The Development of Canoe Trails in Northern Ireland 2005 - 2008

Through a partnership approach – Northern Ireland now has a network of five unique, innovative and accessible canoe trails on four sets of inland water and one Sea Lough.

Through this project – there has been a marked increase in participation in canoe touring and the trails have created a lot of media attention and tourism opportunities.

Aims and Objectives
The aims of the project were to develop a series of high profile canoe trails for both the domestic and visiting paddler. As a result of this a partnership was established between the Canoe Association of Northern Ireland (CANI) and Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN), with funding support being provided by Department for Culture Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Inland Waterways and Sport Northern Ireland to employ an officer to deliver on these proposals. The officer was employed in 2003.

In 2002 CAAN commissioned a Strategic Review of Canoeing in Northern Ireland on behalf of a partnership of organisations including Sport Northern Ireland, DCAL and CANI.

The vision for this strategy was:
“A country with a wealth of sustainable opportunities for keen and environmentally aware visiting and local paddlers to explore and enjoy rivers, lakes and sea with good water quality and high nature conservation value; By kayak or canoe; And where river users show mutual respect and are welcomed by river managers and riparian owners.”
Five trails have been established on:

1. Lough Erne
2. The River Blackwater
3. The Lower Bann
4. Lough Neagh
5. Strangford Lough

Each trail provides canoeists with high quality web based information and a waterproof map as well as infrastructure on the ground that facilitates easy access to the water. A series of campsites have been established on the trail and Strangford Lough trail has a bothy on Salt Island which provides basic but excellent accommodation for canoeists.

These trails were very innovative and the first of their kind in both the UK and Ireland and have sparked considerable national and international interest. British Waterways have visited the trails in Northern Ireland and following advice from CAAN, CANI and Sport Northern Ireland have developed a trail through the Great Glen in Scotland from Fortwilliam to Inverness.

In 2008 the Lough Erne Canoe Trail was nominated and won the Innovation Category at the UK Waterways Renaissance Awards, run by The Waterways Trust and British Urban Regeneration Association. This was the first time that a project in Northern Ireland had won this award.

The numbers of paddlers using the trails continues to grow with the CANI website achieving over 1800 unique visitors per month. The bothy at Strangford Lough is extensively used with over 70% occupancy rate in the summer period with 22 nights being booked in July. The National Trust own the bothy and have reported that nearly every weekend the bothy is booked by canoeists and extensive use is also being made of the campsite on Salt Island.