

Sustainability and Nature and Rural Landscapes

Ireland's countryside represents a rich mosaic of natural areas, and semi-natural areas which are the result of human activities over the centuries, which have now acquired an importance in their own right as habitats for our wild flora and fauna. General development pressure resulting from our economic prosperity have put increasing pressure on many of these areas in recent years.

SPECIES THREATENED

The Irish Red Data Book for Vascular Plants (plants with vessels for carrying sap) published by the then Wildlife Service in 1988 is a register of threatened plants with an indication of the degree of threat. Of the 1,309 species of such plants in Ireland the Red Data Book recorded 159 species of which 10 are now thought to be extinct.

Six further species are in danger of extinction, i.e. marsh saxifrage, serrated wintergreen, meadow saffron, cottonweed, rough poppy and meadow saxifrage. Causes of decline include destruction of the peatland habitat, loss of habitat due to intensive farming, climatic reasons, increased use of herbicides, decline in tillage in favour of pasture and silage making and pressure from amenity use of land.

The Irish Red Data Book 2: Vertebrates (animals with a backbone) including mammals, birds, amphibians and fish was published in 1993. Of the 230 vertebrate species which have regularly occurred in Ireland the Red Data Book features 68 species, including 7 extinct, 42 threatened and 19 others.

The eight endangered species of birds are common scoter, hen harrier, grey partridge, corncrake, red-necked phalarope, nightjar, roseate tern and corn bunting. The three species of endangered fishes are allis shad, Killarney shad and pollan. The only endangered species of amphibian is the natterjack toad. Causes of decline include habitat loss, reduction in food supplies, predation and poisonings from

pesticides, new farming practices including increased mechanisation and the cutting of silage instead of hay, and recreation and tourism developments.

Further information is available in the above Books or Chapter 12 of the State of the Environment Ireland Report published by the Environmental Protection Agency in February, 1996.

HABITATS THREATENED

8% of the world's blanket bog is found in Ireland. Ireland is the most important country in Europe for blanket bog. One type of blanket bog, lowland blanket bog, is found only in Ireland and Scotland. Ireland has some of the best raised bogs remaining in Europe and are probably the most extensive of their type in the world. 80% to 90% of Ireland's blanket and raised bogs have been degraded or destroyed.

Turloughs or seasonal lakes in limestone areas are unique to Ireland - at least a third have been destroyed by drainage.

ONGOING AWARENESS RAISING ACTIVITIES

National Heritage Day- organised by Dúchas;

National Tree Week and Tree Day for Primary Schools organised the Tree Council of Ireland;

National Wildflower Week - organised by Conservation Volunteers of Ireland, Heritage Council and ENFO (the Department of the Environment and Local Government);

Esso Schools Wildlife Challenge - organised in association with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds;

Henry Ford European Conservation Awards;

Millennium Farm Landscape Initiative - organised by the IFA in co-operation with the ESB and the Farmers Journal to encourage farmers/rural dwellers to landscape a farmhouse, farm building or roadway.

Future plans include:-

1. A Wildlife (Management) Bill, 1999, to enhance the legal protection afforded to wild species and habitats, will be published shortly;
2. A Heritage Plan, which will define directions and priorities in all areas of heritage, including natural heritage, for the coming years, is in the course of preparation;
3. **Further** Special Protection Areas will be published in 1999;
4. A National Biodiversity Plan will be published in 1999.

Machair and sand dunes, of which Ireland has a significant proportion of what remains, are under threat from golf courses, overgrazing and agricultural intensification.

The limestone pavement of the Burren and the Aran Islands is vulnerable to bulldozing/clearance, reclamation and to some extent to other damaging agricultural practices.

ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABILITY INCLUDE:-

Nature Conservation is the responsibility of Dúchas, the Heritage Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands.

The EU Birds Directive (79/409/EEC) requires Member States to designate as Special Protection Areas (SPA's) places that are most important to our wild birds, particularly those considered to be most threatened. Over 100 such SPA's have been designated in Ireland, and the State has undertaken to protect their ecological status.

The EU Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) similarly requires the protection of areas considered important for their general wildlife interest, through their designation as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC's). This Directive was transposed into Irish law on 26 February, 1997, and over 200 sites have been proposed as SAC's and already enjoy statutory protection.

Areas protected include- Blanket bog (c. 240,000 ha) Raised bog (c.10,000 ha) Sand dunes (c. 25,000 ha) Machairs (c. 9,000 ha)

Turloughs (s, 3,000 ha) Limestone pavement (c. 30,000 ha) Fens (c.15,000 ha) Grasslands (c.8,000 ha) Woodlands (c. 1,000 ha) Salt marsh/meadows (c. 20,000 ha) Estuaries/mudflats/cliffs (c. 90,000 ha) Shallow bays (c. 40,000 ha) Lakes/rivers (c. 100,000 ha)

The Rural Protection Scheme (REPS) provides incentives to farmers to farm in an environmentally sustainable way, with enhanced levels of payment applying in SPA's and SAC's.

The Local Government (Planning and Development) Acts, 1963 - 1998, were amended to require the inclusion of objectives in relation to the protection of wildlife habitats in county and city developments as a result of new regulations under the Wildlife Acts for the protection of such areas;

The Heritage Council gives grant assistance for community projects which promote interest in, or education, knowledge or appreciation of the natural heritage;

The European Community ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity on 21 December, 1993. On 4 February, 1998, the European Commission adopted a communication on a European Community Biodiversity Strategy in relation to those policies for which it is responsible and which aims to complement local and national initiatives.

What can I Do?

Our natural heritage belongs to everyone and its protection and conservation depend on action by, and the behaviour of, business interests, communities and individuals as well Government and public authorities.

FARMERS / LANDOWNERS

Be aware of any environmental designations that may apply to your land, and of the implications if any of these. Local officers of Dúchas will help as much as they can with advice and information. Do your best to protect important wildlife habitats, such as hedgerows.

CONSUMERS / HOUSEHOLDERS

Have you participated in any of the wide range of awareness raising activities listed above? Find out if there are other local initiatives organised in your area.

Have you considered joining one of the many voluntary organisations which are interested in protecting the various forms of wildlife?

INDUSTRY

Are you aware of the impact of your activities on local flora and fauna?

TREKKERS / HILLWALKERS / NATURE WATCHERS

Stick to established paths, etc. in sensitive areas - walking or climbing on new areas can often cause disturbance or damage.

Respect private ownership of land.

Avoid disturbing wild birds or animals, by for example, trying to get too close, particularly to nests.

Do not leave litter in the countryside - bring it with you to where you can properly dispose of it.

Take great care not to light fires, or even to discard matches or cigarette ends in areas where there is a danger of fire spreading.

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