



WILD ATLANTIC NATURE LIFE





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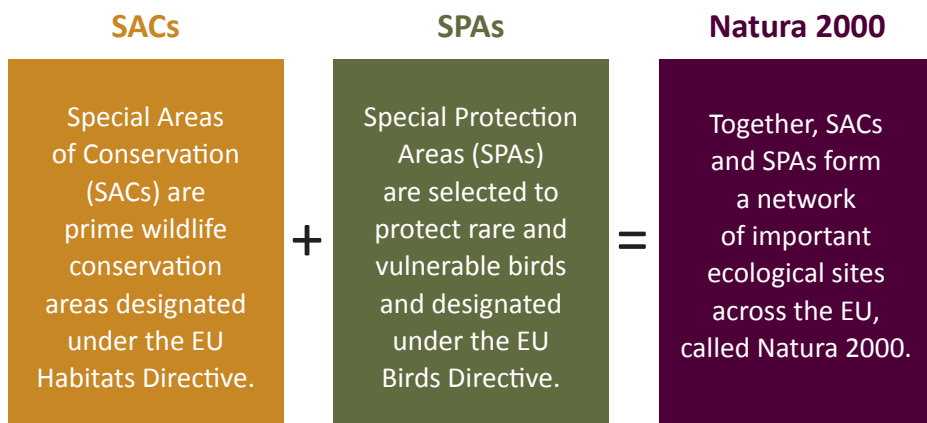
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Project summary

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is a large-scale project aimed at conservation and management of Ireland's Natura 2000 network, with a special focus on blanket bog. This ambitious project covers over 250,000ha of ecologically and socially important habitats, stretching along the west coast of Ireland from south Galway to north Donegal.

This multi-dimensional project works with farmers, local communities, state agencies and others across a broad range of actions spanning sectors including farming, forestry, tourism, community development and scientific. These activities aim to inform broader policy and practice. They include the implementation of a locally adapted Results-Based agri-environment Payment Scheme (RBPS) for farmers and landowners, establishing and working with community support groups, engaging in tourism promotion activities, delivering schools and community education programmes, administering land management programmes and monitoring and evaluation.

The project is funded under the European Union's LIFE programme for environment and climate action projects.

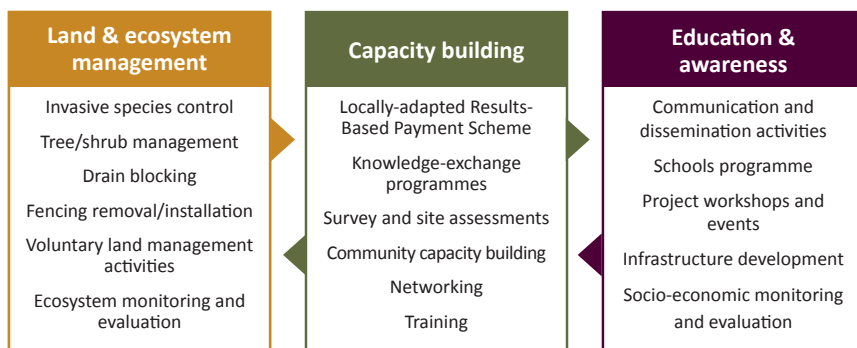


Introduction to Wild Atlantic Nature

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is a nine-year environmental project (2021-2029) led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It aims to improve Ireland's performance in conserving habitats, and in particular to improve the conservation status in the Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) network of blanket bog, a priority habitat under the Habitats Directive. The primary focus is on 35 Natura 2000 sites in the northwest of Ireland.

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is a wide-reaching project covering a range of interrelated social, economic, environmental and cultural topics.

Overview of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature project activities



As well as working closely with farmers and local communities, the project brings together the experience and knowledge of associated partners including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, RTÉ, Coillte, Fáilte Ireland, The Heritage Council, Bord na Móna, Teagasc, Northern & Western Regional Assembly, and Universidade de Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Wild Atlantic Nature and the Prioritised Action Framework for Ireland

The primary target of Wild Atlantic Nature is delivery of the Prioritised Action Framework (PAF) for Ireland in general, and blanket bog specifically. The project aims to deliver broad environmental benefits to biodiversity, habitats and species, as well as improvements in water quality and climate action. Equally, the project aims to deliver benefits for communities in and around Natura 2000 sites through land management, capacity-building and education and awareness activities.

What is the Prioritised Action Framework?

Prioritised Action Frameworks (PAFs) are multiannual planning tools aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of the measures needed to manage the EU-wide Natura 2000 network (which comprises Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas) and the ecosystem services they provide including clean water, carbon storage and biodiversity.



