

Report on Status of Habitats and Species in Ireland

19 May '08

The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley T.D., today (19 May 08) launched a report on the status of habitats and species in Ireland. The report is the first such comprehensive compilation of the status of habitats, animals and plants in Ireland which have protected status under national and EU law.

The habitats include bogs, rivers, marine bays, deep sea reefs, sand dunes, and many more. Many of the habitats are scarce or absent elsewhere in Europe. The species vary from whales and otters to mosses and snails.

The assessments were carried out by expert ecologists and then screened by scientists in the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Each species was assessed according to its range across Ireland, the population, the quality of its habitat and its future prospects. A similar assessment was used for the habitats.

The report found that only 7% of the habitats examined are in good status, with 46% inadequate and 47% bad. Of particular concern is the status of the midland's raised bogs. Less than 1% remains of the living, growing bog and this is rapidly being lost. Another habitat in serious peril is lowland hay meadow, important for birds such as corncrake and plants such as cornflower. The meadows have disappeared as agriculture has modernised. Many habitats associated with water were considered to be in bad condition. Even moderate declines in water quality makes rivers and lakes unsuitable for many fish and invertebrate species.

Coastal habitats were found to have declined in quality, often as a result of recreation and development pressure over the past 20 years.

The report paints a more encouraging picture of Ireland's animals and plants. Roughly 50% of the species examined are in good status, while 10% are considered bad.

Species such as bat, seals, dolphins and whales are considered to be in good condition. However, there is a real fear that the freshwater pearl mussel, which can live to an age of 130 years, is on the brink of extinction in Ireland. The Natterjack Toad is another species considered in bad status but already a programme is in place to expand on the pond habitat it needs.

The assessments outline the pressures and threats that habitats and species face in Ireland.

The main threats and pressures are:

- direct damage, such as peat cutting, drainage and infilling, building and road making, reclamation of wetlands such as bogs and fens; removal of sand and gravel
- overgrazing and undergrazing
- pollution of waters by nutrients or silt
- unsustainable harvesting
- invasive alien species

The bad and poor ratings for habitats reflect the impacts of 35 years of agricultural intensification and a period of unrivalled economic growth in Ireland.

Dr Ciaran O’Keeffe of the National Parks and Wildlife Service said that the bad rating for habitats is not surprising

– the report covers habitats across the entire country (not just in Special Areas of Conservation) after 35 years of agricultural intensification and a period of unrivalled economic growth in Ireland. *“The habitats and species examined were protected by the EU because they are threatened in the EU, therefore unfavourable ratings at this early stage of the implementation of the Directive is to be expected. Furthermore, the EU criteria set a high standard to achieve a ranking of “good”, and minor disimprovements can yield a result of “inadequate”.*

Mr Gormley said: *“This report sets us many tough challenges. The critical issue in the next 5 years and beyond is to maintain and restore habitats (particularly in Special Areas of Conservation) and monitor and report on changes achieved. This will require careful prioritisation, planning and execution, and full engagement with landowners, farmers, other government Departments, local authorities, and other stakeholders.*

“The Programme for Government 2007-2012 includes a commitment to strengthen Ireland’s implementation of the Habitats Directive. I have significantly increased funding to the National Parks and Wildlife Service in 2008. However measures will also be needed across a wide range of policy areas, including planning and infrastructure investment. These measures are already being pursued as a priority by myself and the Department of the Environment.”

“Record levels of investment in water and waste water infrastructure, a key measure for the protection of many of our vulnerable habitats, is also continuing. I will continue to work to strengthen the resources of NPWS and to achieve progress in the conservation of Ireland’s biodiversity.”

The report can be downloaded from: National Parks & Wildlife Service

www.npws.ie

and more detailed information on each of the habitats and species is also available on the website.

<http://www.npws.ie/en/media/Media,6439,en.pdf> - Front page PDF [1,479KB]

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