Building Partnerships for Nature, Farming and Recreation

IRISH UPLANDS FORUM Workshop 22 October 2025

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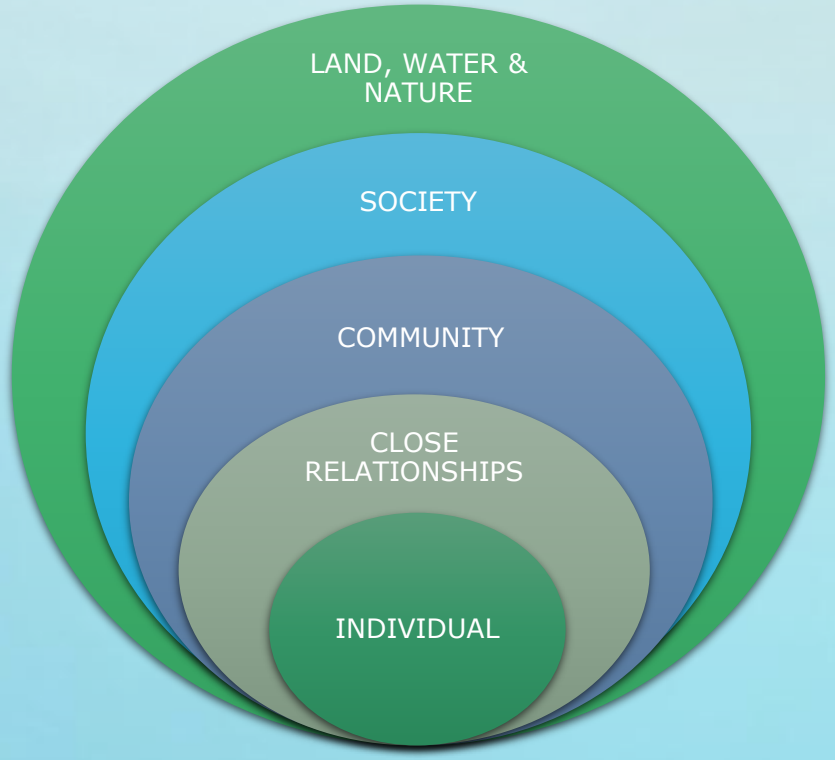
Presentation outline

Helpful stories

1. Partnership & Alliances for the Future of Uplands
2. Agri-Policy for the Uplands
3. Planning for Nature Restoration in the Uplands
4. Tourism & Recreation – Impacts & Opportunities
5. Putting Upland Landscapes into the National Conversation

Summary

Story 1 – we live nested in relationships …



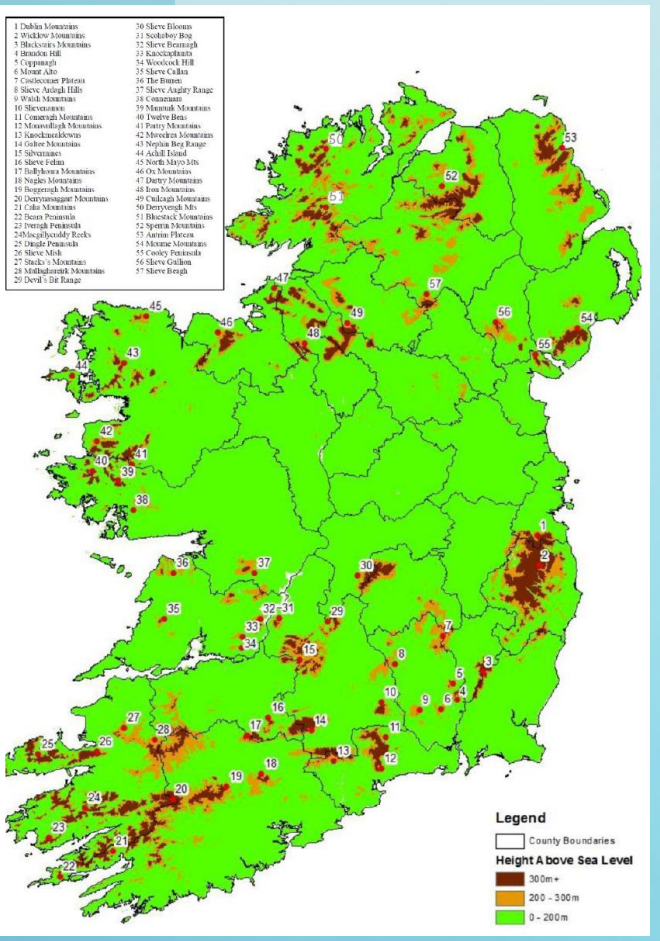
with

- … family (incl. ancestors)
- … community (friends, neighbours, other locals)
- … broader society (incl. visitors)
- … nature, land, place