Natura 2000

Natura 2000 is a European network of important ecological sites covering over 18% of the EU's land area and more than 6% of its marine territory. It comprises lands designated by Member States as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under the EU Habitats Directive and Special Protection Areas (SPA) under the EU Birds Directive. The aim of the network is to ensure the long-term survival of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats, to protect them for future generations. LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature project sites are all related to Natura 2000 sites, with the majority of land privately owned.



Ireland's Natura 2000 network

13% of Ireland's land area forms part of the Natura 2000 network, plus marine areas, across a total of more than 400 sites. Priority habitats include active blanket bog, active raised bog, limestone pavements, orchid-rich calcareous grasslands, alkaline fens, turloughs, machair, fixed dunes, coastal lagoons and woodlands. Species include plants such as marsh saxifrage, invertebrates including freshwater pearl mussel and fish species including Atlantic salmon and lampreys. Protected mammals found in Ireland include otter and lesser horseshoe bat. Within the framework of the Birds Directive, Ireland is of particular importance for migratory waterbirds and breeding seabirds.



Blanket bog

Blanket bog occurs in cool, wet, oceanic climates on flat or gently sloping land where drainage is poor and peat has accumulated to a depth of at least 0.5m. Blanket bogs started to form in Ireland between 7,000 – 10,000 years ago. They were originally confined to isolated wetter areas such as shallow lakes and hollows, but became more widespread around 4,000 years ago when the climate became wetter. High levels of rainfall, where rainfall exceeds the loss of water through evaporation and plant transpiration, leads to near constant saturation and provides the conditions for the growth of bog mosses and sedges, which partially decompose and slowly accumulate as peat.

Blanket bog in Ireland once covered an estimated 773,640 hectares, with less than one-third remaining in relatively intact condition. For many decades, land use policies relating to blanket bogs have varied considerably. These have ranged from the active planting of commercial coniferous forestry, large-scale



commercial cutting and burning of peat, increasing stock levels on hills beyond their capacity, and subsequent reduction of grazing levels. Today, the status of our blanket bogs is considered poor quality in terms of condition. This indicates that in many cases blanket bogs are losing important species, are releasing carbon to the environment, and providing sub-optimal water quality.

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature aims to assist in the conservation and rehabilitation of much of Ireland's SAC network of blanket bog to favourable conservation status. Rehabilitated blanket bogs become carbon sinks, sequestering carbon from the atmosphere into vegetation, which will eventually become peat. Successful rehabilitation of degraded blanket bog will also serve to protect the immense carbon stores that reside in the peat layers that have taken thousands of years to accumulate. Restoration will reverse the current process where degraded blanket bog, a carbon source, is releasing stored carbon into the atmosphere.





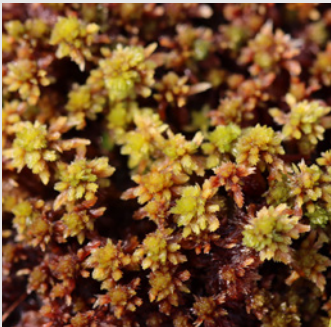
Habitat

Blanket bog is a rare habitat, making an improvement in its conservation status an important objective from a national, European and global perspective.



Biodiversity

Blanket bog habitat supports a rich diversity of species including several rare plants and vulnerable species and provides an essential feeding habitat for wetland birds.



Climate

Blanket bogs are extremely important for climate change mitigation as they store millions of tonnes of carbon. Peat forming plants such as sphagnum moss and sedges remove carbon from the atmosphere.



Water

Blanket bogs help to improve water quality through natural filtration. They play an important role in flood management by storing and slowly releasing surface water run-off (known as water attenuation).



Agriculture

Blanket bogs are important agricultural lands which provide food and grazing land for sheep and cattle, and contribute significantly to the income of rural communities.



Science

Blanket bogs provide important scientific insights into changing atmospheric conditions and regional ecological and environmental conditions.



