WILD ATLANTIC NATURE LIFE

Welcome message

Dear readers,

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

As we approach the end of a busy second year for the project, we have lots of interesting things to report. We lead with exciting news about a further €15 million investment in our project, which is a huge boost of confidence in our work. We reflect on the expansion of our award winning agri-environment programme, provide an update on our extremely successful schools pilot, and report on our upland farmer Knowledge Exchange programme. We look back on our official project launch, as well as some key events throughout the year.

We have updates from several related projects and ecologist Conor Ryan writes about progress in the Bundorragha Catchment Rhododendron Project, supported by LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature. You can continue to keep up-to-date with our work by visiting our website and following our social media accounts.

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, landowners, 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

€15m additional funding announced for LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature

A significant new investment of €15 million in peatlands restoration will benefit cross-border collaboration, knowledge sharing and expertise building. LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature will receive €10 million from the government's Shared Island Fund and an additional €5 million in co-funding through the National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and NatureScot.

The funding announcement recognises the success of the agri-environmental and peatland restoration expertise demonstrated through the work of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature in high nature value areas and the potential for knowledge exchange with the project partners NIEA and NatureScot. The funding will be used to build capacity at local and national levels through upskilling, training and education programmes and restoration work. Sites in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland will be selected to deliver practical peatland restoration, build capacity for long-term peatland management, undertake research and monitoring, exchange knowledge, and address socio-cultural issues across a range of restoration scenarios. These include the restoration of private and public lands, demonstration of restoration of erosion impacts, reactivation of drained peatlands, conifer forest to bog restoration (*pictured left*), control of alien invasives, addressing grazing pressures, improving community engagement and increasing education and awareness. The owners and users of the project sites will be at the centre of any planned activities and participation will be voluntary.

In addition, there are plans to further expand the work of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature in the next two years across a wider geographical area to assist further recovery of blanket bogs nationwide, with a particular focus on Ireland's 55 blanket bog Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

Wild Atlantic Nature win a RÉALTA excellence and innovation award

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature were among the winners in the RÉALTA excellence and innovation awards for our Results-Based Payment Scheme (RBPS) pilot programme. The pilot project was selected as one of four overall winners by an independent judging panel. The awards were announced at a Virtual Awards ceremony in September.

Pictured above: Derek McLoughlin (Project Manager), Vicki McArthur (RBPS Coordinator), John Walsh and Joe Tighe (RBPS Officers)

Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS update *by John Walsh, RBPS Officer*

2022 was a year of expansion for the Wild Atlantic Nature Results Based Payment Scheme (RBPS), which grew from 167 farmers in the Owenduff/ Nephin Special Area of Conservation and surrounding lands in 2021, to more than 800 farmers across the North West of Ireland in 2022. Participating farms and commonages form a complex of peatland SACs, which include Owenduff/Nephin and Glenamoy regions in Co. Mayo, The Ox Mountains, Lough Hoe and Lough Nabrickkeagh in Co. Sligo and Slieve League, Slieve Tooey, and Lough Nillan areas in Co. Donegal.

Our RBPS 2022 kicked off by hosting a series of information evenings in our new target areas, where members of the farming community were welcome to attend a presentation and Q&A regarding the programme. After the information evenings, Expression of Interest forms began arriving from interested farmers and were accepted subject to meeting the required criteria.

In May, LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature staff hosted a number of Advisor training days. Advisors were given a short presentation on the project and shown how to score a plot using the Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS scorecards and record data using the IT systems developed by our team. In total 45 advisors were trained and approved to score lands for participants in 2022.

The Wild Atlantic Nature team were tasked with scoring the commonage lands across our target sites. With such a vast area and a relatively small team, it was necessary to hire in additional help with this task. Assistance came in the form of 3 excellent and hard working students from Atlantic Technological University, Sligo. The students were trained to use the habitat scorecards and the team set off scoring at the beginning of June until October, with over 65,000 hectares of commonage scored across our 8 participating sites.

In October, Wild Atlantic Nature hosted seven training days between Mayo, Sligo and Donegal for participating farmers. During these sessions, participants were shown how the RBPS model works, how our scorecards were applied to their farms and opportunities for improving habitat condition. Representatives from the new ACRES scheme were invited along to provide short presentations, and we had ample time for Q&A.

The Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS team is currently finalising data and administrative procedures in preparation for farmer payments, which will be issued in the New Year. We are also working with farmers who applied for supporting actions to improve their habitat condition. In November, we hosted Rhododendron control training, where the Bundorragha Rhododendron Control Project team trained 14 participants from our 2021 RBPS who expressed an interest to help remove this invasive species from their farms. With our assistance, other farmers are working on various environmental improvements including livestock crossings, protecting water courses, and reducing erosion.

