

Farming For Conservation in the Burren

24-27 February 2008

22/01/08

The Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government Mr Tony Killeen TD, today (22nd January) announced that a major conference on farming for conservation is to be held next month. Speaking at the offices of the European Commission in Dublin, the Minister said that the conference would have as its special focus the preservation of the unique Burren district of Co. Clare. The conference will be held at the Falls Hotel in Ennistymon from 24-27 February.

Minister Killeen spoke of the ecological dangers to the Burren district. The landscape and flora which can be seen there are the result of thousands of years of farming and human activity where man has lived and worked in close partnership with nature. This has resulted in a unique landscape with a rich flora and fauna and a remarkable archaeological heritage. In recent times, however, modern farming practices have led increasingly to abandonment of the land and this has had adverse consequences for nature conservation and the preservation of archaeological monuments. Increasingly, grazing by livestock is declining as farming practices change, resulting in a growing problem of encroachment by scrub on the landscape. This results in a loss of the biodiversity of plant and animal life, including some of the rare flora for which the area is renowned, and also obscures and damages the many archaeological monuments.

Minister Killeen said he was very glad that the Department is centrally involved a major project to reverse these trends and conserve the landscape of the Burren. Since 2004, the European Commission and the National Parks and Wildlife Service have funded and supported the Burren LIFE Project, which provides scientific research, advice and limited funding to farmers. This promotes environmentally sustainable farming and livestock practices, including scrub clearance and the repair of stone walls which, through the centuries, have played a role in assisting agriculture in the area.

The European Commission provides 75% of the funding for the BurrenLife Project and the National Parks and Wildlife Service 25%. Minister Killeen expressed the Government's great appreciation to the Commission and was particularly anxious also to thank the project partners Teagasc and the Burren branch of the Irish Farmers Association for their strong, generous and consistent support for the project, including, in the case of Teagasc, the secondment of a full-time scientific adviser.

Minister Killeen said that he warmly welcomed the upcoming conference' which he stated *'would be an important milestone for the future of the Burren'*. He noted that *'his Department were committed to the work of the BurrenLIFE Project and he congratulated the NPWS, Teagasc and the IFA on their achievements to date'*. He noted the *'widespread support for the Project and the work of the Project Team'* and he *'wished the Project Team every success in the coming 3-day international conference'*. He concluded by stating that *'the conference would be an important step in developing a model for sustainable agriculture in the Burren - a model which would support conservation farming practices, protect habitats, including Special*

Areas of Conservation designated under the EU Habitats Directive, and ensure that farmers are supported to continue to farm the Burren’.

Heritage Council calls for Urgent Action in the Wake of Report on the Burren

The Heritage Council has called for the urgent introduction of a national landscape management plan following a report that concludes that the Burren is seriously under threat from scrub overgrowth, which is destroying the habitats of the rare flowers and plants.

The report which was carried out in conjunction with the BurrenLIFE project, found that the natural and archaeological heritage in the Burren is far richer than previously understood but that it is under threat from ad hoc changes such as reduced cattle grazing and farming activity which have allowed scrub to grow unchecked.

“Changes are happening in an ad hoc way at a landscape level in the Burren and urgent action needs to be taken to manage these changes as they have an incremental effect which is devastating to the delicate landscape and eco-system in the Burren,” said Michael Starrett, Chief Executive of the Heritage Council.

The Burren which covers over 600 km² is a one of Ireland’s main tourist attractions as well as being one of the country’s most important Heritage assets.

The report found that the growth of hazel and blackthorn scrub is increasing by almost 5% per year. It also found that an aerial survey of just 5km² showed at least a 120% increase in the number of archaeological monuments recorded. It concluded that the Burren is much richer in archaeology than ever previously imagined. The report also found that more consultation was needed with landowners in the Burren.

Cattle have grazed on the Burren for thousands of years and they were a very important element in managing the landscape and allowing the rare flowers and plants to grow there. The cattle have stopped grazing in many areas due to a reduction in farming and scrub is now growing out of control. The scrub is changing the environment so that many delicate plants can no longer live there as their habitat is being destroyed. The scrub is also threatening the world-renowned archaeology there.

“We urgently need to resource a national landscape management programme. It is especially needed for areas such as the Burren, The Tara-Skryne Valley and the Cooley Peninsula and many others,” continued Michael Starrett. *“Ireland lags far behind other European countries which have legislation in place to allow designation of important landscapes and accompany the designation with resources to manage them in a sustainable manner. This approach is vital for our economy, quality of life and environment and we strongly recommend that urgent steps are taken to manage our most important heritage and tourism landscapes”,* he concluded.

Commenting on the report Brendan Dunford from the BurrenLIFE project said, *“The findings of this report are very important and we need to take it very seriously before*

too much irreversible damage is done. Our project is about 'Farming for Conservation of the Burren'. The report highlights the need for an overall strategic-level approach to the management of the Burren's natural and cultural heritage. There are too many ad hoc changes taking place and the entire area needs a well-researched and resourced management plan. The Burren is unique and is a world-renowned landscape which deserves much more management and attention than we are currently giving it. It is also vital for the local economy in the West of Ireland. People need to understand the effect of the changes that are taking place in the Burren and we need to move quickly if we want to limit the damage that is currently taking place there."

More details are available at www.burrenbeo.ie

burrenLife *Farming for Conservation in the Burren*

Brendan Dunford, James Moran

http://www.teagasc.ie/publications/2005/20051208/burren_life.pdf

ConservationEvidence.com

[Grazing Animals Project \(GAP\)](#)