relationship to land & place, roots - dúiche

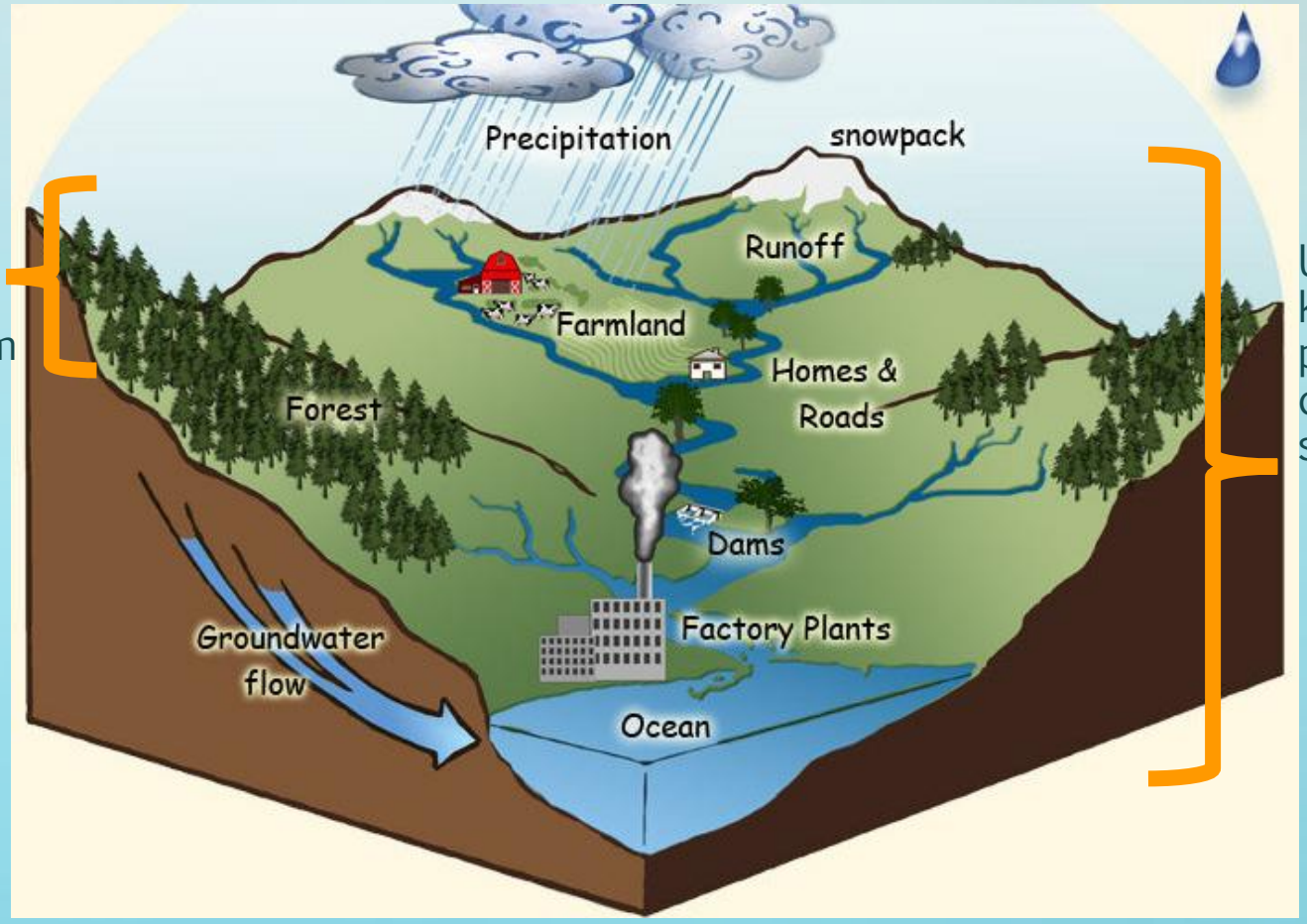
“There’s nowhere else in the world I want to live except here. This is where I am. [Repeated with emotion] ***This is where I am.*** *And I want to be nowhere else. Ever. …. And when I stop enjoying it, I’ll become part of it, in one form or another.”*

