

# Heritage & Habitat

## New approaches to nature



**PADDY WOODWORTH**

As the climate crisis deepens, a European conference on ecological restoration heard that we need to greatly increase conservation investment and do a lot more to restore and manage the continent's ecosystems

**W**E DID NOT invent nature. Nature invented us," Jurgen Tack of Belgium's Research Institute for Nature and Forest told a large gathering of conservationists in Ghent, Belgium, this month.

It was clear from many of the conference sessions and field trips, however, that we are currently reinventing nature in radical ways, with results that are increasingly difficult to predict. Tack wanted to remind us that nature is our parent, since it provides us with the essentials of life, but now it is our child as well.

This has been true for centuries in Europe, where human activity has modified most landscapes many times, and where real wilderness, if it exists at all, is extremely rare. Whether we like it or not, we are directly responsible for the survival (or otherwise) of many species and indeed entire ecosystems (see panel). Now, climate change is extending human impacts to places we have never even set foot upon. Despite impressive advances in EU environmental legislation in recent years, the conference heard many arguments that Europe needs to do a lot more to restore and manage its ecosystems as the climate crisis deepens.

The Sixth European Conference on Ecological Restoration focused on the state of the EU's Natura 2000 protected sites, set up under the EU Habitats Directive. Dr Richard Hobbs, one of the world's leading restoration ecologists, pointed out that establishing hundreds of such sites across 27 countries, with different ecosystems and, just as significantly, very different understandings of "nature", remains a remarkable achievement by international standards.

Nevertheless, session after session heard similar stories of how realities on the ground fall far short of ambitious targets on paper.

Many sites, designated for the protection of a single threatened species, have never had a full ecological survey, so the way they function is poorly understood. Management plans have still not been drawn up for a large number of sites. Where these plans do exist they are sometimes not implemented. It is hardly surprising, then, that 50 per cent of species protected under the Habitats Directive are still under serious threat.

**CONNECTIVITY IS ANOTHER** issue. Conservation obviously requires complex joined-up thinking, as it involves many scientific disciplines combined with socio-economic sensitivity. But it also needs joined-up sites if habitats are to flourish as dynamic elements within overall ecosystems.

"Natura 2000 is meant to be a network, but very few sites are actually connected to others in terms of their ecology," Ladislav Miko told the meeting. He heads up one of the EU environment directorates in Brussels, and was refreshingly open to new developments. "We need to create a functional green infrastructure in Europe," he said.

If animals and plants cannot migrate from one site to another, we may be condemning them to a slow decline. This was always true, and the argument for "green corridors" between sites is not new. But climate change is upping the pressure on many sites in ways we



**Above: Schotse Hooglander (a highland cow) in de Westhoek in Flanders, which is one of those sites that needs, paradoxically, constant human intervention if it is to remain 'natural'.** Photograph: Yves Adams/Vildaphoto

could not have predicted a few years ago, and this crisis is accelerating, as many speakers indicated in disturbing terms.

Seabird chicks are already starving to death in large numbers in several sites, because fish species that used to be their food source have already moved elsewhere. Their parents have to make longer and longer journeys in search of prey, and cannot feed the chicks frequently enough.

There were many discussions at the conference about what we should do in such circumstances. Should we de-designate sites when protected species move on elsewhere – assuming they can? Should we try to second-guess where they will turn up next? Should we then designate as protected these new sites, where no endangered species yet exist? Should we manipulate the ecosystems in such sites to help them adapt more easily to climate change? Should we actually create up animals and plants and move them ourselves to more suitable sites, where no green corridors can be provided? Such scenarios are a new kind of nightmare for conservationists.

And both de-designation and new designations of protected areas are likely to spark further public controversies. Natura 2000 sites already attract much opposition – think of the bitter rows over sites designated for the protection of the hen harrier over the last few years in Ireland. Almost all of the "frequently asked questions" on the Natura section of the National Parks and Wildlife Service website, which designates Natura 2000 sites in Ireland, is dedicated to reassuring farmers about their property rights under the scheme, rather than stressing the benefits of conservation to the public at large.

Despite the many difficulties discussed, and the daunting prospect of rapid climate change, the tone of the conference was remarkably upbeat.

