

Habitat Assessment



The ASCENT Site

Errigal Mountain Co Donegal, Ireland

T1.1

Research on the Impact of Unregulated Access to Upland Sites

Prepared for: Donegal County Council By: Earthy Matters Environmental Consultants

Habitat Review Report (Flora and Fauna), Errigal Mountain

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Introduction

1.1

Terms of Reference

This document has been prepared by Dr Florence Renou-Wilson of Earthy Matters Environmental Consultants on behalf of Donegal County Council. The document is a draft habitat review report following a desktop study carried out to collect preliminary information regarding the ecology and main habitats found on Errigal Mountain that would inform the ASCENT project and its objectives.

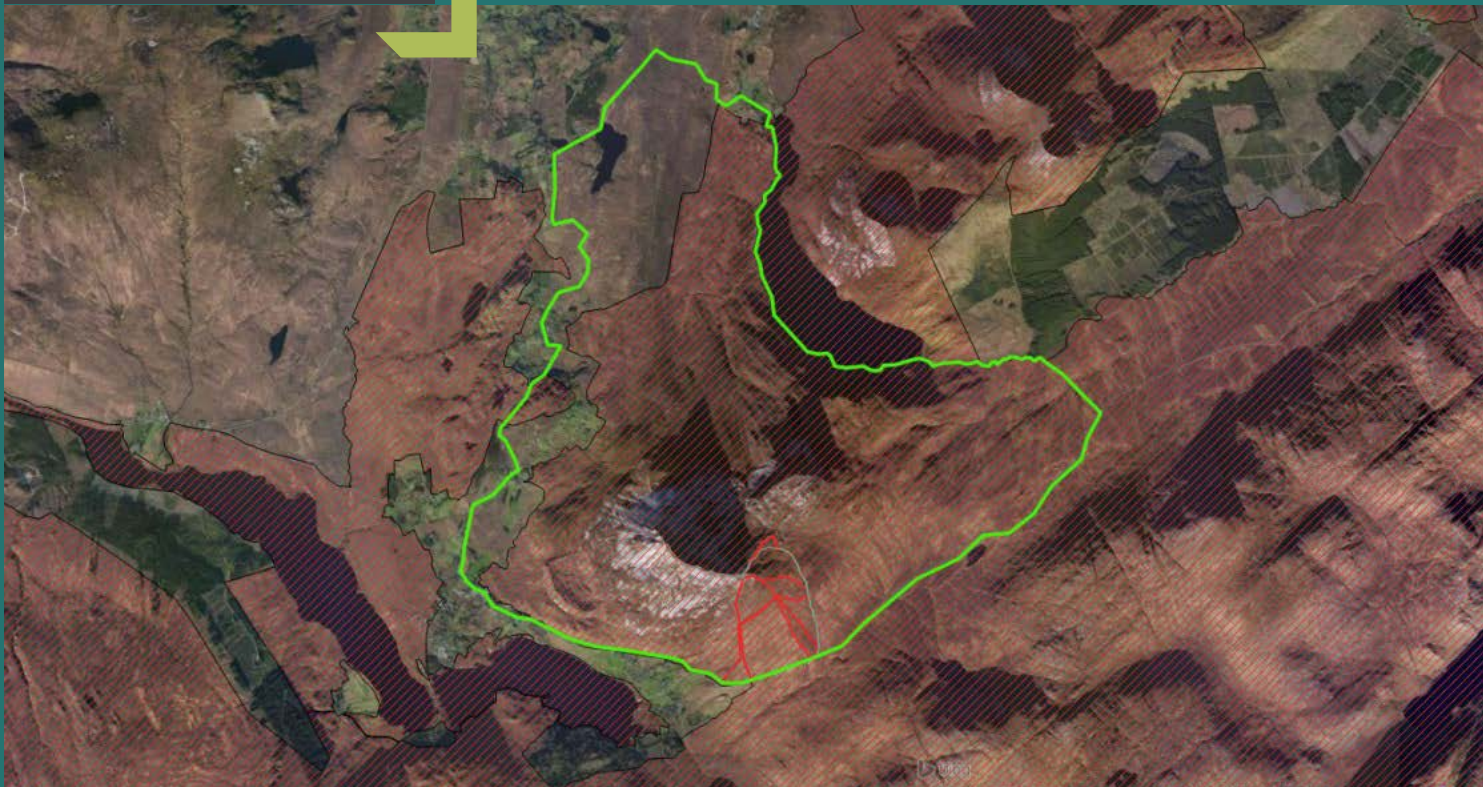
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Methods and Consultation

The study area comprises the whole footprint of Errigal Mountain, including the surrounding landscape, whose associated habitats will be considered proportional to the sensitivity and connectivity of the habitats concerned (Figure 1).

