

**Heritage Office, Monaghan County Council  
Wise Use of Wetlands Conference  
Co. Monaghan, Ireland.**

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In 2008 World Wetlands Day was celebrated in Monaghan, Ireland with a major conference called “Wise Use of Wetlands” held at the new Ballybay Wetlands Centre. The conference was organised by Monaghan County Council Heritage Office and jointly funded by the Heritage Council. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Mr. John Gormley gave the opening address, and also launched the County Monaghan Fen Survey report at the event.

Between 2000 and 2006 there was a reduction by 10% of wetland habitat in County Monaghan. This conservative estimate was one of the findings of the Heritage Council funded Wetland Survey conducted in the county in 2006.

Although well known for its hills and lakes, Monaghan’s wetland biodiversity has been the poor relation, rarely studied, highlighted or celebrated. Between the steep sided drumlins little wetlands nestle in the hollows. Many of these were once raised bogs, easily accessible due to their relatively small size and were cutover in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, they are now reverting to secondary fen and transition mire. Others are small marshes and swamps, some with birch woodland and scrub or with alder scrub. The smaller wetlands are surrounded on four sides with drumlins and are usually found at the juncture between three of four townlands, having originally been discounted from early map delineation. Larger sites follow valleys parallel to ridges and are often groundwater fed.

Drainage schemes of the 1970s in the Finn-Lackey catchment, part of the Erne system, has resulted in the loss of many sites in the west of the county. Water quality and eutrophication threatens the diversity of many sites in the entire county today. The main immediate threat however is related to development and construction with far too many wetland sites being targeted as places to infill with construction and demolition waste, as well as general rubbish. During the 2007 Fen Survey in the county, it was noted that 20 of the 42 sites surveyed were being damaged by infilling. Some illegal sites even have signs on them seeking “clean fill”.

Infilling wetlands is a complex problem in a county with a myriad of small vulnerable wetlands, most close to local roads, easily accessible, but hard to monitor due to the topography obscuring long range views. Interventions and responses to wetland damage and degradation in Monaghan need to be multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary. Enforcement of the various legislation dealing with littering, waste management and permitting and planning is crucial but it needs bolstering at various levels, including decision making and raising awareness.

The Heritage Office of Monaghan County Council is working to tackle the issue from many angles in order to address the causes as well as the disease. This year, World Wetlands Day was celebrated in Monaghan with a major conference called “Wise Use of Wetlands” held at the new Ballybay Wetlands Centre. The conference was organised by Monaghan County Council Heritage Office and jointly funded by the Heritage Council.

World Wetlands Day, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February, marks the signing of the International Convention on Wetlands, known as the Ramsar Convention. As well as urging the designation of sites as Ramsar Sites to protect internationally important numbers of wildfowl and other wetland birds, the Convention promotes the concept of wise use. ***The wise use of wetlands is the maintenance of their ecological character, achieved through implementation of ecosystem approaches, within the context of sustainable development.***

The concept has developed into a useful tool, with guidance on interventions in the wise use of wetlands handbook series, including one on communications, education and public awareness. The vision of this awareness programme is “People acting for the wise use of wetlands”. In order to achieve conservation of wetlands in Monaghan, and other counties, this is clearly the approach that is needed. We need to promote wetlands so that the population becomes advocates for their conservation and wise use; their wise use needs to be mainstreamed in policies, plans and decisions throughout society.

The “Wise Use of Wetlands” conference programme for the day was designed to highlight the functions and benefits of wetlands and to link these to the well-being of the population in Monaghan. The Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley gave the opening address, and also launched the Monaghan Fen Survey report.

The Minister was unequivocal “The theme of today’s conference focuses on the wise use of wetlands and I think it’s fair to say that this is not an area where our record is exemplary. Wetlands provide us with important environmental services such as flood mitigation, water supply and pollution control. Our peatlands also act as carbon sinks, an important service in the battle against increased CO2 emissions. These services are not easily replicated and it behoves us all to take the necessary steps to use our wetlands, and indeed our natural environment wisely.”

The first session of the day “Wonderful Wetlands” looked at the results of the 2006 wetland survey with Simon Barron from BEC Consultants. In addition to outlining the main wetland habitat types in the county, Simon reinforced the message of piecemeal loss due to infilling and planning permissions, and infrastructural development. Dr. Catherine O’Connell from the Irish Peatland Conservation Council brought the audience through a lively narrated and visually stimulating journey through wetland biodiversity.