It was organised by the Society for Ecological Restoration International (SERI), a branch of conservation that explores ways to reverse ecosystem damage, or at least to assist degraded systems to recover many of their functions and typical species.

The fact that restoration is even possible surprises many people, as they are accustomed to hearing doom and gloom from environmentalists. In fact, there are now many instances around the world where ecosystem health has improved due to restoration, but they makes few headlines.

"We have painted Armageddons and disheartened the crowds," Sebastian Winkler, an EU environmental policy adviser, told the conference. "Protection and conservation have a

negative ring to them. Restoration is much more positive."

Dr Jim Harris, chair of the SERI science committee, made a challenging contribution, arguing that climate change will force restorationists and policy-makers alike to rethink strategies such as Natura 2000. The current policy focuses on protecting individual species or habitats threatened with extinction or disappearance.

Harris argued that the coming climate crisis demands that we think much bigger, and implement an "Ecosystems Directive" rather than the current Habitats Directive. This would involve mapping the ecosystems of Europe to assess the "natural capital" and "ecosystem services" they provide us with. These include fisheries, forest products, flood prevention, clean water, fresh air, fertile soil, biodiversity and so on. Conservation strategy should then seek to restore degraded systems to their full productive capacity, taking into account the impact of changing weather patterns.

He is well aware that this proposal is controversial, not least because some property owners will find it very threatening. "But property has duties as well as rights," he insisted, arguing that a few individuals cannot block the right of the broad European community to a healthy environment.

His proposal also deeply worries some ecologists, who fear that a shift away from the protection of species to a focus on ecosystem services to human beings fatally undermines the case for conservation, and will lead to huge bio-

diversity losses.

Harris told *The Irish Times* that he is talking about "valuation" and not monetisation, and that biodiversity is itself a most valuable ecosystem service. Whether the planners will buy that argument is, of course, another matter.

**THE MOST UPBEAT** analysis at the meeting came from Dr Rudolf de Groot, a leading contributor to the UN's Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. He outlined a number of convincing studies that show that investing in ecosystems brings, in many cases, much bigger financial returns than converting a natural or semi-natural system into an artificial one.

While acknowledging that nature is in some ways "priceless", he offered conservationists strong economic arguments for greatly increased conservation investment.

Strategies such as those proposed by Harris and de Groot demand that we change our mindsets, and rethink the relationship between the human economy and the natural world. They may be hard to grasp at first, but as we exhaust our natural resources and face into rapid climate change, hard thinking is sorely needed.

Outside the entrance to the conference building, someone had written in chalk a quote from Charles Darwin: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change." Whether *Homo sapiens* is a sufficiently adaptable species for the times that are in it remains to be seen.

### LET'S INTERFERE HOW HUMANS CAN HELP NATURE

Many Natura 2000 sites need, paradoxically, constant human intervention if they are to remain "natural". We have altered landscapes so much through urbanisation and intensive farming that protected sites often need intensive management in order to survive exterior pressures.

This was illustrated on a visit to the Western Dunes (de Westhoek) nature reserve, on the Belgian-French border. "We have to interfere constantly in order to preserve this place," a ranger said.

This is the first reserve established in Flanders, in 1957, and it is one of the last areas of mobile dunes on the Belgian coast. Its 340

hectares contain 40 per cent of the wild plant species in the country, as well as the natterjack toad, a rare species also found in parts of Kerry, and birds such as the Kentish plover and hen harrier.

The survival of many of these plants and animals depends on the dune system retaining its natural dynamics, where wind, waves and sand interact to build dunes on the coast and then steadily shift them inland. Species protection without ecosystem protection is a self-defeating exercise.

The dunes used to move inland relentlessly, overwhelming human settlements and, on one occasion, burying a monastic settlement.

For centuries, however, the situation has reversed, and it is we who now limit the dunes, through housing developments, road building and concrete barriers along the coast.

Today only the middle section of the dunes is truly mobile, and even so it requires much "interference" in order to maintain its rich flora, including such activities as mowing, grazing, and occasional heavy engineering. And these dunes too must stabilise fairly soon, as there is nowhere left for them to move to. Can we continue to mimic nature through management at that stage, and save the system's flora and fauna? No one really knows.

