



**WATER-BASED RECREATION
MAWDDACH EXEMPLAR PROJECT**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Eryri-Bywiol
Snowdonia-Active**



Introduction

Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) ministers are very keen to secure greater public access to rivers and lakes in Wales for recreational use. In pursuit of this goal, WAG made funding available to Forestry Commission Wales (FCW) and the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) to implement a number of exemplar projects exploring improvements in access to inland water in Wales. The Mawddach catchment, north of Dolgellau in the Snowdonia National Park was identified as one such suitable pilot area.

In August 2007, FCW commissioned Snowdonia-Active (S-A) to undertake a project based in the Mawddach catchment that had two key objectives:

1. To develop opportunities for water based recreation for the Mawddach Catchment, North Wales;
2. To develop a toolkit planning process for the development of opportunities for water based recreation, to enable others to assess and facilitate opportunities where appropriate.

Mawddach Study Area



The project used a combination of desk based research, site survey and extensive liaison with stakeholders to develop the outputs. In addition, a Geographical Information System (GIS) was used to capture and manipulate data. A Steering Group was convened to oversee the project and provide technical input. The group comprised representatives of the following organisations: Forestry Commission Wales (FCW); Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), Environment Agency Wales (EAW), Dolgellau Angling Association, Welsh Canoeing Association (WCA), National Farmers Union Cymru (NFU), Snowdonia National Park Authority (SNPA) and the Mawddach Conservation Committee.

Opportunities for Water Based Recreation Within the Mawddach Catchment

The Afon Mawddach is at the centre of a hub of outdoor recreation. Data collected and processed during the project has shown that there is an existing level of water based activity within the catchment, which includes: Angling; Paddlesport; Wild Swimming; Bird watching; Walking; Cycling and Horse riding.

Photo: Gorge walking, North Wales



The upland sections of the main river and its tributaries provide excellent, technically challenging white water which are attractive to paddlesport enthusiasts. These sections also make up part of an important and well-used game fishery, providing prime sea trout and salmon pools and well-stocked brown trout lakes. The surrounding forest hosts one of FCWs flagship mountain bike trail facilities and visitor centre. The Mawddach estuary section provides tidal access for a range of recreation both on and off the water with excellent canoe touring opportunities and purpose built cycle and walking trails. The network of footpaths and bridleways in the area and attractive landscape offer ample opportunity for walking and horse riding. The extent of valuable habitat, including riparian oak woodland, reedbed and mire and presence of rare species in the catchment, present water based wildlife watching opportunities.

Much of this recreational activity currently takes place on an *ad hoc* basis and participants, landowners, occupiers and land managers have no comprehensive means of determining whether this activity causes environmental damage or conflict with other users. There is a history of dispute between paddlesport and angling/landowner/tenant interests across the catchment.

Whatever the prevailing weather conditions, there are opportunities for one form of recreational activity or another. The added benefit of the range of opportunities is that there are options for groups or families to undertake individual activities within the same catchment or for users to undertake other high quality activities if conditions for their primary activity are not suitable.

The nature of the catchment and its diverse range of attractive recreational activities is such that there may be potential for other recreational use of the riparian corridor to develop, such as gorge walking as these activities grow in popularity.

In terms of developing new opportunities for water based recreation the two main challenges within the catchment are:

1. Reconciling the balance between conservation and recreation; and
2. Addressing the concerns of property/sporting rights holders and their reluctance to share the resource.

Outputs

Mawddach Catchment Management Proposals

Baseline data on current recreational use, sporting rights, environmental issues and land owners / occupiers was collated and input into a GIS. From this data, potential constraints to water based recreation were identified. Through a process of consultation, a set of management proposals were developed to address, as far as possible, the potential constraints. These proposals include practical actions that would be required to secure appropriately managed recreational access plus further consultation requirements.

