



Welcome message

Dear readers,

Welcome to the first issue of the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature newsletter!

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is a new and exciting project primarily aimed at conservation and restoration of blanket bog habitat in northwest Ireland. Our annual newsletter provides updates about project progress, outcomes, news, events and networking opportunities. You will also find news by LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature partners, other related projects and community networks in the region.

We hope you will find the content interesting and useful. You can continue to keep up-to-date with our work by regularly visiting our website, subscribing to our newsletter, following our social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube or contacting us directly.

Gary Goggins, on behalf of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature



About LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is an innovative and ambitious project aimed at conservation and management of Ireland’s Natura 2000 network of blanket bog habitats. Funded under the EU LIFE programme for nine years (2021-2029), LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature works with farmers, local communities, state agencies and others across a broad range of actions spanning sectors including farming, forestry, tourism, community development, education and research.

You can find out more about LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature by visiting our website at www.wildatlanticnature.ie



Who we are

Coordinated by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH), the project involves nine associated partners including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), RTÉ, Coillte, Fáilte Ireland, The Heritage Council, Bord na Móna, Teagasc, Northern & Western Regional Assembly, and Universidade de Santiago de Compostela.



Project news

Blanket bog ecology: An introduction *by John Derwin, Project Ecologist*



There are two types of bog in Ireland; raised bogs, which occur in the midlands, and blanket bogs, which are found on mountains and along the west coast of Ireland (where it is known as Atlantic Blanket Bog). Blanket bog depends on high rainfall and forms in areas with over 1,200mm of rain per year. With these high rainfall levels, waterlogged conditions develop, which allow peat formation to occur over thousands of years, creating a unique landscape along the west coast of Ireland.

Blanket bogs support a wide variety of specialised vegetation including heathers, bog cottons and bog mosses called sphagnum. It is these sphagnum mosses that retain water and create the waterlogged conditions that allow peat to develop. Blanket bogs are low in nutrients and some plants have evolved to survive by trapping and eating insects for food. Carnivorous bog plants include sundews, butterworts (*pictured right*) and bladderworts. As well as lots of midges, bogs are home to a range of species including dragonfly, butterflies (including the rare Marsh Fritillary), frogs, foxes, badger and the Irish hare. Numerous birds such as skylark, snipe, red grouse, curlew, golden plover, merlin, hen harrier and eagles are also found in blanket bog habitat.

As well as supporting biodiversity with many specialised plants and animals, blanket bogs are important for water quality and climate regulation. Because intact bogs retain water, blanket bogs on mountains reduce flash flooding further downstream. When blanket bogs are damaged water is released more quickly, which can cause flooding, erosion and landslides.

As peat consists of dead plant material, mainly moss and sedges, blanket bogs have accumulated huge amounts of carbon over thousands of years. Intact blanket bogs are carbon stores, however with damaging activities such as draining, burning and turf extraction, carbon is released to the atmosphere. The more peat that can be locked away in wet blanket bogs, the less impact there will be on the climate.

Blanket bogs also hold important historical records of past climates (which can be identified by studying pollen preserved in peat cores), ancient human activities and artefacts such as bog butter and ‘bog bodies’. They are very sensitive habitats and can be damaged by drainage, burning, over- or undergrazing and by invasive species such as rhododendron. Over the next 9 years, LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature will work with farmers and local communities in the northwest of Ireland to design and implement suitable conservation and restoration measures for blanket bogs.