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature Heritage in Schools pilot programme 2022

by Maria Walsh, Heritage in Schools Programme Manager

As part of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, The Heritage Council developed and pilot tested a schools' programme, aimed promoting local awareness of the project amongst schools and involving children in assessing a local blanket bog habitat using the Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS scorecard.

The Irish Peatland Conservation Council was contracted to develop the education programme and supporting resources. The pilot programme was delivered through the Heritage in Schools Scheme by three suitably qualified specialists. Participating schools received a full day visit from the specialist, which included an introduction to the programme and resources, followed by a field trip to a local bog. Resources developed included a teacher's resource pack, a PowerPoint for use in the classroom and the *Wild Atlantic Bog Plants* identification swatch (*pictured left)*.

Visits were scheduled and delivered in October and November to two schools in Donegal, seven in Mayo and three in Sligo. All schools were sent a teacher's resource document in advance of the visit so that some preparation could be done, if time allowed.

Wild Atlantic Bog Plants swatches were distributed on the day or were forwarded after the visit, with each participating school receiving a pack of 15 swatches.

School feedback

Schools were asked to complete a short online questionnaire following their visit and provide feedback on key areas – feedback was received from 11 of the 12 participating schools. Most children involved were from senior classes and the average group size was 25. 54% of respondents reported having some knowledge of blanket bog habitats, whilst almost 30% had some prior knowledge of the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature project. All 11 schools rated the structure and content of the visit, the children's response, the resources, and the overall experience of the pilot as 'excellent'.

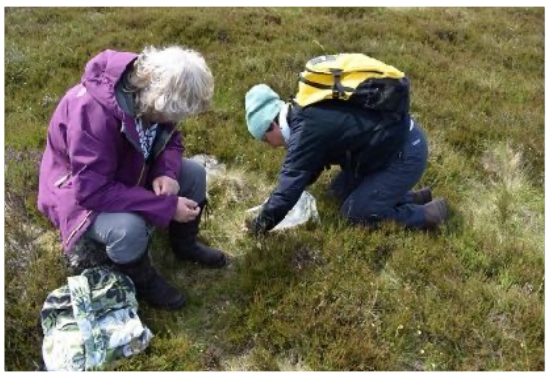
Ten schools said they shared knowledge with family, and 9 shared what they learned with the wider school community. All said they planned to continue bog studies and would recommend the programme to other schools.

> *'Children were engaged and enjoyed learning about blanket bogs in their area. They were proud that their local bog was considered a healthy bog, based on the scorecard'*

A full evaluation of the programme and resources will be completed in the New Year, including recommendations for a national roll-out and launch in spring 2023.

Farmer Knowledge Exchange Groups 2022 *by Catherine Keena, Teagasc*

Farmer discussion groups are a key component of the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) for many years. Research has found that discussion group members are more likely to adopt new practices, with groups an effective mechanism in the delivery of advice. The AKIS model specifically recognises the existence and importance of multiple stakeholders and patterns of information flow with respect to issues relating to sustainable land resource management. Environmental awareness is associated with behaviour change, and while information and education are rarely sufficient in themselves to achieve preferred environmental outcomes, they are a necessary underpinning of any other strategy.



Mayo Wild Atlantic Nature Knowledge Exchange Group

Lowland farmers use Knowledge Exchange groups to discuss grassland management, using grass measurement and grass budgeting tools as decision-making aids. A similar focus on upland management was proposed by Teagasc through pilot Knowledge Exchange Groups in Wild Atlantic Nature. Sustainable upland farming is necessary for biodiversity and other benefits delivered by these most important habitats, and farmers are key to the delivery. The scoring of uplands in Results-Based Payment Schemes is the primary tool to assess their condition and aid decision making. Twenty farmers are participating in the first Wild Atlantic Nature KE Group, facilitated by Chris Hanrahan, local Teagasc advisor. The group includes clients of Teagasc and private consultants. Four meetings were held in 2022 on the farms of group members. In addition to scoring the uplands and discussing related management practices, at each meeting a guest attended to further the environmental discussion. Owen Carton, Project Manager of the Comeragh Upland Communities EIP, gave his experience of bringing an environmental focus to an established Sheep Discussion Group. Helen Sheridan and Gaia Scalabrino (*pictured above*) from NatPro, the Centre for Natural Products Research in Trinity College Dublin, explained the potential value of bogland plants to medicine, and themselves learned the local plant knowledge from the farmers. Ruth Wilson, All Ireland Pollinator Plan Farmland Officer, pointed out plants of value to our solitary and bumble bees. Mary Roache, Teagasc ASSAP advisor, discussed the importance of sustainable upland management for water quality. The Wild Atlantic Nature Knowledge Exchange Group will be extended to other project areas in 2023.

