of extreme white water paddling in a gorge. He explained how the evolution of equipments and the craft in particular had made it possible to navigate streams and rivers that were previously considered to be impassable.

Ashley said that of the 76 named rivers in Wales most had been explored from a canoeing standpoint and many were regularly paddled.

At this point a local land owner who was at the meeting started to air his grievances about people using his and other local rivers for recreation without making payment for them as do anglers. As the meeting had no intention of discussing access issues this was politely explained to the gentleman who after a short while left the meeting.

*Discussion & Feedback*

Phil Blain suggested that education days with CCW & Plantlife staff should be set up for leaders to introduce them to the environmental issues raised at the meeting and to look at specific sections of the locally used gorges.

The Afon Ddu booklet was identified as a good example of a publication that could be adapted to fit other gorges in Wales.

It was stressed that the CCW website was a good resource for gorge leaders to access for information related to conservation measures.

Jill Mayer the manager of CCW HQ was named as a useful point of contact.

It was suggested that a mailing list of gorge leaders compiled so that CCW could disseminate information to the appropriate persons. This was implemented at the end of the meeting.

Barbra Jones suggested that a day spent with the main users of the Trawsfynydd Gorge discussing and looking at the environmentally sensitive areas together with CCW staff could be arranged.

Another suggestion was that AMI could run a similar evening workshop for its members in the Afon Ddu Gorge this summer.

*Summing Up from the Chair – John Cousins*

John did a brief summing up of the seminar which concluded at 15.30.

Phill Thomas – IFMGA Mountain Guide

Development Officer

MLT Wales & Mountain Leader Training Association

