

Heritage Council Calls for Urgent Measures to Protect Ireland's Declining Wildlife

The Heritage Council is launching a campaign to raise awareness of the decline in Ireland's biodiversity and the loss of their natural habitats such as boglands, natural grasslands, hedgerows and sand dunes. The campaign includes poster advertising, a series of postcards which are available free of charge at food and drink venues throughout the country and a new section on its website

www.heritagecouncil.ie called BiodiversityWatch, which is an online resource for anyone who wants to find out more about Ireland's unique biodiversity and the species and habitats that are under threat. The Council wants everyone to get involved in recognising and helping to protect our important wildlife.

Gardens make up a huge amount of our land mass and they provide food and shelter for a huge number of birds, butterflies and other important wildlife. Growing native trees, shrubs and flowers or planting old-fashioned traditional garden plants from herbs to scented flowers provide more food and shelter than the newer hybrid and exotic breeds. Everyone could play a part by planting native and traditional plants and using less moss peat, insecticide and other garden chemicals in their gardens and public spaces.

The Heritage Council warns that Ireland's biodiversity, is facing significantly increased threats. The Council argues that to respond to these threats new legislation is needed together with structures and resources to implement that legislation. Changes resulting from a range of factors including climate change, changing agricultural practices and building development are the major contributors to Ireland's declining biodiversity and the increasing numbers of native wildlife and plants that are endangered or facing extinction. The signs are there for everyone to see.

"Butterflies are known as an indicator species for measuring changes to our biodiversity and environment and even looking at this year alone, we can see some very dramatic changes," said Dr Liam Lysaght, Director of the newly established National Biodiversity Data Centre. "Some species such as the Marsh Fritillary are in serious decline due to the loss of their wetland habitats. On the other hand, many of our commoner butterfly species are flying earlier this year with butterflies such as the small tortoiseshell and red admiral flying in the depths of winter. A small tortoiseshell was seen flying on New Year's Day in Macroom. There is evidence that species such as the Holly Blue and Speckled Wood are expanding their range in Ireland. We believe this may be due to climate change, but we can't say for certain. Ireland does not currently have a monitoring programme for butterflies and we aim to establish a National Butterfly Monitoring Programme next year which will give us much needed baseline data which is essential to monitor changes in our biodiversity. Ireland has agreed to halt the loss in biodiversity by 2010. This will be a very challenging target for the country and the first step is to establish baseline data on the range of wildlife and plants in the country and where each species is located. This is one of the main objectives of the National Biodiversity Data Centre".

“While climate change and the arrival of invasive species such as the Zebra Mussel, Grey Squirrel and Hogweed are playing a significant role, the changes to our countryside from a decline in traditional farming practices to unprecedented development are having a profound effect on our biodiversity”, said Michael Starrett, Chief Executive of the Heritage Council. “European directives such as the Habitats Directive which brought us SACs (special areas of conservation) and the Birds Directive have played a very significant role in protecting our biodiversity over the past number of years. The shame is that such an approach had to be imposed on us by Europe. At this stage in our development we really should be in line with the rest of Europe in having systems and structures and indeed legislation in place that allows us to manage local and regional biodiversity and effectively integrate it with other land uses. We have really not valued nature conservation or taken it seriously and as a result are facing a whole range of environmental problems including loss of water quality.”

Local Authorities, in partnership with the Heritage Council have started to look at managing biodiversity in a more significant way. Some are now employing Biodiversity Officers and putting Local Biodiversity Plans in place. Others such as Galway County Council have started to identify Local Biodiversity Areas and are including them in Local Area Plans under the Planning Act 2000.

“We need to rapidly increase the effort and urgently put legislation and structures in place to manage Ireland’s declining biodiversity. Such a move could give local authorities and local communities responsibility for the management of the landscapes they live in. It is in everyone’s interest that we do so as quickly as possible”, concluded Michael Starrett.

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<http://www.biology.ie/home.php?m=biodiversity>