Wild Atlantic Nature at EU Green Week

We were delighted earlier this year when we were invited to speak at the Biodiversity – Nature restoration targets session at EU Green Week 2022 in Brussels. The session, organised by the Directorate-General for the Environment at the European Commission, explored the multiple benefits we gain from healthy ecosystems and how they can be realised through restoration. Representing LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, Gary Goggins spoke about the importance of agri-environment policy for nature conservation.

Event highlights

Official project launch in Ballycroy, Co. Mayo

The official launch of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature took place in Ballycroy Community Centre on 13th May 2022. The event was attended by more than 120 people representing a cross-section of society including government, businesses, civil society and academia. The project was launched by Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Malcolm Noonan TD and Minister of State for Land Use and Biodiversity at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Pippa Hackett TD. Guest speakers included Martin Gavin, Leenane Development Association, and Michael Davoren from the Burren programme. The event was widely covered in local and national media including RTÉ, The Irish Times, The Farmers Journal, The Western People, The Connaught Telegraph and MidWest Radio. A project promotional video premiered at the event was extremely popular and since viewed more than 3,000 times on social media.

Presentations at national and international conferences and local events

Dr Derek McLoughlin gave a presentation at the National Biodiversity Conference 2022 where he spoke about building partnerships for people and nature. Derek also gave a presentation at the Environment Ireland Conference 2022. Dr Gary Goggins held a session at the Ecosystem Services Partnership conference in Greece, and gave a presentation on our work with the WaterLANDS H2020 project. Gary also presented at the SEAI National Energy Research and Policy Conference, where he spoke about potential for aligning energy and land use policy, an idea we hope to pursue further in 2023.

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature were also at the National Ploughing Championships in the Sustainable Living tent, and Gary Goggins took part in a panel discussion at the Government of Ireland marquee on Biodiversity in Farming. Vicki McArthur gave a presentation about our work to the Leitrim Sustainable Agriculture group and spoke to the large crowd at the annual Clonmany Agricultural Show in north Donegal. To date, the team have given more than 100 presentations about our work.

News from partners

IBADER USC collaborating with networking contacts thanks to LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature *by Javier Ferreiro*

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature networking action has continued its progress after creation of the Southern European blanket bog working group by IBADER-USC. Nottingham Trent University (NTU) has been one of the contacted partners, because of its extensive experience and knowledge in blanket bogs from Cantabria (Northern Spain). The synergies created between IBADER-USC and NTU have achieved several new outcomes:

- Recently, an original research article showing the extent of windfarm infrastructures on recognised European blanket bogs was published in the prestigious journal 'Scientific Reports'. This work highlights the need to assess the impacts of windfarms on peatlands to ensure that efforts to meet energy targets result only in carbon sequestration, but not jeopardise ecosystem services.

- From the extensive knowledge generated during the aforementioned article, NTU invited IBADER-USC and NPWS, both associated beneficiaries from LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, to the seminar '*UN75+2 at NTU: Can we restore peatlands to mitigate climate change?*' The event included a discussion panel about peatlands role as carbon sinks and their activity in this sense, according to their conservation status and functionality.

- Thanks to the synergies created by LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, NTU has enlarged the study sites of its 'The Blanket Bog Project' (www.theblanketbogproject.com) to NW Spain (Galicia) and NW Ireland (Donegal). This very interesting research project is trying to make a global full assessment of blanket bogs around the Atlantic Ocean, so it is developed on study areas across England (reaching the Falkland islands), Scotland, Ireland, Norway and Spain, and it's expected to expand in 2023 to Canada and Chile.

WaterLANDS project — Opportunity for artists

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature are one of 32 partners on WaterLANDS, a 5-year EU Green Deal funded project that aims to restore damaged wetlands across Europe and lay the foundations for protection across larger areas. In WaterLANDS we want art to be an integral part of creating and reflecting cultural renewal. We see art and science as complementary disciplines, which are both driven by curiosity and enquiry. They can provide different perspectives on restoration and give rise to unique collaborations. We are hosting an artistic engagement residency at each of the six Action Sites, including Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC in Ireland. We are looking for artists to engage with the site, the restoration team and the project more broadly, on a part-time basis.