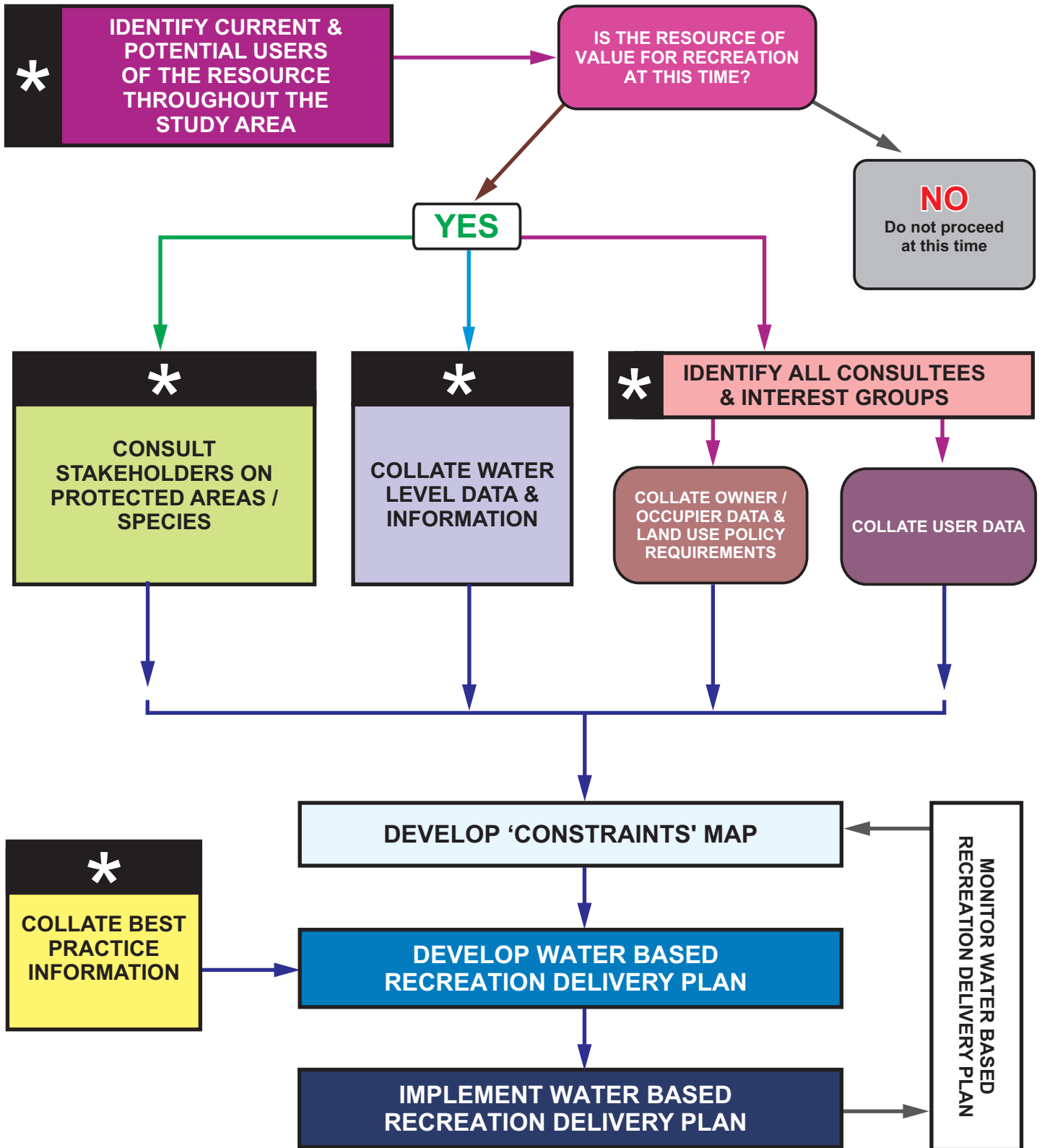
Toolkit Planning Process for Opportunities for Water-Based Recreation

The Mawddach project developed a transferable Water Based Recreation Planning Process (WBRPP) to provide a detailed planning process for the development of opportunities for water based recreation elsewhere in Wales. The process takes a participatory approach and also incorporates necessary requirements to consider environmental and social opportunities and constraints that could affect the development of a management plan.

To assist in this process a number of Advisory Notes were prepared covering: Lists of consultees, with contact details, where appropriate; Methods appropriate for each phase; Inputs; Outputs; Resource Requirements; Schedule Information; Potential Issues and Potential Solutions.

The figure below illustrates a summarised version of the WBRPP.