History

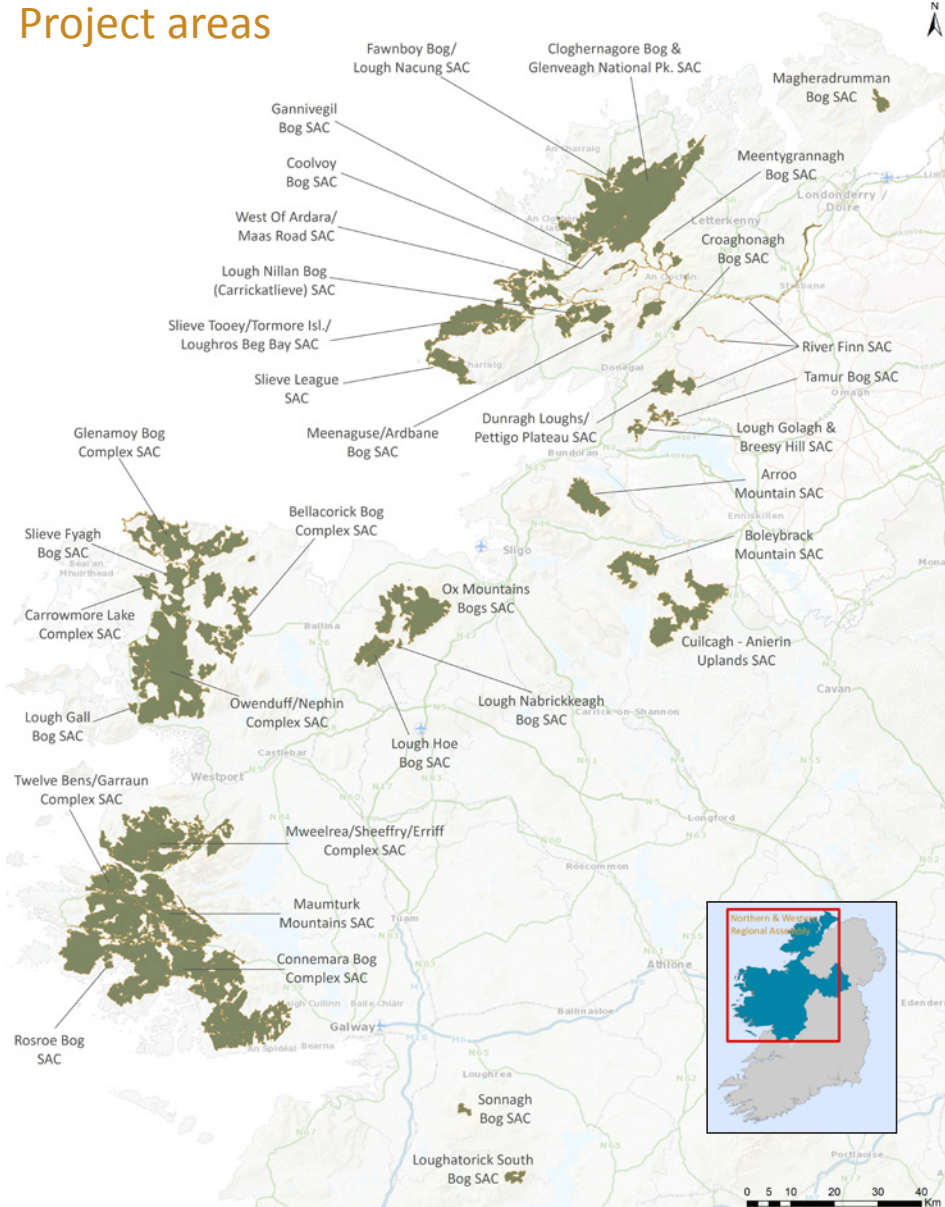
Blanket bogs are important archaeological sites as they preserve ancient landscapes and artefacts within and beneath the peat mass.



Recreation

Blanket bogs are important recreational sites used by walkers, runners, anglers, photographers, nature and outdoor enthusiasts, among others.

Project areas

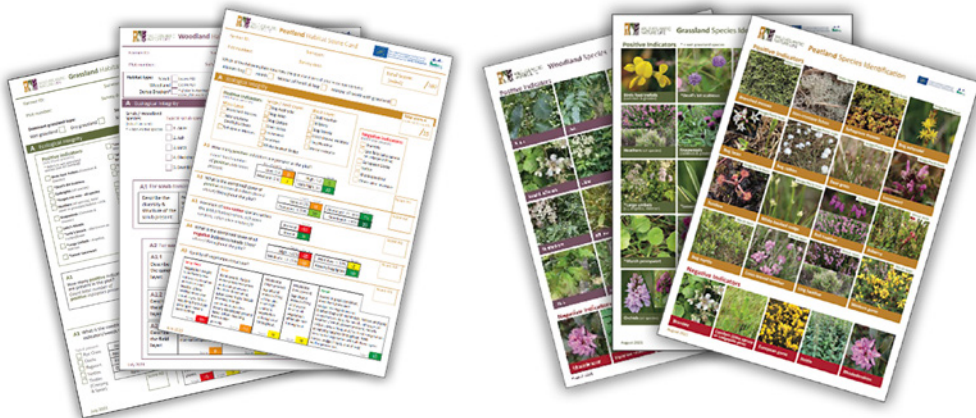


Under the Habitats Directive, Ireland has identified more than 50 areas as SACs for the protection of blanket bog. Within the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature project area of the northwest region, there are 35 blanket bog SACs with a total area of 262,632ha, of which approx. 134,319ha is active blanket bog. This accounts for 87% of the national total habitat.