Photos (clockwise from top-right): Butterwort in flower, sphagnum moss, bell heather, hillock in wet blanket bog

Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS update *by Vicki McArthur, RBPS Coordinator*



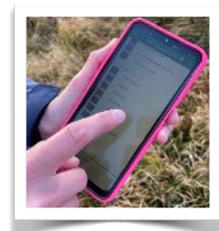
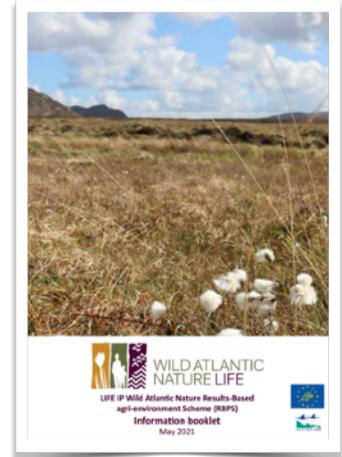
This autumn saw 167 farmers from the Owenduff/Nephin Complex SAC area join the Wild Atlantic Nature agri-environment programme. This pilot Results-Based Payment Scheme (RBPS) is central to the project, and has been designed to reward farmers for a range of environmental services that they are delivering on their farms including biodiversity, clean water and climate regulation.

The habitat assessments of the private farm land in the pilot has been completed by participants preferred farm advisor. A total of 26 farm advisors have been trained and approved by the project team. Farm assessments are recorded using specially designed score cards which give each plot on participating farms a score out of 10. These scores are used to calculate payments, with higher plot scores result in higher payments (i.e. payments are ‘results-based’). Farmers who wish to improve their scores year-on-year can avail of financial and technical support from the project team.

The project team are currently braving some mixed weather to carry out habitat assessments of all the participating commonages in the target area. Each commonage receives a payment according to its ecological quality and the payment is divided among participating commonage shareholders. In total, we have more than 20,000ha of land in the RBPS pilot this year.

Training for participant farmers was organised for early December; however, due to the current COVID rate this training is postponed until early next year. Training provides an opportunity to meet with all the participants, explain the RBPS in more detail, update on progress and answer any questions. Training days are an important source of information for farmers who are just starting off in a RBPS and it is disappointing that we have had to make this decision to postpone.

Next year will see further expansion of our RBPS pilot to other selected project areas, which will result in an increase in participating farms to approximately 800. Follow our website and social media channels for the latest news and updates on our RBPS programme. Finally, thanks to all our participating farmers and to DAFM and DHLGH for providing additional funding of €680,000 to allow all eligible farmers into the programme this year. We look forward to working with everyone again in 2022!



Launch of €23.5m EU-funded WaterLANDS project

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is part of a new 5-year (2021-2026) EU Horizon 2020 funded project to restore and protect wetland sites across Europe. WaterLANDS (Water-based solutions for carbon storage, people and wilderness) will undertake hands-on restoration of specific wetland sites, including a Wild Atlantic Nature site at Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC, and create best practice models that can be applied to wetland restoration at other sites. By engaging with local communities and stakeholders, the project will ensure that wetland restoration results not only in environmental gains, but also social and economic benefits for the communities involved. The project website (www.waterlands.eu) will launch soon and Wild Atlantic Nature will be recruiting staff to work on the project early next year.



Event highlights

EU Commissioner Sinkevičius visit

This September, EU Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius paid a visit to Sliabh Liag SAC to see the site and learn about the work of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature. After brief viewing of the stunning scenery at the cliffs, the Commissioner discussed the LIFE project and our development of the Results-Based agri-environment Payments Scheme (RBPS) of Wild Atlantic Nature. The Commissioner was provided with a demonstration of how the scorecard works, using the surrounding blanket bog as an example, and discussed how the RBPS is informing Ireland’s new CAP Strategic Plan.



Peatlands Gathering 2021



The hugely successful Peatlands Gathering 2021 took place from 7-9 October to share knowledge and understandings of peatlands in Ireland. The event aims to create an open forum to promote dialogue about peatlands and their future. LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature manager Derek McLoughlin gave a presentation focusing on the management of farmland and its influence on the quality of peatland habitat. As part of the event, Wild Atlantic Nature and Pearl Mussel Project held a fieldtrip at Connemara National Park where participants had the opportunity to see how results-based programmes work and discuss how this approach can deliver better outcomes for the environment and society. For more information see www.peatlandsgathering.com

Wild Atlantic Nature on TV

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature recently featured in a Portuguese national television series on RPT exploring EU-funded projects across Europe. The series ‘From Stockholm to Lisbon’ visits a different country each episode to showcase interesting environment projects. The film crew paid a visit to one of our project areas in South Mayo where we chatted to a local farmer about the challenges and opportunities for farming in the west of Ireland. Wild Atlantic Nature also spent a day in Ballycroy filming with TG4 for a new series exploring the past, present and future of peatlands in Ireland. The three-part series is scheduled to air next spring.



