

Sargent Opens Sonairte Farmers' Market

31 March, 2008

Mr Trevor Sargent T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, performed the official opening of the Sonairte Farmers' Market in Laytown, Co. Meath.

The market is operated by Sonairte, an organisation established in the late 1980's by members of the local community to promote environmental awareness and education.

Speaking at the opening event Minister Sargent highlighted the important role farmers' markets can play within communities saying *"experience to date of farmers' markets suggests that they can provide wide-ranging and long-term benefits, both locally and regionally, which can be measured socially, environmentally and economically"*.

The Minister pointed out that well organised markets of a consistently high quality can become a very valuable tourist attraction, bringing more foot flow into towns to the benefit of all retailers and that *"recent research has shown that EUR10 spent at a farmers' market will result in a net income of EUR24 for the community. It has also been estimated that trade for other businesses increases, by up to 30% when a market is run in a town"*.

Farmers' markets provide customers with an alternative shopping experience, with access to fresh in season produce direct from the producer and for the producers they provide a great opportunity for market research and the testing of new products.

Sonairte is an interactive visitor centre promoting ecological awareness and sustainable living

Sonairte was established in the late 1980's by members of the local community and concerned environmentalists. The organisation set out to promote environmental awareness and education by establishing an ecological visitor centre. The original founders, many of whom remain on the present Board of Directors, drew much of their inspiration from the Centre for Alternative Technology in Wales.

The name **Sonairte** is derived from a middle Irish word meaning *"positive strength"*, it is also an acronym which encompasses many of the aims of the centre:

Sustainable Development. What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development was defined in **"Our Common Future"** - the Brundtland report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) - as:

"development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_Common_Future

Sustainable development does not mean a return to a pre-industrial era, but calls for continued economic growth, with the public, business and industry acknowledging and taking responsibility for their impact on society and the environment.

Sonairte aims to illustrate the benefits of sustainable development by demonstrating and providing information and education on ways in which it affects every aspect of our every day lives - from how we get our food, electricity and heating, to how we deal with our waste; from the benefits of nature conservation to the importance of wellbeing.

Organic growing

Farming with Nature

Organic farming is a sustainable production system. It provides the opportunity of an alternative farming system based primarily on balancing inputs and outputs in a 'closed' system. Increased consumer awareness of food safety issues and environmental concerns has contributed to the growth in organic farming over the last few years.

Organic farming requires: the consideration and application of production methods that do not damage the environment; a more respectful use of the countryside; concern for animal welfare and the production of high quality agricultural products.

Organic agriculture is a farming system which relies on crop rotations, the recycling of farm-produced organic materials i.e. crop residues, animal manure, legumes, green manure and off-farm organic wastes and on a variety of non-chemical methods for the control of pests, diseases and weeds. Synthetically compounded fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, growth regulators and livestock feed additives are excluded or severely restricted. The products and methods of genetic engineering are also strictly prohibited.

Nature Conservation

Nature conservation aims to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

Sonairte, on the mouth of the river Nanny, where river, land and sea meet, is surrounded by a rich natural environment. With an extensive woodland and wetland region, and a wide variety of wildlife, any description would fall short of the experience of actually taking a walk around our woodland path. Such is the quality of this walk that it has won several Meath *Pride of Place Awards* including one in 2004.

Each year Sonairte undertakes various projects to enhance and maintain this area of great natural beauty including native tree planting and path maintenance.

Appropriate Technology

Appropriate technology implies technology, not for technology's sake but for the greater goal of sustainable development. Many of today's environmental problems have been caused by a lack of understanding of appropriate technology. Technology is a powerful tool and can enhance the lives of millions of people, but it also has the power to alienate and disenfranchise people. So we must decide, before deploying a certain technology, whether we need it and above all do we understand sufficiently its impacts. Otherwise we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Renewable sources of energy offer sustainable alternatives to our dependency on fossil fuels, a means of reducing harmful greenhouse emissions and opportunities to reduce our reliance on imported fuels.

Renewable energy from sources such as the wind, the sun, wood, waste and water is abundantly available in Ireland. Several renewable energy technologies are now commercially viable and capable of supplying clean, economical heat and power. Many of these technologies can be seen in action in our energy courtyard which is home to two wind turbines, thermal and photovoltaic solar panels, a hydraulic pump and other demonstrations which illustrate how electricity and heat can be generated.