Various individuals and organisations and publicly-available data sets were consulted. The documents were mostly held in the public domain by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), as well as via data requests. The National Biodiversity Data Centre was also consulted to ascertain the presence of significant species in or near the survey area. All of the data sets were combined into a QGIS project and various map outputs produced. Gaps in knowledge were also highlighted.

Figure 1: Footprint of Errigal Mountain



Chapter 2

Geographical Habitat Data Sets

The following data sets were consulted and compiled:

CORINE land cover;

NPWS data from the designation of the Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and ecological surveys commissioned by NPWS;

Derryveagh and Glendowan Mountains Special Protection area (SPA: Site code 004039);

<https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/synopsis/SY004039.pdf>

Clogherhagore Bog and Glenveagh National Park SAC (Site code 002047);

<https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/protected-sites/synopsis/SY002047.pdf>;

Flora protection order species;

<http://dahg.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=71f8df33693f48edbb70369d7fb26b7e>

The explanatory notes accompanying the Natura 2000 forms have also been consulted;

Detailed habitat mapping was carried out within the boundary of Glenveagh National Park, which includes part of Errigal Mountain (Weekes 1990).

Chapter 3

Habitat overview

Errigal mountain is primarily an upland area. Its national importance in terms of biodiversity conservation is unquestionable since it contains numerous upland habitat types listed under Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive, as well as many rare and threatened birds associated with these habitats. It is unfortunate that the upland habitat project (NPWS) did not include this study area in its remit.

A habitat map (Figure 2) based on the Level 2 of the Fossitt 2000 habitat classification system shows that the greatest area of the footprint is occupied by blanket bogs (both lowland and upland) and in mosaic with dry siliceous heath. A large area of wet heath has been identified at the foot of the south-eastern slope of Errigal. Above c.400m, the main habitat consists of 'siliceous scree and loose rock' while, at the ridge, some dry heath and alpine heath is also present. Some glacial till and bedrock are exposed near the stream and up to the col.

An initial walk-over survey of the proposed route showed a range in the condition of the various habitats: from highly-degraded wet heath near the car park to patches of degrading wet heath and blanket bog along the stream. There is a decreasing gradient of degradation of heath/bog habitat along the eastern corridor of the stream where the route is proposed. The peat depth is variable, but the sub-peat glacial till or boulders are already exposed in many areas. An area of wet heath with bog remnants (peat hags) is located on the flatter part of the mountain's eastern flanks and shows acute signs (bare peat, see picture front cover) that might have been exacerbated by grazing in the past. While this area is not crossed by the proposed route, there are some severe eroding hags associated with gullies in the area closer to the stream.

There is an upland flush/swamp above the area where the stream emerges from under the peat layer. Pools are also located on flatter grounds.

The next part has a steeper gradient and corresponds to dry heath, which is in relatively good condition and contains a high proportion of rocks. At higher elevation, the scree is also severely impacted in some places, while the existing routes have damaged some of the dry heath at the top of the ridge and are jeopardising some alpine heath located below the ridge.

A detailed habitat mapping of Glenveagh National Park comprised an area of Errigal mountain's western slopes and is shown in Figure 3 (data from Weekes, 1990).

3.1 EU Habitats

The Clogherhagore Bog and Glenveagh National Park SAC have been designated based on the presence of Annex I Habitats of European importance. The following list of Annex I Habitats are present within the study area in various proportions, with wet and mosaic of blanket bog and dry heath being the two main types (see Figure 4). A very good example of alpine heath is present on the higher parts of Errigal, just below the ridge on the eastern side.