Story 2 – understanding our relationship with uplands



Source: irishuplandsforum.org

Uplands as an integral landscape form ~150+m > sea level



Source: https://snohomishcd.org/whats-a-watershed

Uplands as a key, integrated part of a river catchment from source to sea

Story 3 – the quality of our relationships matter

Riane Eisler's Domination/Partnership Social Scale

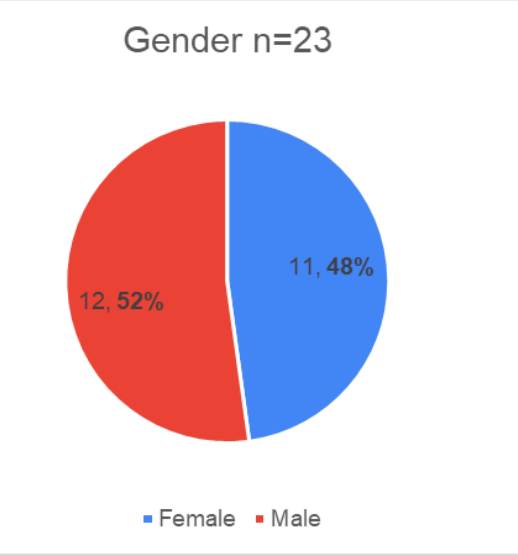
Domination	Partnership
• In groups and out groups	Everyone matters •
• Hierarchies of domination	Hierarchies of actualization •
• Power maintained by force and fear	Increase in liberty and expression •
• Inequality	Equality: gender, race, etc •
• Ignores economic value of caring	Care is valued economically •
• Violence and abuse	Human flourishing and creativity •

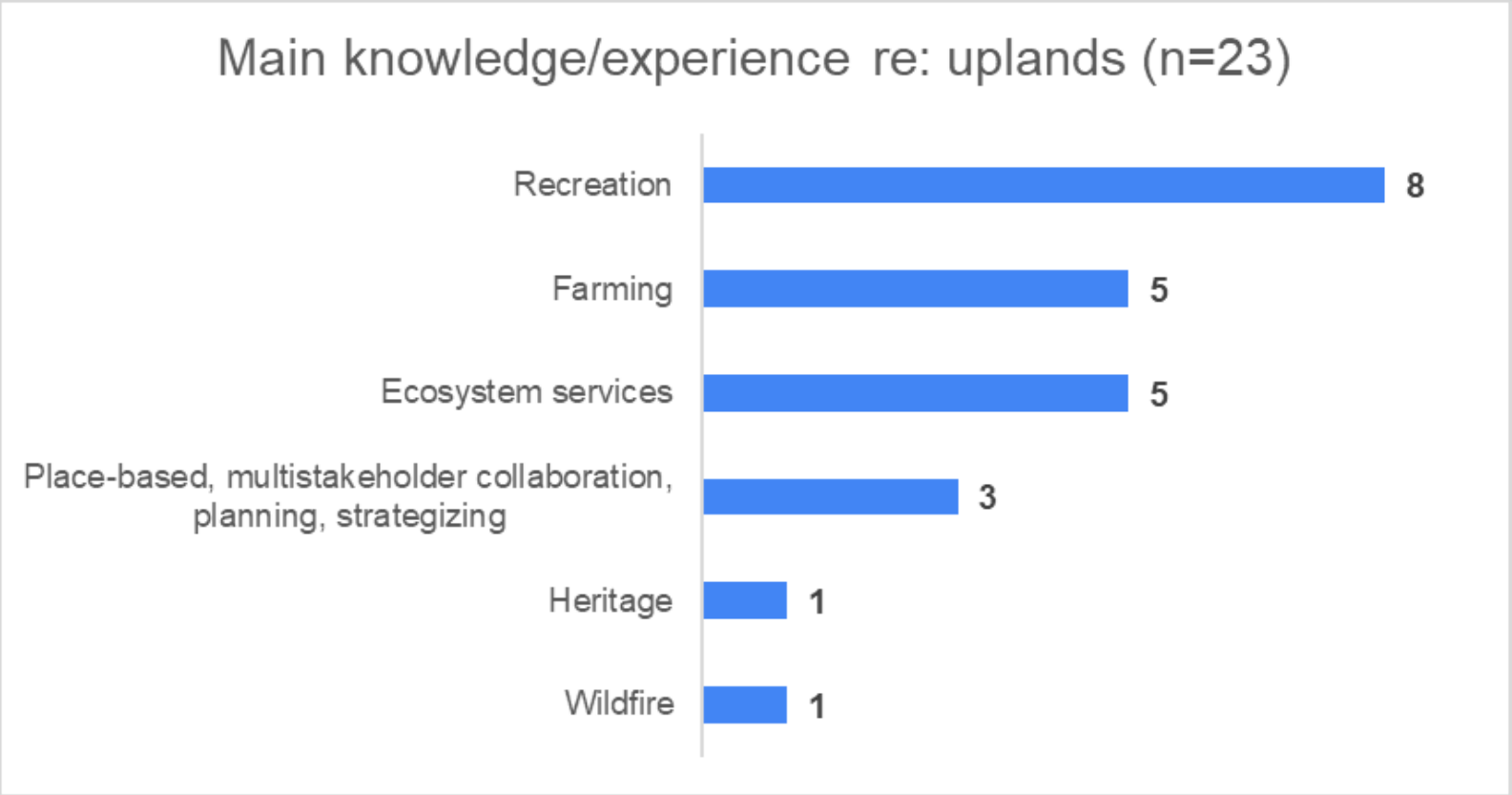
Towards a culture of partnership to work in service to the shared future of people and planet in the Uplands