Information and communication technologies are employed widely within the centre. This site and e-mail provide a means to disseminate information quickly and easily to all the volunteers and the public.

Old and new, from the wheelbarrow to advanced graphic design software, technology is used at Sonairte to pursue the aims of the centre.

Intercultural Exchange

Intercultural exchange is an effort on the part of Sonairte to promote understanding between different cultural groups. Working with people from different countries and cultural backgrounds enables the exchange of ideas and experience and generates a climate of respect and tolerance of different ways of approaching life.

There is much to be learned from other countries, for instance, how they approach sustainable development. Being able to draw from these many resources adds strength and resilience to the centre.

Sonairte, with this end in mind, carries out regular projects with Volunteers Services International where groups of young volunteers from all over Europe come and work in the centre.

Reconciliation and inner peace

"Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you might miss it!" - Ferris Bueller.

In today's fast paced life pervaded with every kind of technological solution, it sometimes is easy to forget that we are all biological creatures. It is essential that we take time to relax and unwind in order to keep ourselves healthy and on top form.

Much of consumer society is aimed at our more physical needs, often at the expense of our emotional and spiritual needs. At Sonairte, providing a place where we can reflect on life is an integral part of the purpose of the centre. Taking a walk along the woodland trail, or just sitting and marvelling at the beauty and simplicity of the natural world, offers us an opportunity to slow down and catch our breaths.

It is this very environment that makes people want to work here for free - the rewards being the fresh air, the satisfaction of working towards a common goal and, of course, a good dose of healthy exercise. It is also a place that fosters creativity and allows everyone to input their ideas into worthwhile projects that help sustain the centre.

Trading Fairly

Trade is one of the pillars of our social and economic systems. Exchange of goods is as old as humankind itself. However, of late, the rich countries of the world, using abstract market mechanisms and trade laws, have manipulated the market to serve their own interests at the expense sadly of the developing world.

Unfair trade is a heinous activity that, along with colossal debt repayments, cripples developing countries to a point where they can no longer feed their own people. It must be noted, however, that the causes of this inequity are complex and their solutions even more complex. The solutions are there but it is the dismantling of the shortcomings of the current system that poses a very significant challenge to the world.

The fairtrade system is an effort to address these issues and is strongly endorsed by Sonairte. Products featuring the fairtrade logo guarantee that the farmer involved in the growing of the product has received a fair price. There are many products on the market today that feature the fair trade logo such tea, coffee and chocolate though there are many others.

Education

Education is at the core of Sonairte. The centre presents a working model of the implementation of sustainable development through organic growth, nature conservation, appropriate technology, intercultural exchange, reconciliation and inner peace and trading fairly. Education provides the final link that completes Sonairte.

The "*strength*" that the name refers to lies in the presentation of all these aspects as whole rather than sum of all the parts. Each aspect is inextricably linked to the others. Energy affects trade which affects intercultural exchange. Trade affects organic food production which affects nature conservation. And so on.

Education is present throughout Sonairte through:

- * **Themed open days,**
- * **School Tours Programme,**
- * **Specialist courses,**
- * **Lifelong learning and**
- * **Learning from each other.**

Through all of these methods we promote Sonairte's way of life. The beauty of the centre is that it provides education against a backdrop of the whole system where all the facets of life are linked to each other. We cannot change the part without having knowledge of the whole.

A person can only decide for themselves the way of life that they feel is right for them. By offering practical and realistic advice and demonstrating what's possible, education at Sonairte helps people make an informed decision and empowers them with the know-how and the can-do necessary to make a difference.

<http://sonairte.org/>

Sonairte, which is situated in a farm complex of noteworthy historical interest on the banks of the River Nanny near Laytown (Co. Meath), has developed steadily since it was originally established in terms both of its physical facilities and its standing as an environmental organisation, visitor attraction and educational facility.

The site covers some seven acres and is leased to Sonairte by local farmer Luk Van Doorslaer. Many of the buildings on the site which were in serious disrepair have now been renovated to a high standard and the final part of the re-roofing is underway and will be completed by 2008/9.

In all aspects of renovation care has been taken to stay true to the green philosophy of the centre, particularly in the choice of building material and use of renewable energy and energy conservation where possible. The facilities that have been created have allowed Sonairte to become active in many diverse fields. The centre is run by a staff of local volunteers who bring a wide range of expertise to its management.

<http://www.sonairte.org/>

http://sonairte.org/index.php/School_Tours_Programme

<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>