



Pádraic Fogarty
Campaign Officer
Irish Wildlife Trust
Sigmund Business Centre,
93A Lagan Road,
Glasnevin,
Dublin 11

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The Irish Wildlife Trust (IWT) is a membership-based conservation charity established in 1979. Our aim is to raise awareness of the importance of the natural environment to people and to campaign for better policy measures to protect nature (see www.iwt.ie).

Background

We are currently experiencing twin ecological crises which threaten our way of life. While the climate crisis and its causes are relatively well known, the extinction crisis has received less attention. In October of this year a report from the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London highlighted how 60% of the world's vertebrates (animals with backbones) have disappeared since the 1970s¹. Indeed, scientists are in broad agreement that the Earth is experiencing a 'mass extinction' event, like that which wiped out dinosaurs many millions of years ago. This is driven by habitat loss, pollution and unsustainable use of resources. To address this, world governments – including Ireland – signed up to the Convention on Biological Diversity at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the same meeting which established the International Convention on Climate Change (IPCC) and to end biodiversity loss. Despite this commitment, biodiversity has continued its downward trajectory².

The extinction crisis is not something which is happening somewhere else. Indeed, Ireland has experienced a dramatic transformation of its ecosystems which has had a radical effect on our plant and animal life. This is backed up by state scientific bodies, such as the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the National Biodiversity Data Centre which show:

- 90% of our highest value habitats protected under the EU's Habitats Directive are in 'poor' or 'inadequate' status³.
- Only 0.6% of our once-unique Midland Raised Bog habitats remains intact⁴.
- Ireland has the second lowest forest cover in Europe and only around 1% of our land area consists of native woodland (i.e. predominantly composed of native trees, in contrast the typical figure on mainland Europe is 30%)⁵.

¹ <https://www.zsl.org/global-biodiversity-monitoring/indicators-and-assessments-unit/living-planet-index>

² <https://indicators.biodiversityireland.ie/>

³ <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/National%20Biodiversity%20Action%20Plan%20English.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.npws.ie/peatlands-and-turf-cutting/peatlands-council/national-peatlands-strategy>

⁵ <https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/Woodlands%20booklet.pdf>

- Chronic overfishing of our waters has decimated the populations of once-abundant fish species such as cod, whiting, sole and herring – with knock-on consequences for coastal fishing communities⁶.
- One third of our native bee species face extinction⁷.
- Around a third of all species groups examined in Ireland, including plants, birds, butterflies, freshwater fish, dragonflies and sharks are either threatened with extinction or ‘near threatened’⁸.
- 50% of our rivers and lakes are polluted while obstructions such as dams contribute to once common species like Atlantic salmon now appearing on the endangered species list⁹.
- A number of species are ‘critically endangered’, that is they face a very real risk of disappearing entirely without urgent action – including the curlew, the angel shark, the freshwater pearl mussel and the European eel¹⁰.
- About 120 species have already gone extinct from Ireland since the arrival humans¹¹.

The collapse of ecosystems in Ireland is having direct impacts upon local communities. Healthy ecosystems provide food, clean water and air, amenity and recreational benefits, flood protection, jobs, physical and mental health benefits, as well as materials for building and clothing. As we degrade our environment, so these benefits dwindle. Weakened ecosystems cope poorly with climate change – as was experienced through 2018 as farming communities struggled with weather extremes. Small-scale coastal fishing communities have all but disappeared. Conversely, restoring natural systems brings great opportunity in bringing benefits back to local people and resilience to those who depend upon them.

Nature and Climate Change – Where’s the Connection?

There are two important ways in which better protection for nature can help us in our climate challenge. According to the European Commission “At sea or on land, healthy ecosystems can help mitigate Climate Change impacts”¹². This is because healthy rivers, soil, forests and seas lessen the impacts of extreme weather. The EC also says, “In Europe, the Natura 2000 sites are key in this role, when properly implemented”. This refers to the network of protected sites under the EU’s Birds and Habitats Directives. In Ireland there are currently over 600 such areas covering more than 13% of the land. However, to-date the directives have been poorly implemented, with very few management plans for protected areas and most habitats and species being in poor condition. Indeed, this poor implementation has led to conflict with local people – even leading to the impression that nature protection is a threat to local livelihoods. Indeed broadly speaking, investment in nature has been a low priority with the NPWS receiving about the same amount of public money as greyhound racing. If we are to address the extinction crisis and realise the potential for climate resilience, there is an urgent need to invest adequately in an independent nature authority as well as other conservation initiatives.