Aligning agriculture with peatland conservation

Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS

One of the key aims of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is to establish a voluntary pilot agri-environment programme for farmers in target project sites. Results-Based Payments Schemes (RBPS) link payments to the environmental quality of a farm, with higher nature quality resulting in a higher payment level. This provides an exciting opportunity for farmers in the project areas to realise and be celebrated for the vital role they play in our biodiversity and climate challenges. It also provides an opportunity to enhance the resilience of farming communities in and around Natura 2000 sites.



Partner profiles



An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Aitiúil agus Oidhreacht
Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage

Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

(DHLGH), as the Coordinating Beneficiary, take responsibility for the overall management of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature. DHLGH, by means of the project team, are responsible for implementing the majority of project actions.



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,
Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture,
Food and the Marine

Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)

assist in the design and implementation of a Results Based agri-environment Payments Scheme (RBPS), targeted at upland hill farmers in Natura 2000 and associated management units. The learnings will assist in the design of future results-based actions to be incorporated into CAP Agri-Environment, Climate Measures (AECMs).



Teagasc (the Agriculture and Food Development Authority) provide integrated research, advisory and training services to the agriculture and food industry and rural communities. They are responsible for the design and pilot of knowledge exchange measures, targeted at upland hill farmers in project areas.

An Chomhairle Oidhreacht
The Heritage Council



The Heritage Council provides policy advice for government on heritage issues and invests in heritage infrastructure and capacity. They are tasked with facilitating community engagement and developing a programme for blanket bog environmental education in schools across the project area.



Fáilte
Ireland

National Tourism
Development
Authority

Fáilte Ireland (the National Tourism Development Authority) will lead the preparation of guidelines for the sustainable presentation and management of tourist access to Natura 2000 sites and the organisation of community workshops to maximise the potential in nature for local tourism.



The Northern & Western Regional Assembly (Regional Local Authority for project area) liaise with existing Interreg blanket bog projects in the Northern & Western Region to maximise EU added value and build synergies between projects.



RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann), Ireland's national public-service media organisation, are responsible for the commissioning and production of nature TV programming to promote appreciation of the Natura 2000 network nationally and regionally.



Coillte (the Irish Forestry Board) manages Ireland's publicly-owned forests, including many areas of afforested blanket bog. Coillte are restoring a pre-identified afforested peatland site and piloting an innovative non-commercial restocking with native trees.



Bord na Móna is a semi-state company created by the Turf Development Act 1946. Since the 1990s, the company has been actively involved in the rehabilitation and restoration of blanket and raised bogs across Ireland. Bord na Móna are delivering training for machinery contractors on drain blocking techniques and installing and maintaining dams on a pre-identified site.



Institute for Agricultural Biodiversity and Rural Development (IBADER), located at Campus Terra (Lugo, Spain) of University of Santiago de Compostela (USC), have vast experience in the management of habitats and species of the Natura 2000 network, especially blanket bog characterisation and sustainable management by research group 1934-TB (Territorio, Biodiversidade). IBADER-USC ensure a wider transnational uptake of results through dissemination across the Atlantic biogeographical region.



Expected project results

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature has both national level and regional level objectives. It is expected that over the duration of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature there will be:

- Improved stakeholder communication and cooperation in the policy and governance of Natura 2000
- Increased general public awareness locally and nationally of the value of the Natura 2000 network
- Improvement in conservation status of blanket bog habitat
- Improved fire prevention and management on project sites
- Improved support from local communities for long term conservation
- Increased sense of community ownership or custodianship towards local peatlands
- Improved awareness of the importance of Ireland's blanket bog SACs
- Demonstration and testing of Results Based agri-environmental Payments Schemes, specifically targeted at upland hill farmers
- Delivery of environmental training and knowledge transfer measures, targeted at uplands hill farmers
- Significant financial injections into rural communities – through the implementation of the RBPS programme and conservation actions
- Benefits for tourism and recreation
- Climate change and ecosystem benefits including improved carbon storage and sequestration, flood mitigation, water quality, and improved environmental monitoring
- Mobilisation of additional complementary funding

LIFE programme



The LIFE programme is the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action since its inception in 1992.

The European Union recognises that a transition to a sustainable economy requires major shifts in investments towards new infrastructures, new technologies, new business models, and new modes of production and consumption of all types of goods and services, including food and natural resources.

Through its targeted support to policy and market uptake actions, the LIFE programme aims to preserve, protect and improve the quality of the environment, protect human health and pursue the prudent and rational utilisation of natural resources. To date, LIFE has co-financed approximately 4,000 projects across the EU, contributing more than €3 billion to the protection of the environment.







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