4010	Northern Atlantic wet heaths with <i>Erica tetralix</i>
4030	European dry heaths
4060	Alpine and Boreal heaths
7130	Blanket bogs (* if active bog)

Chapter 4

Rare and Protected Species

A list of all rare and protected species within the 10km grid B92, which includes the study area, is presented in Appendix A. Many species are associated with the freshwater bodies that surround Errigal, such as Loughs Altan, Feeane and Dunlewey. However, the presence of both upland and wetland habitats (bogs and heath) provides refuge for potentially rare and protected species within the area where the route is proposed. There are also several hepatic heath mats comprising leafy liverworts and rare mosses. Sphagnum species (*Sphagnum capillifolium*), alpine clubmoss (*Diphasiastrum alpinum*) and reindeer moss (*Cladonia portentosa* f. *subimpexa*) have been recorded on Errigal. In addition, according to the Flora (Protection) Order (updated January 2018), the following four mosses have been identified in the vicinity of the project: *Adelanthus lindenbergianus*, *Scapania nimbosea*, *Bazzania pearsonii* and *Oedipodium griffithianum*. Their locations have been recorded (See Figure 5).

Chapter 5

Fauna

5.1 Birds

The study area is also located within the Derryveagh and Glendowan Mountains SPA and many protected species are recorded within the larger area. The alpine heath located just below the ridge would be attractive for species such as golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) and the rugged terrain on the higher part of the mountain also provides good habitats for peregrines (*Falco peregrinus*) since frequent rock outcrops provide excellent nesting ledges, while the tracts of open bog and heath provide habitat for prey species. Cliffs and cragg areas near the mountain top would also provide habitat for the rig ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*).

5.2

Others

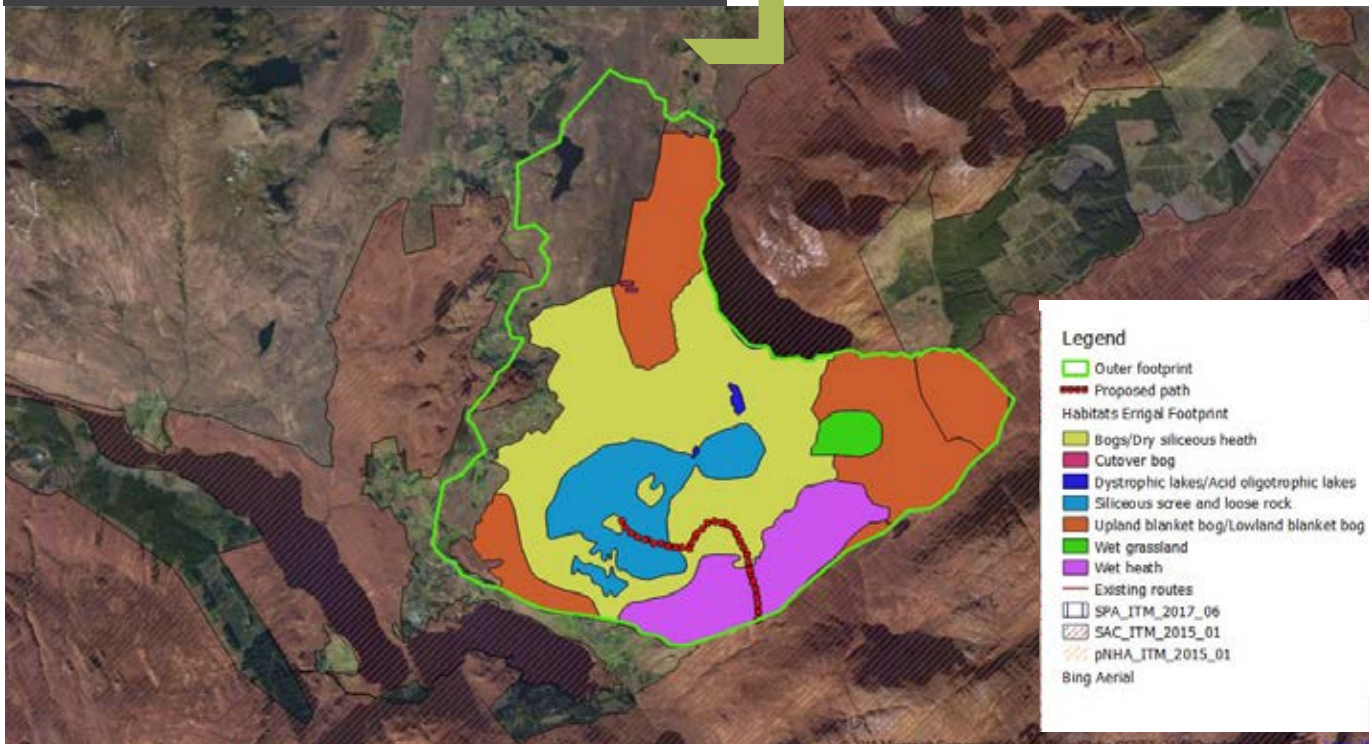
The Irish hare (*Lepus timidus hibernicus*) and the common frog (*Rana temporaria*) are all Red Data Book species and have been recorded in the vicinity of the study area. Freshwater pearl mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*) has been recorded in two rivers, the Owencarrow and the Glaskeelan, which are not hydrologically connected to the study site. Other records of this species are in the River Clady within another designated area, namely the Fawnboy bog/Lough Nacung SAC, which is located due west/south-west of the study area and would not be affected by the proposed route/path.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Overall, the vegetation is highly complex, varying in topography, exposure and management history. The main habitats merge into each other with gradual or sharp transitions, depending on the elevation. The existing routes currently contribute to the degradation and loss of several habitats of conservation value. The proposed route will traverse three main habitats, two of which represent the primary reason for the designation of the SAC. Therefore, a detailed habitat assessment should be carried out along the finalised proposed route in order to determine the condition of the habitats and to provide a baseline to inform management proposals and monitor change.