Additional highlights from 2021

Additional highlights for 2021 include the Burren Winterage festival where Wild Atlantic Nature project manager Derek McLoughlin took part in a panel discussion on the future of agri-environment schemes. In total, the project team have delivered more than 50 presentations at various events in 2021.

Gary Goggins visited Ballycroy Visitor Centre where he discussed our work with ag-science students from St Joseph’s Secondary School, Foxford. We hope to increase our engagement with local schools in the coming years and we will run a dedicated schools programme in conjunction with our partners The Heritage Council.



Representatives of the Ulster Farmers’ Union paid a visit to Westport where they heard about the work of Wild Atlantic Nature and had to opportunity to visit some Pearl Mussel Project sites in the Doolough/Delphi area. We also held training events with members of Ulster Wildlife, Corncrake LIFE, Teagasc and DAFM in 2021.

News from partners

Teagasc's RENEW2050 project collaborating with LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature

ReNEW 2050

Rural Generational Renewal 2050 (RENEW2050) is a research project run by Teagasc and University College Cork that seeks to generate policy recommendations for addressing challenges that farmers will face in the period until 2050. Research undertaken as part of RENEW2050 to date has identified drivers that may transform farming and forestry. These drivers are multiple and complex, but they include new climate policy targets, the increasing role of digital technology, public perceptions of farming, and the economic challenges facing farmers in globalised value chains. At the

same time, there is significant uncertainty about how these factors will coalesce and play out in different farming regions or at an individual farm level.

To address this knowledge gap, researchers David Meredith (*pictured right*) and Jack McCarthy (*left*) from RENEW2050 are developing workshops to engage with farmers across a range of farming systems and regions about the future challenges that they may face. They have been collaborating with Wild Atlantic Nature staff to implement these workshops in an upland area in the coming months. It is hoped that these workshops will develop policy recommendations that are sensitive to the needs and settings in which different farmers operate. Moreover, the workshops may be used as part of future knowledge exchange activities within Wild Atlantic Nature.



News from related projects

LIFE Atlantic Crex project (Corncrake/Traonach LIFE)



Once found in almost every townland in Ireland, the iconic call of the corncrake has all but disappeared from the Irish countryside. Largely associated with low intensity traditional farming practices, the ground nesting corncrake was one of the first species to succumb to rapid changes in farming during the 1960s and 1970s. By the mid- 90s the number of calling male corncrakes had been reduced to less than 200 and half of these were found in the Shannon Callows. Fast forward 20 years and the corncrakes are now extinct in the callows and largely confined to the coastal retreats of north and west Donegal, the Mullet

peninsula in Mayo and the islands of Connemara.

Corncrake/Traonach LIFE is a five year project, carrying out conservation work in counties Donegal, Mayo and Galway, working in partnership with landowners, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology and Fota Wildlife Park. The role that local communities, particularly landowners, must play in conserving corncrake habitat is fully recognised and the project is working collaboratively with these stakeholders.



Initially delayed due to COVID-19, the project launched a pilot Results-Based Payment Scheme (RBPS) in autumn 2021. The RBPS, developed in conjunction with DAFM, is based on a hybrid approach that rewards farmers for taking certain actions to benefit corncrakes, while rewarding habitat quality. 45 farmers across 8 catchments will participate in the pilot in 2022 and close to 400ha of land will be managed as part of the pilot. The project will expand further based on the outcomes of its pilot year, and hopefully see a turnaround in fortune of this iconic sound of the Irish summer. For more info see the project website at www.corncrakelife.ie

LIFE on Machair



NPWS and project partners the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), Teagasc and Fáilte Ireland are delighted that *LIFE On Machair* has received final approval from the European Commission. Starting in 2022, LIFE On Machair will run for six years with a total budget of €7.4m. A dedicated project team will work with local stakeholders in nine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and four Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in counties Donegal, Mayo and Galway to improve the

conservation condition of machair systems and boost the value of the habitat for wading birds and pollinators.