The second session looked at Wetland Functions, and commenced with a presentation from Rory Callan, of the Environment Agency in the UK on wetlands and their role in flood protection. Rory highlighted the new Environment Agency report “A 50 year future for wetlands: A future for England’s wetlands and their biodiversity”. He

looked at the 2007 Summer floods and lessons learnt and a new EA initiative called “Making space for water”. The 2007 floods caused 48,000 homes to be damaged, were linked to 13 deaths, and five counties and four cities were brought to a standstill. The EA has determined that flood risk is here to stay, and it requires management and planning. The Pitt Report “Learning Lessons from the 2007 Floods” recommends the creation of washlands and wetlands. “Wetlands if properly designed provide increased capacity at time of peak floods and help protect urban areas”

The EA presentation highlighted the Alkborough Flats project which has created 370 hectares of new wetland and has provided storage for extreme events as well as intertidal habitat. The scheme cost £10.2m but the wetland is valued is at £11.34m. This economic analysis is similar to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment finding that in Canada areas of intact freshwater marsh have a total economic value of about \$5,800 per hectare compared to about \$2,400 when drained marshes are used for agriculture.

A new initiative to prevent Kidderminster from flooding uses a channel diverting floodwaters from the River Stour into the local Marshes. During extreme flood events the marshes can hold 700,000m<sup>3</sup> of water and protect 180 properties for flooding.

Bernie O’Flaherty from the Environment Section, Monaghan County Council presented a talk on water quality and wetlands. She highlighted the role wetlands play in maintaining and improving water quality through biogeochemical processes – uptake of nutrients by plants, sorption to sediments, deposition of detritus and chemical precipitation and also structurally by slowing down the movement of water thereby causing sediment deposition which reduces downstream siltation of rivers, lakes and streams.

James Orr, Northern Ireland Director of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust looked at ecological planning and wise use. In highlighting the value of wetlands James put it another way:

- wetlands store water
- wetlands are cleaners
- wetlands are calmers
- wetlands are producers
- wetlands are homes

He posed the question “Does Ireland have a ‘strategy’ which ensures delivery of the multi-functional benefits (or ecosystem services) derived from wetlands?”

Session three “Fantastic Fens”, focused on the 2007 Fen Survey which was a joint project led by the Monaghan County Council Heritage Office, with the National Parks and Wildlife, Heritage Council and Environment Protection Agency. Dr. Peter Foss and Patrick Crushell, authors of the report delivered their findings and Dr. Colman O’Criodain from the National Parks and Wildlife talked about conservation of fens. Colman said that the prospects for fen conservation remain bad unless further action is taken. He recommended a national fen survey; designation of further high quality fen sites as statutory NHAs and better law enforcement. The fen survey of Co. Monaghan was undertaken as a pilot exercise to test the feasibility of a national survey and has been regarded as a success. The survey found that of the 42 sites surveyed (total 1,900 ha in extent) and believed to contain fen, 25 sites were found to contain fen communities. On 11 sites the survey found that the fen habitats believed

to be present differed from those actually recorded. Transition Mire 7140 (PF3) is the most frequently occurring fen habitat type in Monaghan. Four main fen types were recognised in Monaghan, namely Poor fen, Transition Mire, Cladium fen and Alkaline fen.

The fourth session of the day looked at conservation issues and policies. Shirley Clerkin, Heritage Officer, Monaghan County Council spoke about legislation and policy and highlighted the values of wetlands, and linked this to decision making. When determining the “total economic value” of wetlands, the full range of characteristics of an integrated system must be included. Wetlands provide various types of ecosystem services including

- “provisioning” – food, water, fibre, genetic materials;
- “regulating” climate, water or hydrological flow, water purification and waste treatment, erosion regulation, natural hazard regulation, pollination.
- “cultural” – spiritual and inspirational, recreational, aesthetic, educational;
- “supporting” – soil formation, nutrient cycling

A range of new methods are available and are being increasingly used to value wetlands. This allows a community and decision makers to evaluate the full economic costs and benefits of any proposed changes to a wetlands.

Marcus Malley, from the Conservation Service of Craigavon Borough Council looked at wetland conservation and the benefits to Craigavon Borough Council. He brought us through their conservation strategy and biodiversity action plans. The biggest surprise was to discover that the Oxford Island Discovery Centre was once a pig farm.

Over 100 people attended the Wise Use of Wetlands Conference, and it is envisaged that more such events will be held in the future to raise awareness of the issues. A wise use of wetlands policy is being developed for the Monaghan, through the Monaghan Heritage Forum and Strategic Policy Committees. No national policy exists which reflects the full wetland system, its functions, values and benefits. Such a national policy would give a local policy an easier peg to hang from, but its absence should not be a deterrent to local action.

Another initiative has been the development of a publication series “Monaghan’s Wonderful Wetlands”, funded by Monaghan County Council and the Heritage Council. This includes a series of three posters highlighting plants, habitats and wildlife using actual photographs taken in the county in order to highlight the uniqueness of place which can be so elusive but which creates a pathway for advocacy for the environment. A 12 page booklet called “Wetlands not Wastelands” has also been produced looking at the functions of wetlands (What wetlands do for us), wetland habitats and a “What you can do for wetlands” section. A leaflet has been produced with the Environment Section on wetlands and their wise use, looking at waste permitting and construction and demolition waste.

To sum up, what better than a few lines from Gerard Manley Hopkins “Inversnaid”?

*What would the world be, once bereft  
Of wet and of wilderness? Let them be left,*

*O let them be left, wilderness and wet;  
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.*