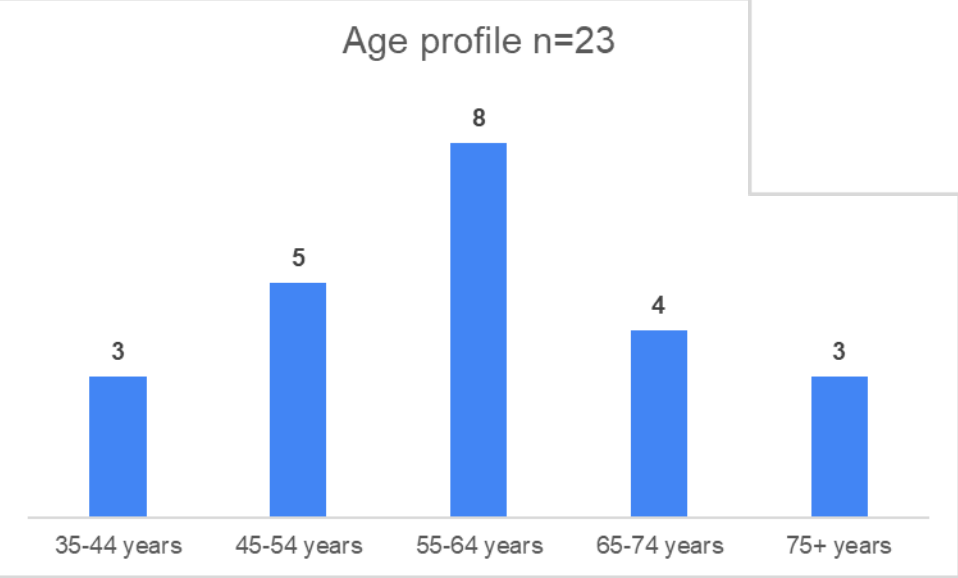
Source: partnerism.org

IUF Survey of Members & Associates 2025

Profile of respondents







- **48 IUF members & associates surveyed** (Board, former Board, Upland community groups, Upland farmer reps, Upland interest groups)
- **48% response rate** (x21 questionnaires, x2 interviews)

1. Partnership & Alliances for the Future of Uplands

Partnerships & Alliances

- **Vertical**: IUF "*is an NGO run on an absolute shoestring*" and struggles with precarious income e.g. 7-12 month competitive grants from Heritage Council, local authorities, etc.
  - Secure **Associate Partner committed to multi-year funding** including core funding for key permanent staff for IUF
- **Horizontal**: Reestablish dynamic network of upland community groups for their "*grassroots energy, local knowledge, and bottom-up credibility*" and to "*amplify IUF's voice*" and "*co-develop innovative solutions, and scale successful initiatives*"
  - **Upland Network Coordinator**
- **Integrated**: Build alliances with youth, other interest groups, agencies, policymakers
  - "*… to promote better understanding … of upland areas*"
  - To "*address skill gaps through partnerships*".
- Calls for a **vision** that brings it all together
  - an **Uplands Manifesto**