Machairs, or sandy coastal plains, occur from Galway to Donegal in Ireland, and form a system with surrounding coastal habitats such as dunes and wetlands. These systems are the product of a history of natural processes combined with human activities. In particular, low-intensity winter grazing in Ireland resulted in flower-rich grasslands that provide food and shelter for insects and birds. More recently, increased stocking density, land abandonment and unsuitable recreation have changed the plant communities and vegetation structure so that machair systems provide fewer resources for pollinators and breeding birds. The populations of wading birds, in particular, have declined significantly.

LIFE on Machair aims to reverse these changes by working with farmers and local communities. Farmers have a central role in land management, and they will be offered practical and financial support through a voluntary Results-Based Payment Scheme (RBPS) measure designed for machair. By facilitating education and knowledge exchange, the project will help to build capacity among farmers and advisors for long term sustainable farming. The project will also explore sustainable tourism options and provide supports for the wider community to engage in conservation friendly activities in machair systems. LIFE on Machair will engage with existing LIFE projects in the northwest to maximise benefits for communities and conservation.



LIFE IP Peatlands and People



EU LIFE IP Peatlands and People is a 7-year project set on the wider Midlands region in Ireland that aspires to be a catalyst for behaviour change and climate action, bringing together people, place and policy to deliver a more sustainable future for all. To achieve this the project centres on three powerful pillars:

Pillar One, Peatlands Centre of Excellence: A large area of peatlands in Ireland's Midlands will be restored and rehabilitated under the project as restored bogs and peatland areas have numerous benefits for our lives and livelihoods and can nurture sustainable opportunities.

Pillar Two, Just Transition Accelerator: Minister Robert Troy, Minister for State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment launched EU LIFE IP Peatlands and People Accelerate Green Programme in October 2021. This is the first accelerator dedicated to scaling companies leading the response to climate action and sustainability by developing products and services based on 'green' innovation. Accelerate Green is located at Bord na Móna's existing office complex in Boora, Co. Offaly. 8-12 companies are expected to participate in the programme commencing early 2022.

Pillar Three, People's Discovery Experience: Responding directly to the Irish Government's Climate Action Plan 19 and updated CAP 21, the vision for the People's Discovery Experience is to help people make sense of climate change and sustainability so they can be the change agents in their own lives, their families, communities and workplaces, opening the door to a new sustainable world for all. *The soul of the People's Discovery Experience is about Greening Ireland and the world.* In January 2022, pillar three are commencing a feasibility study with Eden International to assess the viability of a large-scale visitor attraction in the Midlands.

For more information on the EU LIFE IP Peatlands and People project, visit their website at www.peatlandsandpeople.ie or follow their social media accounts on Twitter and LinkedIn.

News from community networks

Mulranny to take on the Climate Action Challenge

Mulranny, Co. Mayo has been selected by Mayo County Council to be Mayo's first Decarbonising Zone (DZ), aiming to reduce greenhouse gases by at least 51% by 2030 as required under Action 165 of the National Climate Action Plan.

Selected as a resilient, vibrant, and sustainable community on a pathway to zero carbon emissions, Mulranny, as Mayo's first Decarbonising Zone, will now become an exemplar site for the rest of the county to develop pathways and learnings for other communities to decarbonise. Mulranny will also be part of a new county wide network of communities taking climate action.

Mulranny was one of 10 Mayo communities to apply to be Mayo's initial Decarbonising Zone. The application focused on previous community track record, the community vision for 2030 and their DZ structure. Mulranny's vision for 2030 is to become an empowered community, with a low carbon economy, living in a thriving biosphere. Using a participative democracy network, Mulranny's ambition includes community energy initiatives, regenerative agricultural actions and the promotion of the circular economy in the village and its wider community.