## HORIZONS

SYLVIA THOMPSON

### Native woodlands under threat

The key role of native woodlands – to protect biodiversity – is under threat due to the stalling of funding for the Native Woodland Scheme, according to Dr Declan Little, project manager of Woodlands of Ireland. "When the scheme was launched in 2001, we were told native woodlands were among Ireland's most valuable habitats, forming an important part of heritage, culture and landscape," says Dr Little. "Yet, the most recently published *Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland* indicates that the condition of and future prospects of most native woodlands in Ireland is bad." According to Dr Little, lack of funding for maintaining and expanding native woodlands to public- and private-sector landowners will compromise work already done and will prevent Ireland from meeting EU biodiversity targets. Not to mention loss of fuel for sustainable energy units in homes across Ireland.

### Politicians face your questions

As Ireland's greenhouse gases continue to rise, the big question is whether we should put a price on carbon in the forthcoming budget. Or should a system of "cap and share", in which everyone has a tradable carbon allocation, be considered? These questions and more will be put to the finance spokespeople of the main political parties at an event on Tuesday at 6pm in Cultivare, East Essex Street, Dublin. The panel, which will be chaired by *Irish Times* political reporter Harry McGee, will include Fine Gael TD Richard Bruton, Labour Party TD Joan Burton, Green Party Senator Dan Boyle and Fianna Fáil TD Sean Fleming. It has been organised by Dublin Friends of the Earth. Admission is by donation but advance booking and questions should be e-mailed to Dublin@foe.ie.

### Sustaining the North

Making sustainable tourism a foundation of the rural economy is the theme of a two-day event in Northern Ireland on October 23rd and 24th. Organised by the international European Federation, the event consists of field trips to the Antrim Coast and Glens and Mourne Mountains on the first day, followed by a seminar at the Europa Hotel in Belfast. Topics for discussion include how local businesses can work together to develop sustainable tourism and how initiatives such as the European Federation Charter for Sustainable Tourism and Green Business accreditation schemes can help. Speakers include Patrizia Rossi, director of sustainable tourism enterprises in the Italian Alps. [www.europarc-consulting.org](http://www.europarc-consulting.org).

### Eco-Unesco's 10th birthday

An exhibition celebrating 10 years of Eco-Unesco continues until Wednesday at Enfo, St Andrew Street, Dublin. The exhibition highlights the achievements of young people's work to conserve, protect and enhance Ireland's environment since the Young Environmentalist Awards were launched in September 1999. Teachers and project leaders can avail of free training sessions to help design and implement projects for their school or youth group. These sessions will be held in Dublin, Galway, Cork, Athlone, and Belfast over the next few weeks. Booking essential on 01-6625491. [www.ecounesco.ie](http://www.ecounesco.ie).

## ECOWEB

[www.michaelkelly.ie](http://www.michaelkelly.ie)  
Check out this witty site by author and journalist Michael Kelly, who gave up life in the fast lane to grow vegetables, keep hens and pigs and encourage others to do so. Kelly is also a founding member of the Waterford Food Producers' Network, which will have its first meeting on Wednesday at 6.30pm in Waterford City Library.

## EYE ON NATURE

On a recent visit to the Great Blasket, I spotted two fine, healthy-looking hares, despite the Stationery Office publication saying there are no hares on the island.  
Harry Conway, Blackrock, Co Dublin

I found what I think is a fossilised shark tooth, three-centimetre long on Sandymount beach (photo provided).  
Eoin Mac Ionmhain

It looks like a fossilised shark's tooth. Head for the Natural History Museum.

How do birds know that bread on the ground is bread rather than something else?  
Kathleen Speight (7), Braade, Co Fermanagh

Birds have very sharp vision and learn from experience as well.

My parents saw an animal in their Limerick garden gathering seeds from a withering sunflower. US visitors said it was a chipmunk.  
Eoin Curtin, Limerick

It must have been a red squirrel. Chipmunks, which belong to the squirrel family, are not found in Ireland.

While walking in Currane, Achill we came across a caterpillar about 75mm-100mm long and as thick as my little finger. It was grey/black, had four eyes on one end and a horn on the other.  
Padraic Mc Hugh, 5 Davis Place, Dublin 8  
It was the caterpillar of the elephant hawkmoth, which is plentiful this year.