2. Agri-Policy for the Uplands

Human-Nature Relations

Issues Undermining Human-Nature Relations

- Land ownership changing as families struggle with farm succession
- Encroachment of corporate industry is considered a major challenge e.g. "*indiscriminate siting of wind turbines and other industrial infrastructure*", "*afforestation remains an ongoing challenge but also carbon marketing*".
- "*The use of carbon credits will drive an increase in the price of land that has carbon storage potential which in turn may challenge the local communities in the uplands and force them out of their landscape that they have lived and worked in for generations*"
- Enabler - Government Policy (e.g. high input/output industry, financialisation of climate mitigation)
- Barrier - piecemeal approach, lack of coordinated policies

Responses to Support Human-Nature Relations

- Evidence base - scale of industrial encroachment in uplands e.g. level of land abandonment, extent of industrial development/investment
- Alliances and agreed Vision - advocate for policies that integrate conservation and rural sustainability, provide financial aid for upland communities, support appropriate models of farming and tourism

Interwoven Futures – Humans & Nature Thriving Together

- Update story of the 'good farmer' and resource upland farming with vision
- Farmers call for model of farming that supports their connection to the land ('dúiche') & considers nature restoration and farming futures together
  - In commodity-focused agriculture, a 'good' farmer is considered a high-input /high-output producer
  - particularly unsuited to upland soils and topography e.g. faster decline in number of upland farms than nationally (O'Keeffe & Crowley, 2019) and agri-environmental schemes in marginal farming areas are over-subscribed
  - Upland farming requires a vision that enables people to attain a living wage and to raise a family in the community - systemic change beyond a 'scheme' and beyond agriculture alone
  - lack of farm succession to next generation of energetic, creative people is threat to nature restoration too - "*Nature restoration is hard work; it needs to be properly rewarded and implemented at scale*."
  - locally adapted projects (EIPs, LIFE) + policy review of upland farming systems (Moran, 2024) support call for truly valuing ecosystem services for mutual benefit of financial returns for farmers and natural returns for environment
  - key role of farmer education – piloted through WAN LIFE, Teagasc & farmer collaboration

3. Planning for Nature Restoration in the Uplands

Story reminder – quality of our relationships matter

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Towards a culture of partnership to work in service to the shared future of people and planet in the Uplands

Source: partnerism.org

Diverging Views

- NRP as an **opportunity** – *"the driving force for Ireland's approach to large-scale environmental management in the coming decades"*
- Unique uplands habitats and environment could be central, e.g.
  - *"water storage and filtration,*
  - *carbon storage through enhanced upland peatland and their ecologies,*
  - *appropriate upland farming and management of scrub encroachment,*
  - *geological and landscape heritage.*
- NRP as a **threat** – there is anxiety among upland farmers: *"Don't sacrifice the person that is managing those landscapes for a paper ambition that looks good."*

Interwoven Futures – Humans & Nature Thriving Together

IUF Advisory Group for the Natural Restoration Plan

- "… ***collective position*** *on key issues"*
- a Vision (Uplands Manifesto) could inform this
- **systems-based** at multiple levels, from genetic to human to landscape scales
- hold politicians accountable for allocating **appropriate funding**, including for model of upland farming

Partnership Working - NRP

Source: Arnstein (1969) in Hyland, Macken-Walsh and O'Mahony (2017).

- … across farmers, IUF, State and others
- Ensuring equitable relations ('power with' and 'power to')
  - participatory/democratic, multisectoral/integrated, local/scientific
- If appropriately resourced, IUF has role:
  - as trusted, independent facilitator of relations among farmers, NPWS and DAFM to help find shared ground with mutual benefits
  - to advocate for following actions by State
- Ensure appropriate farmer education, advice and income support:
  - a Green Cert for the uplands because "*farmer education … is not designed with the uplands in mind*"
  - community-based advisors "*able to get into the nitty gritty with farmers on a townland basis or at farm-level*".
  - targeted funding for "*ongoing management through appropriate grazing regimes*"