The other important role nature can play in climate action is in directly helping to achieve reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. A study by the Nature Conservancy in 2017 found that ‘nature-based solutions’ – such as rewetting bogs, expanding natural forests and better managing farmland so that soil absorbs carbon – can provide up to 37% of the emissions reductions needed to meet global targets under the Paris Climate Agreement. According to the authors “we’re unlikely to see a better carbon capture and storage technology than that which nature provides—we just need to actively give it the best chance to do its job”¹³. A study in

⁶ <https://www.marine.ie/Home/site-area/areas-activity/fisheries-ecosystems/ecosystems-overview>

⁷ <http://www.pollinators.ie/>

⁸ <https://www.npws.ie/publications/red-lists>

⁹ <http://www.epa.ie/irelandsenvironment/water/>

¹⁰ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/science/the-clock-is-ticking-to-save-the-curlew-1.3470968>

¹¹ Fogarty, P. ‘Whittled Away’. 2017. Collins Press.

¹² https://twitter.com/EU_ENV/status/1069550588705325057

¹³ <https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/tackle-climate-change/climate-change-stories/how-nature-can-help-heal-our-planet/>

the UK found a figure of 33% for land use in that country stating: “If reforestation occurred across the whole of the UK, increasing the total forest cover to 18% and if all bogs, grasslands, arable and horticultural lands were managed in the best way possible, then these could account for one third of the required cuts by 2050”¹⁴. No comparable figures are available for Ireland but given the levels of emissions from worked over peatlands and agriculture a similar scale can surely be expected. In Ireland, forestry has been seen as part of the solution to emissions reductions however our model has been based on the expansion of non-native monocultures, which are a driver of biodiversity loss and water pollution while providing few benefits for amenity or recreation. In addition, recent studies have found that mixed forests are better at drawing carbon out of the atmosphere while native woodlands can provide multiple benefits from wildlife habitat to amenity, water purification and flood alleviation¹⁵. Even better protection for the marine environment can help, with authors of a recent study saying “marine reserves protected from fishing and other human exploitation can reduce the damage from acidification, rising sea levels, storm intensification, and other effects of climate change”¹⁶.

In short, restoring nature is likely to be the easiest, cheapest and most effective form of climate action available. The IWT also believes it is likely to be among the most popular.

What actions would we like to see?

Our recommendations can be summarised as follows:

- Invest in an independent nature conservation agency so that it can implement existing nature conservation commitments;
- Develop a plan with Bord na Mona to re-wet and ‘rewild’ the worked-out Midlands bogs;
- Work with Coillte to better manage existing conifer plantations to restore them to native woodlands;
- Reorient the Forestry Programme (currently failing to meet its targets and due for review in 2020) to focus on native woodland planting and ‘continuous cover forestry’ (where timber production is a goal);
- Ensure that the Common Agricultural Policy adequately rewards farmers for farming in a nature-friendly way, so that Irish agriculture can be ‘carbon negative’¹⁷.
- Implement existing laws on marine protection including ending overfishing, creating Marine Protected Areas and achieving good water quality.

Conclusion

The extinction crisis and the climate crisis threaten human societies as we know them. The need for urgent action is clear. However, we hope that the Climate Action Committee can see the opportunity that restoring nature provides. We firmly believe that this is a decisive moment in our relationship with the natural world and that we are likely to be the last generation to have the power to take meaningful measures to save life on Earth. This can be done to the great benefit of Irish communities and so we wish the committee well in seizing this opportunity.

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/cop24-rewilding-is-essential-to-the-uks-commitments-on-climate-change-107541>

¹⁵ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/diverse-forests-capture-more-carbon/?amp>

¹⁶ <https://news.mongabay.com/2017/06/can-marine-reserves-help-counteract-climate-change/>

¹⁷ https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/sep/10/soil-our-best-shot-at-cooling-the-planet-might-be-right-under-our-feet?CMP=share_btn_tw