Figure 2: Habitat map within the relevant footprint of Errigal Mountain.



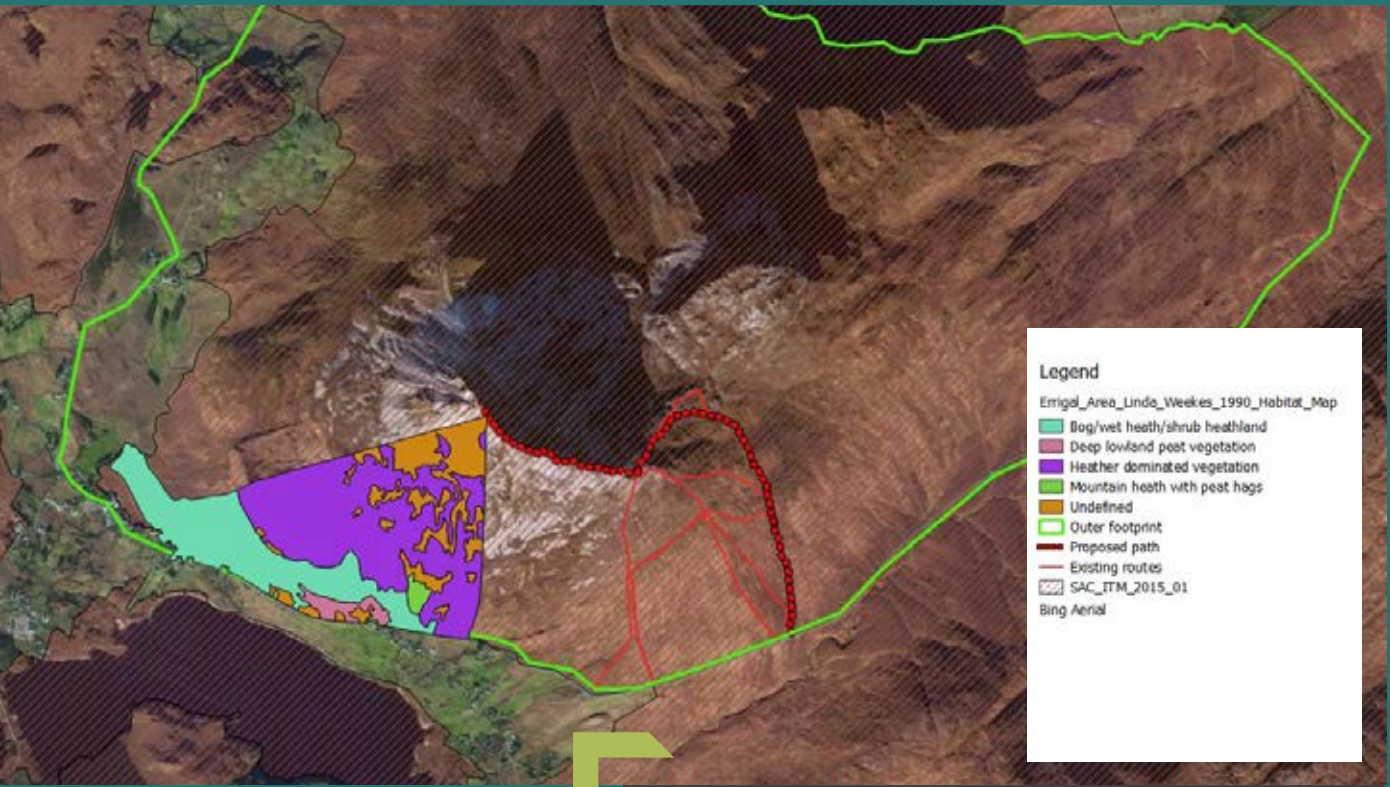


Figure 3: Detailed habitat mapping of Glenveagh National Park property located on Errigal Mountain (data acquired from Weekes, 1990).