4. Tourism & Recreation – Impacts & Opportunities

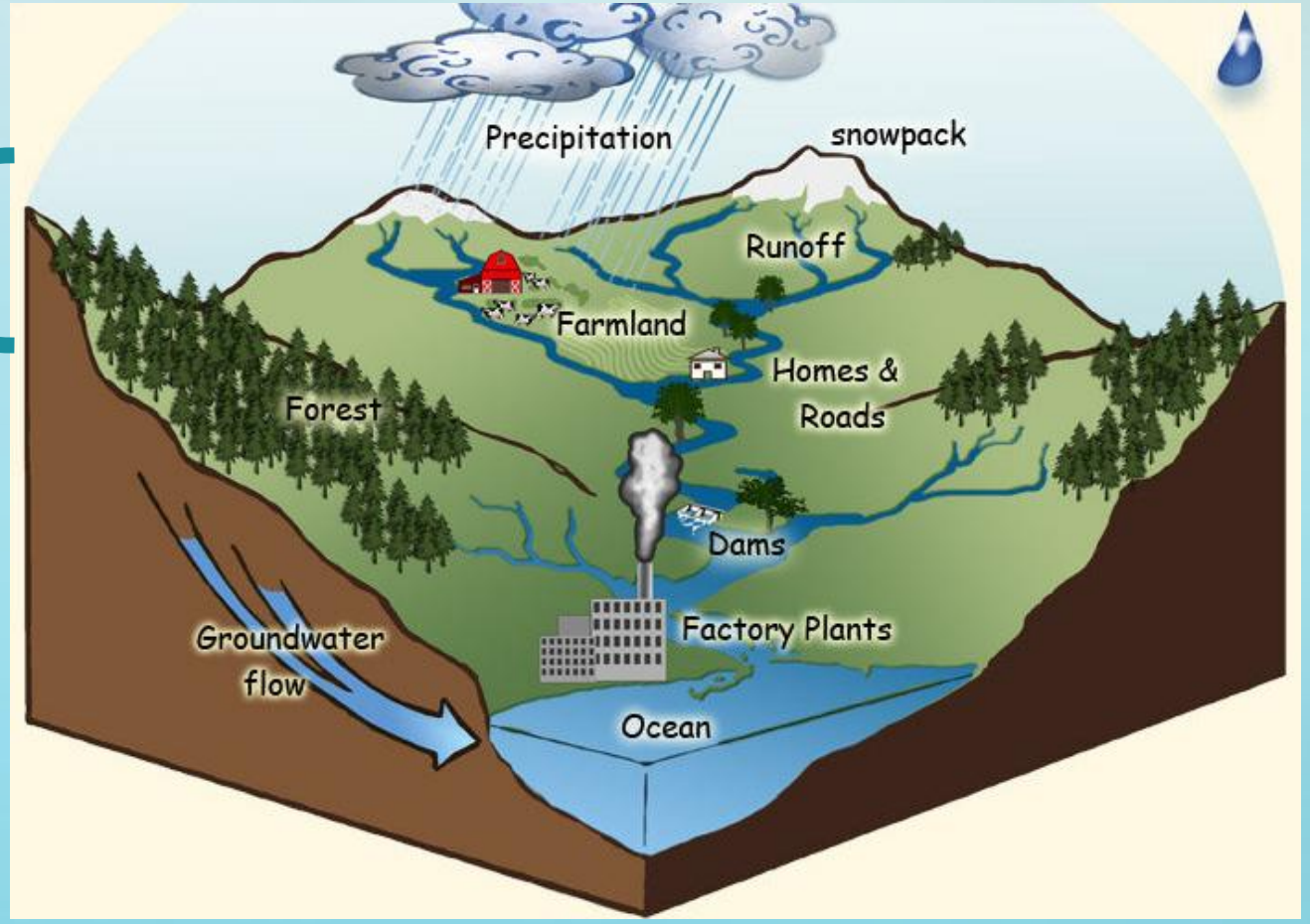
Interwoven Futures – Humans & Nature Thriving Together

- Issues
  - "*unmanaged or poorly managed access*" for outdoor recreation & increasing recreational users annually
  - resulting in widespread path erosion and visitor pressure at popular sites e.g. Djouce area, Wicklow mountains
  - damage from quad bikes, pedal bikes, hiking, running
  - dog attacks on livestock
- Enabler: Fáilte Ireland actively promotes upland hiking and outdoor recreation for tourism
- Barrier: lack of requisite resources to manage these sensitive environments
- Responses
  - resource local management structures and initiatives to support nature, farming activities and outdoor recreation together
  - develop areas and routes appropriate to nature, farming and visitor demand, e.g. via Comhairle na Tuaithe, NPWS & Heritage Council, with Fáilte Ireland & Dept. of Tourism, in partnership with landowners & Coillte
  - develop appropriate infrastructure, facilities, amenities and services with mutual benefits for residents, farmers and visitors, e.g. with local authorities and other public bodies