Michael Viney welcomes observations at Thallabawn, Carrowiskey PD, Westport, Co Mayo; e-mail: [viney@anu.ie](mailto:viney@anu.ie). Include a postal address.

## The day we failed to push the boat out



**MICHAEL VINEY**

### ANOTHER LIFE

**O**NE FINE SUMMER Sunday afternoon 30 years ago, in perhaps the least-well-considered phase of the Viney's sorties into self-sufficiency, our brand new curragh was carried down to the sea for the first time. Mine was the third pair of shoulders beneath the shiny, 18-foot carapace, and I have never known such crushing, insupportable weight: at any moment, my spine was going to fold or my legs be driven down into the sand. In those 20 or 30 fraught paces to the waves, the original notion that Ethna and I could launch a curragh in this manner by ourselves was revealed as thoroughly mad.

The first two sets of shoulders, needless to say, were those of burly and amiable neighbours, and Sunday afternoon was their only time for indulging in such optional effort. All other fine days were spoken for by the serious priorities of silage, potatoes or the bog, and certainly not to be gambled on a share of a hypothetical catch from our equally untried trammel net.

After a couple of hauls of seaweed and crabs, and the steady failure of Sunday to coin-



cide with fine weather and the right sort of tide, the curragh was lifted on the prongs of a tractor and deposited above a sandy notch in the rocks further along the shore. In Plan B, the pair of us would manage the curragh the right way up, on rollers. An ancient winch was obtained from the Dublin docks and cemented into place. It had been geared, as we then discovered, to haul a very much bigger boat – perhaps the *Titanic* – very slowly indeed.

I think I'll stop there. Enough to say that the project was put on hold, so to speak, while I learned more about growing food rather than catching it. For two or three autumns I hiked

along the shore with a can of liquid tar to give the canvas hull a fresh coat, which at least paid off when the curragh was sold into more capable hands. The winch, too, disappeared mysteriously one winter, being made of highly saleable bronze.

The extent of my original ignorance, fortunately never punished by the sea, has been revived by browsing a monumental book just published by the Collins Press of Cork. *Traditional Boats of Ireland: History, Folklore and Construction*, edited by Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh, gives 657 pages and a wealth of illustration to the infinite variety of the inshore

craft of this island. At €60 hardback, the research and production needed support by half a dozen public agencies and the Heritage Council.

In a revelation of boat design matched to purpose and environment, its 60 distinct boat types range from big clinker-built wherries and carvel-built trawlers to cutters, hookers, seine boats, skiffs, smacks and yawls. Curraghs, above all, were as organic as a boat could get, built originally of local hides and timber and still shaped to fit the local coastal waters, with their distinctive winds and waves. Local craftsmen, too, have put an individual

stamp on the contours of their boats, which I suppose is some excuse for the eccentricity of Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh in insisting that curragh is spelled in the English text with one "r" throughout the book, pleading historical accuracy and better pronunciation.

Photographs of curraghs being carried by two men go some way to explaining our original plan. What we hadn't appreciated (apart from the pertinent matter of our citified muscle-power) was that, while curraghs had still been spoken of as "canoes", design had moved on considerably since the (relatively) lightweight boat of open latticework, propelled by oars. Even more to our purpose, I suspect, might have been the stubby, one-man paddling curragh perfected in Donegal, but that needs deep and sheltered inlets.

In west Mayo, the curragh was adapted to the Seagull outboard engine as early as 1946, led by Inishturk, the island in our kitchen window. The "canoe" built by the O'Tooles, the island's senior craftsmen, and duly delivered to our gate was thus the standard, robust, Inishturk model, with deep, heavy transom (for the engine) and steeply angled bow. It was closely-ribbed with oak and its hull was fully planked beneath the tarred canvas, to take the wear and tear of lobster fishing.

Today, it would probably be covered in fibreglass, which needs fewer ribs, lighter planking and no annual coat of tar.

A century ago, there were some 300 curraghs in use in Mayo. Today, writes Mac Cárthaigh, there are perhaps 100 working curraghs in the county (the one in my painting, but-tressed with rocks against winter storms, has long vanished from the dunes). The curragh is still the most convenient craft for a coast with so few slipways or piers – but only, perhaps, for men with a bit of Atlas in their genes.