

The Preservation of the Biodiversity and Ecosystems of Peatlands – Presentation to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. February 6th 2019.

The Irish Wildlife Trust (IWT) was founded in 1979 for the purpose of raising awareness of Ireland's unique wildlife and its importance to people, while also promoting better protection for nature through national policies and legislation. We are a registered charity with a membership base of about 800 people with a headquarters in Dublin along with branches in Waterford, Galway, Laois/Offaly, Kerry and Dublin. Much of the work we do is undertaken on a voluntary basis. We are grateful for the opportunity to address your committee today.

The work of the IWT (and other organisations like us) has become all the more pressing in recent years as the full scale of the planetary ecological crisis becomes apparent. Scientists say that we have perhaps 12 years remaining to avert dangerous climate breakdown, while in October of last year a report from the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society of London showed that 60% of the large animals have disappeared from the Earth in only the last 40 years. Indeed, it is widely believed that we are in the midst of a mass extinction event which is leading to the collapse of ecosystems and which has very uncertain consequences for us all. This has affected Ireland as much as any other country.

Over many thousands of years Ireland's unique geography and climate has produced peatland and bog landscapes which are of global significance. In historic times they were home to a diversity of habitats and wildlife including vast woodlands and wetlands with teeming birdlife and specialised plants. These landscapes were also inhabited by people – there is evidence that turf was harvested for fuel going back many hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The IWT accepts that turf cutting for domestic use has a long cultural heritage and that those people have well-established turbarry rights which should be respected. However, we must also acknowledge that major changes have occurred in more recent decades that have had calamitous consequences for our peatlands. It is no exaggeration to say that the raised bogs of the Midlands are practically extinct – according to the NPWS less than 1% of the original area remains 'active' (i.e. capable of growing peat) while no raised bog has survived intact.

The vast blanket bogs of the West and upland areas have fared little better – only 28% are deemed to be 'worthy of conservation'. The remaining 72% have been drained for agriculture, turf extraction or are buried underneath a carpet of plantation conifers. Even those blanket bogs within so-called 'protected areas' (Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas etc.) have been subjected to over-grazing by sheep, uncontrolled fires and unregulated turf-cutting, activities which are leading to their deterioration. Of 11 habitats on peat which are listed for special protection under the EU's habitats directive, nine are in 'bad' condition, one is 'inadequate' and only one is 'good' according to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

With habitat degradation comes extinction, and according to BirdWatch Ireland 10 birds which are characteristic of peatlands are on their 'red list', meaning they have suffered catastrophic declines in population or breeding range, namely the Golden Eagle, Red Grouse, Golden Plover, Dunlin, Curlew, Twite, Whinchat, Nightjar, Meadow Pipit and Ring Ouzel. A number of other birds, like the Skylark,

the Hen Harrier and the Short-eared Owl are on their 'amber list'. The Hen Harrier is currently threatened with the prospect of more planting of conifer monocultures which will destroy its habitats. Wind turbines are being inappropriately erected on peatlands where their contribution to climate goals is likely to be less than the greenhouse gases being released by the degrading peat, while at the same time harming water quality and aquatic life downstream.

We have to acknowledge that conservation measures over the past 30 years, limited in extent and late in coming as they were, have been a colossal failure. This has left us with serious challenges in meeting legally binding commitments on climate change, water quality and nature preservation. But more important than that, it is a tragic loss of heritage that today we cannot show our children what a healthy bog looks like. It is a legacy that few will thank us for.

The National Peatlands Strategy was published in 2015 and set out to comprehensively map a path towards the wise management of all our peatland areas. It set out a path towards meeting conservation aims as well as the many other competing interests. In our view, it failed to deal in a meaningful way with existing forestry plantations or upland farming however the IWT was broadly supportive of the Strategy. Nevertheless, its implementation to-date has been mostly disappointing. While authorities were quick to de-designate 46 Natural Heritage Areas (NHA, areas identified in the 1970s as being nationally unique for their biodiversity value), we have yet to see even the list of proposed new NHAs which were supposed to replace them. We have seen no progress towards setting conservation objectives for blanket bogs and promised management plans have not materialised. The NPWS committed to finding a way of accommodating turf-cutters while ensuring conservation objectives in these areas could be met, but we are no wiser in 2019 as to how this can be achieved. Meanwhile turf-cutting and habitat loss continues.

The strategy committed to the proper regulation of turf-cutting on all non-designated areas (both large-scale and small-scale) but little progress has been made in this regard. In 2018 Friends of the Irish Environment revealed how wet peat was being mined on a 200 hectare site in Co. Westmeath with no planning permission from the Local Authority or licence from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) despite both bodies being aware of activities there since 2010. This is despite a ruling from the European Court of Justice in 1999 against Ireland for not applying environmental impact legislation to peat extraction. In 2013 and 2017 the IWT visited Glenveagh National Park in Donegal where we found evidence of the use of 'sausage machines' – something that was supposed to have been prohibited. Not only were the areas concerned within one of our national parks, but they were also within designated SACs and SPAs. In addition to the use of sausage machines there was also extensive dumping, including builders' rubble, dead animals and asbestos. What hope for nature if we can't even protect these precious places? Clearly, we need a radical change in our relationship with the natural world.

The IWT welcomes the publication last year of the National Raised Bog SAC Management Plan and we are grateful to the NPWS and the other stakeholders for the work that went into this. Hopefully it will secure the future of these special places. We also commend the restoration efforts being undertaken at 12 of our raised bog SACs by the Living Bog Project (funded by the EU and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht). Also, the CANN project, which is a €9.4 million cross-border environment project which aims to improve the condition of blanket bog habitats and to support priority species found at 25 EU designated SACs across Northern Ireland, the Border

Region and Western Scotland. We are encouraged by European Innovation Partnerships, being run by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, one of which is working with scientists and farmers in upland areas with the aim to restore the Hen Harrier population in Special Protection Areas. The community of Abbeyleix in Co. Laois has undertaken a remarkable project to rescue and restore their local bog, something which has been championed by President Higgins. We would also like to commend the work of the Bord na Mona ecology team which has been working on the restoration of 15,000 hectares of industrial cut-away bog. The Lough Boora Parklands in Co. Offaly show that large-scale ecological restoration is not only technically feasible but can also be popular with local communities while stimulating small-scale sustainable enterprises. Despite this, many communities remain in the dark as to what the future of their local area holds. The IWT would like to see the ecological restoration of *all* of Bord na Mona's 80,000 hectare landholding but we are keen also that local communities will be central to the decision-making process. We have been told by local community groups that plans for a Shannon Wildness Park have been stymied by lack of engagement from Bord na Mona and the drive for wind farms which are unwanted by local communities.

Although the current state of our peatlands is not good, there remains an incredible opportunity were the right policies to be put in place. Fixing these important ecosystems can help us to clean our water, lock up carbon, regulate flooding, stimulate local economies and restore wildlife populations. The IWT would like to see new solutions for upland farmers so they can make a good living while protecting nature. We would like to see Coillte convert their plantations to native woodlands or (where appropriate) restore blanket bog habitats. We would like to see Bord na Mona re-purposed so that the Midlands could be home to one of Europe's largest landscape and nature restoration projects. We urgently need for the Peatlands Strategy to be energetically implemented. The National Parks and Wildlife Service should be leading an education drive, to show people the wonders of our peatland wildlife. To-date unfortunately we have not seen the level of vision or enthusiasm required to meet these goals.

A cloud of neglect and apathy has smothered the natural world. It is a terrible legacy that we are leaving to the next generation. But it doesn't have to be this way – legislators like yourselves have the power to take action and give our children a brighter future.