5. Putting Upland Landscapes into the National Conversation

Story reminder – understanding our relationship with uplands

Uplands as an integral landscape form ~150+m > sea level



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Interwoven Futures – Humans & Nature Thriving Together

- Public funding allocations are decisions based on what politicians, other policymakers and society values
- Funding could flow from greater appreciation for uplands, especially with mounting crises
- What society & politicians value is strongly influenced by economy
- Root in appropriate economic model
- e.g. Doughnut Economics, encompasses 17 SDGs through ecological ceilings and social thresholds for regenerative (safe) and distributive (just) economy

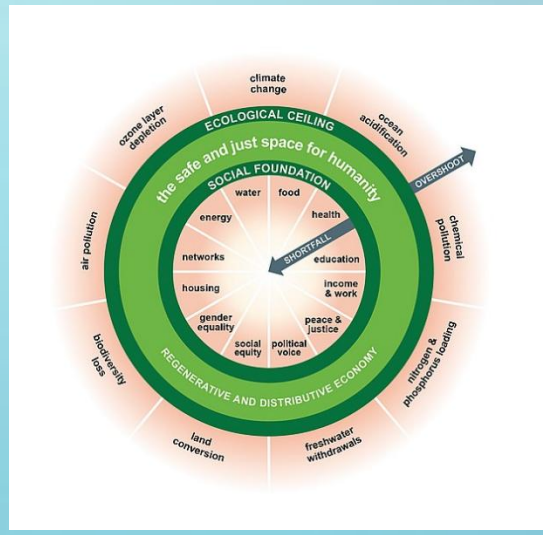
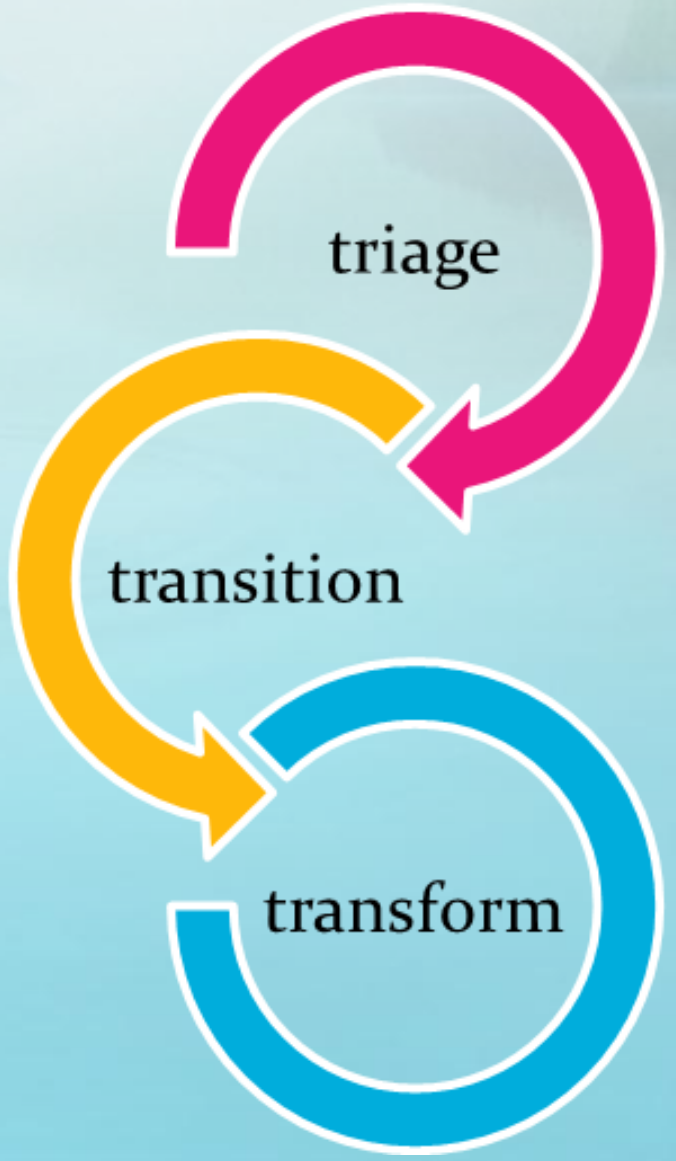
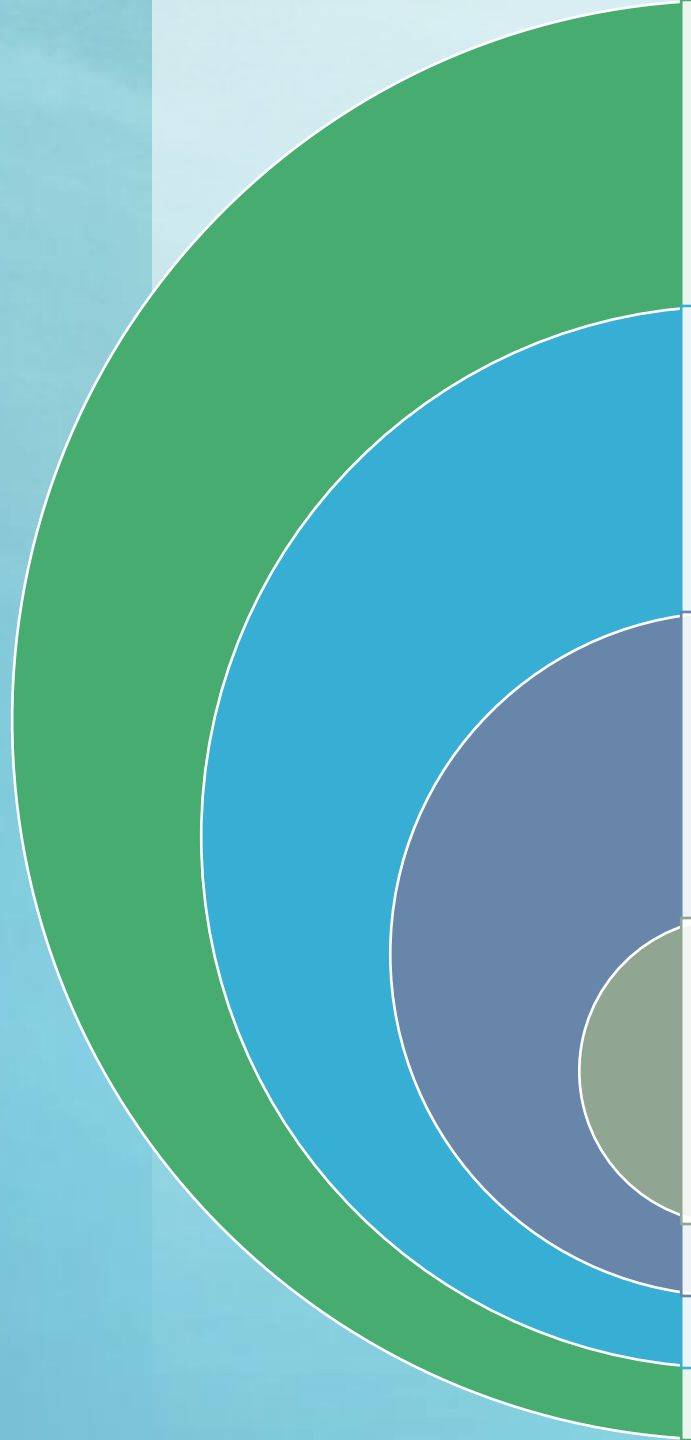