Summary of Toolkit Process for the Identification of Opportunities for Water Based Recreation using a Multi-Stakeholder Approach



N.B. For the full process diagram see the main report and accompanying advisory notes

Key Findings

1. The Mawddach exemplar project has clearly demonstrated that by developing, agreeing and applying appropriate management and mitigation tools it is possible to address concerns over the potential damage caused by recreational activities in even the most environmentally sensitive sites in Wales.
2. The process identified and the toolkit produced as part of this project represent valuable outputs, which can be employed by land owners/managers to make informed decisions on whether they have the capacity to manage and promote sustainable opportunities for water based recreation.
3. Whilst land owners and managers may be willing to provide opportunities for sustainable water based recreation, they are compromised by the fact that they may not own, or have leased out, other property rights which prevent them from being able to move forward as they might wish.
4. Property rights and the reluctance of some rights holders to share the resource remains the major obstacle to developing opportunities for water based recreation in the Mawddach catchment.
5. Where leases are in place it may be possible to review these at certain points within their lifespan which could provide the opportunity to insert clauses which require rights holder to permit access to other users within the agreed management plans. Where leases have been sold or have many years to run the only solution may be at statutory level.
6. The project has identified opportunities and restrictions ('constraints') to guide the development of water based recreation within the Mawddach Catchment. Constraints do not necessarily represent an absolute restriction on activity but rather an issue that needs careful consideration to ensure that all stakeholder interests are met.
7. In the case of the Mawddach through working closely with the statutory nature conservation agency (CCW) it has been possible to develop mitigation measures for protected areas to allow management of existing, and potentially higher, levels of future recreational activity.

8. A readily available, reliable source of river level data would deliver a high level of customer service for visitors to Wales and reduce wasted journeys made on the off chance that a certain river will be in suitable condition. Meeting this demand could provide a strong element in the marketing of water level dependant water based recreation in Wales. In addition, this would reduce the likelihood of users accessing water at inappropriate flow levels and permit compliance with the mitigation and management measures.
9. If water levels are to provide a credible, practical and workable solution for managing a wide range of recreational activities, a programme of infrastructure development and monitoring will need to be undertaken.
10. WAG and its statutory bodies need to develop, capture and create mechanisms for sharing a scientifically robust understanding of the effects of different types of recreation on specific habitats and species within the riparian corridor. If this information is more widely understood, the process of developing water based recreation opportunities could be streamlined considerably.
11. CCW may wish to consider providing guidance and support to their ecology staff on how to deal with approaches from projects relating to managing the provision of opportunities for recreational access to inland water.
12. It is important to note that in the case of protected areas or species, each new location across Wales will need specific consideration in terms of the ecological interest and the type of recreational activities proposed. This will have resource implications for projects and consultees depending upon the nature of the ecological interest and the potential impacts of the activities.
13. In the case of land owners / occupiers, the requirements for agreeing access will be dependent upon the type of land owners / occupier and thus specific to the situation. The policies and requirements of statutory bodies such as CCW, for example the need for consent to undertake any Operation Likely to Damage or Disturb (OLDD), will apply across any protected area or where protected species are involved.
14. There is a potential role for public or larger land holders to take the lead in liaising with their neighbours to encourage participation in projects and / or access to their land with any necessary restrictions.

15. River telemetry data collected for the Mawddach catchment clearly indicates that the peak paddlesport season is during the winter months October to March. This time of the year is often regarded as "out of season" for traditional or mainstream tourism, demonstrating that there is potential to attract paddlesport enthusiasts to the catchment at this otherwise quiet time of the year.
16. The Mawddach catchment specific management proposals and supporting material produced by the project provide the FCW local area team with the tools to be able implement environmentally sensitive water based recreation delivery across the catchment.
17. Problems in accessing the required detail of habitat/species data from statutory bodies has been a significant barrier to the efficient running of the project. In complex and environmentally sensitive sites time needs to be allowed for representatives of both recreation and conservation interests to properly explore proposals and to develop understanding and empathy with each other's positions.
18. The toolkit has the potential to provide a meaningful process that can be applied to non-water based recreation across Wales, particularly for environmentally sensitive sites.
19. It should be recognised that there may be both complimentary and conflicting uses. This project highlights the need for non-impact recreation and responsible use by all users. All users should be sufficiently informed and take responsibility for their activities and accept any limitations on timing or areas available for use. The provision of adequate information on the recreational resources available and the timing and nature of any restrictions is essential for the sustainable management of both recreation and ecological resources.
20. The project highlighted the importance of effective co-ordination and partnership working in the development of opportunities for water based recreation. Where these two elements were positively combined, in the shape of the Steering Group, a huge amount of value was added to the project. Where these two elements were lacking there were time and progress implications to the project. It is the reconciliation of differences that is key to increasing recreational opportunities.





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