Children from Mulranny National School came up with some fantastic climate action ideas that were included with the application.

The Mulranny community are looking forward to working in collaboration with Mayo County Council, LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and other communities across Mayo to take climate action.



Photos: (Above) Mulranny has been awarded several national and international sustainability and tourism awards, and (below) locals and visitors enjoying the stunning views from Mulranny over Clew Bay (photo credit: Carol Loftus)



Closing message

Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to look at our newsletter.

Don't forget you can keep up-to-date with all of our project activities by visiting our website or following our social media channels. You can also contact a member of the project team directly if you have any questions, ideas or suggestions to enhance blanket bog conservation and support vibrant local communities in our project area.

We already have lots of exciting activities planned for 2022 with plenty of opportunities for people to participate. Planned events include our official project launch next spring, upscaling our agri-environment programme to more than 800 farmers across the northwest and commencement of knowledge-exchange programmes for farmers. We will also commence our schools blanket bog education and awareness programme and run several public events including bog walks, talks, competitions, and other events.

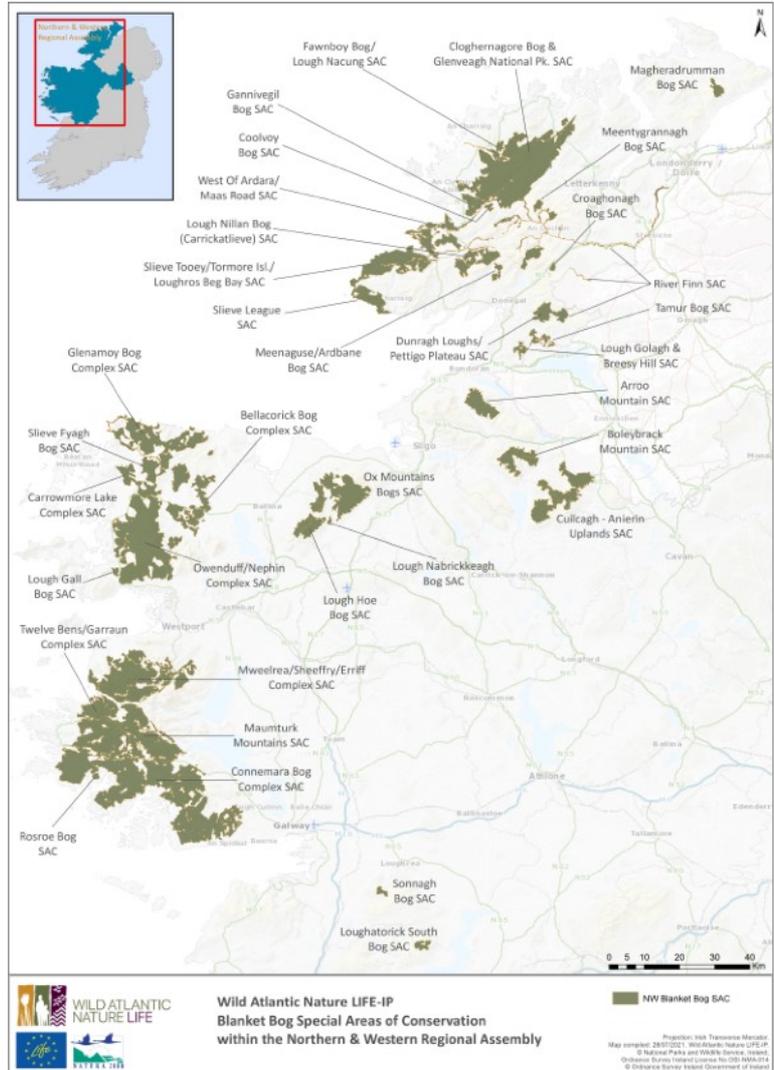
We look forward to working together into the future.

Regards,

Derek McLoughlin and the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature team



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