Image source: Raworth, K. (2017). A Doughnut for the Anthropocene: humanity's compass in the 21st Century. The Lancet Planetary Health (1): 48-49.

To close …

- **triage** – continue to advocate and raise awareness of uplands among general public and decision makers in Government and public sector to help address legacy issues from undervaluing and under-rewarding upland families, communities and nature
- **transition** – encourage entrepreneurial, co-operative and regenerative systems, structures and approaches to planning, implementing, evaluating and adapting upland management with mutual benefits for families, communities and nature, plus mutual benefits for recreational visitors, and for lowland populations dependent on upland ecosystem services
- **transform** – root the work in a vision to transform the socio-economic system to one that promotes the wellbeing of families, communities, nature and our collective future





envision

- **Envision - needs, care & wellbeing together**
  - enable resources to flow
  - through solidarity & partnership
  - to grow wellbeing & choice

understand

- **Understand - space & place together**
  - uplands as distinct landscape - mountain
  - uplands as part of the water cycle - river catchment
  - uplands as interactions of geology, nature & human culture - bioregion

value

- **Value - family, community & nature together**
  - multi-stakeholder - across diverse interests & sectors
  - multi-level - from genes to landscapes
  - multi-generational - from ancestors to descendants

reward

- **Reward - people and planet before profit**
  - ensure family, community & nature wellbeing is prioritised
  - root economy in a suitable model e.g. Doughnut Economics
  - grow the social economy e.g co-operative & social enterprise