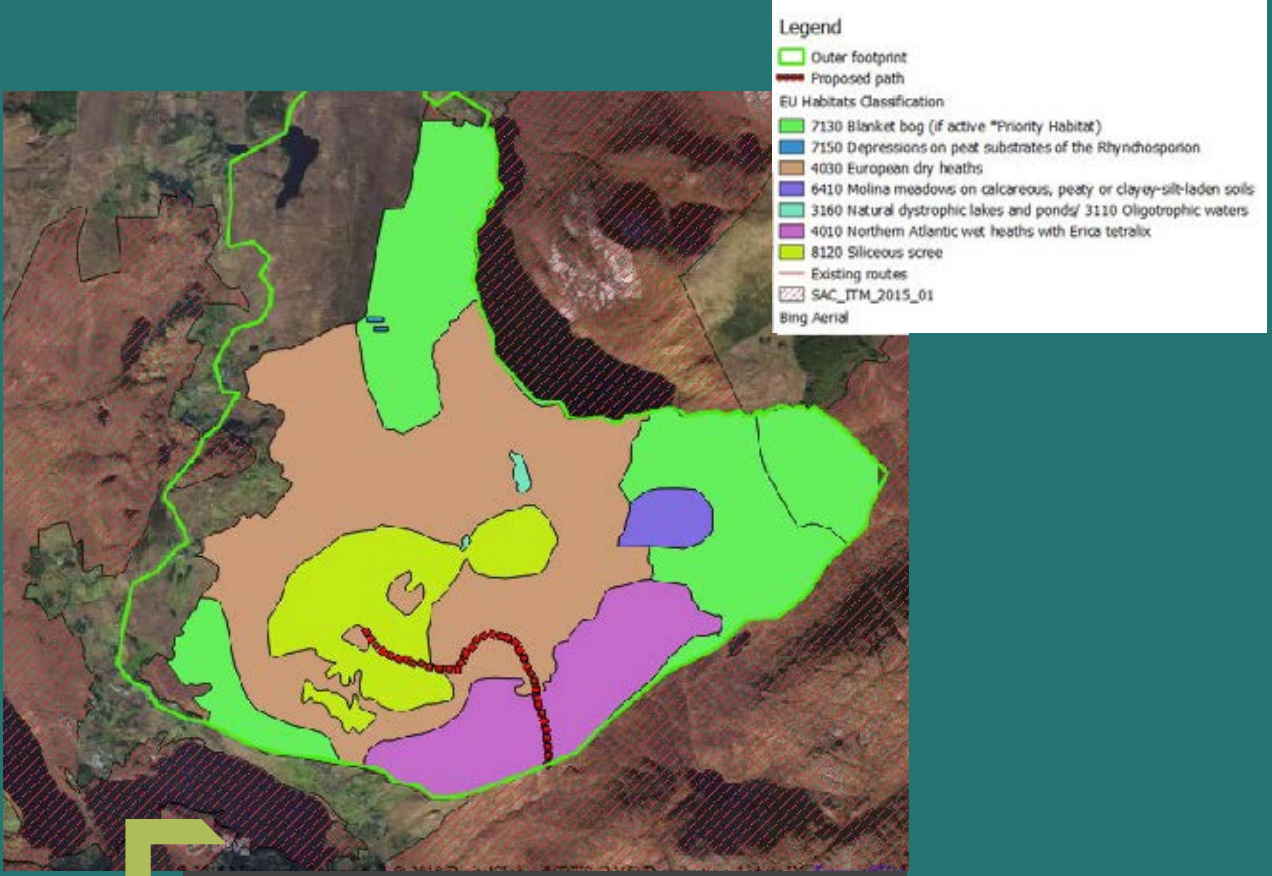
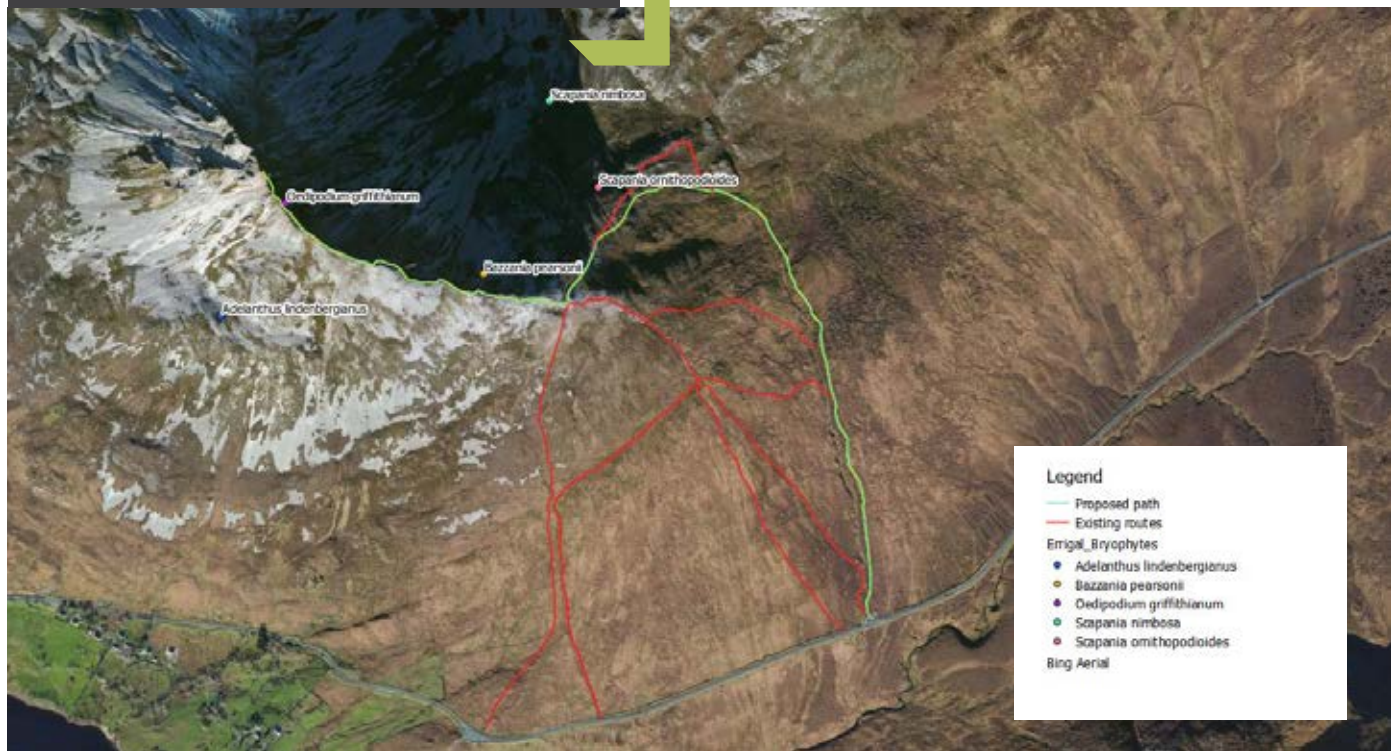


Figure 4: EU habitats classification of habitats within Errigal footprint

Figure 5: Location of rare mosses around Errigal Mountain.



Appendix A

List of rare and protected species within the 10km grid where the study area is located



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