The aim is for the artist to reflect on the ongoing restoration at the site, as well as broader social processes, by interacting with relevant stakeholders and communities. This will culminate with an exhibition at the final project event in 2026, where accounts of six artistic engagements will be exhibited in varied forms. Deadline for applications is 13 January 2023.

News from related projects

Lough Carra LIFE *by Kieran Flynn*

Lough Carra is an exceptionally rare and important habitat. It forms part of the Lough Carra/Mask Complex SAC, and the Lough Carra SPA, and is one of the finest examples of a Marl Lake habitat in Ireland, and Europe. It is a shallow, predominantly spring fed lake, well known for its turquoise clear waters and the calcareous encrustations on its rocky lake floor and shores. Its shores are fringed with a complex of limestone pavement, orchid rich grasslands, and wetland habitats, providing homes for a diverse range of key species including the Lesser horseshoe bat, Eurasian Otter, and Common Gull.

Due to its rarity and ecological significance, Lough Carra has been studied intensively in recent decades and many signs of deterioration have emerged. In October 2021 the Lough Carra LIFE Project was established, aiming to improve the water quality of the lake, restore the Marl Lake habitat, and raise the conservation status of other habitats and species within the catchment area. The project is jointly funded by the European Commission LIFE Programme and the project partners, and will work with farmers, other landowners, and local community groups in the catchment area to achieve the project aims, which includes groundwater studies, agri-environment scheme, habitat restoration and conservation, monitoring and outreach activities.

Coordinated by Mayo County Council, the project partners include the Department of Agriculture, Food, and Marine (DAFM), National Parks and Wildlife Services (NPWS), Geological Survey Ireland (GSI), Coillte, and the Lough Carra Catchment Association (LCCA).

The Project Office in Belcarra Community Centre, Belcarra, Co. Mayo, F23 HY58, and the doors are open to anyone interested in meeting with the project team and discussing the project. More information can be found at www.loughcarralife.ie

Charting a course for LIFE on Machair in 2023 *by Catherine Farrell*

The darker days are drawing in and it is time for reflection over a busy year for LIFE on Machair. In our first LIFE on Machair blog we wrote: '*we're only at the beginning, but after one hundred days it is clear that any Machair focused project has to be collaborative. We all stand to lose these precious natural and cultural treasures, and so we all have skin in the game. Fortunately, the interest and willingness is there, and that in itself makes for a good beginning*'.

Well, after almost a year, with a roadshow of public meetings under our belts and several windswept meetings on Machair hillsides and plains (in both Ireland and Scotland), we're happy to stand by that quote, which inspires us to chart a fairly ambitious course for 2023. Having recruited the bones of our ecology and administration team by August 2022, after a period of visiting sites and bringing everyone up to speed on *What is Machair and why is it so special?*, over the course of October and into late November we hosted a number of public information meetings relating to the project target areas.

At these meetings held in community halls of Ballyconneely in Connemara, Killeen in South Mayo, The Valley in Achill, Eachléim on the Mullet peninsula, and Dunfanaghy and Gaoth Dobhair in North Donegal, we gained invaluable insight and feedback from local farmers, community groups and an array of interested people – some from beyond the boundaries of the target areas but mostly with interests from within. In general, we discovered that we are all agreed of the need for relevant and appropriate guidance for the future 'balanced' use of Machair complexes – in terms of nature conservation, agriculture, local amenity and wider tourism. Read more about our plans for 2023 at www.lifeonmachair.ie

Waters of LIFE Integrated Project *by Anne Goggin*

Waters of LIFE is a European Union funded Life Integrated Project, which aims to help reverse the loss of Ireland's most pristine rivers. The ongoing loss of high-status waters is a worrying trend for water quality in Ireland. The protection and restoration of these waters is one of the key underpinning principles of the EU Water Framework Directive.

The project aims to develop, test and validate effective catchment management measures to reverse this declining trend. Six project catchments have been selected; five test catchments and one control catchment including The Avonmore, Co. Wicklow (*pictured*), The Awbeg (Kilbrin), Co. Cork, Graney, Co. Clare, The Sheen, Co. Kerry. (Control), The Islands River, Co. Galway/Roscommon, and The Shornaugh, Co. Cork (see project website for maps).

Project activities aim to achieve multiple benefits for climate action and biodiversity. The project will include a 'Results Based agri-environmental Payment Scheme' (RBPS) for participating landowners in the Blackwater, Lee and Suck sub catchments (similar schemes will operate in the other sub catchments under the recently announced ACRES agri environmental scheme). Engaging and communicating with stakeholders and the public will be an important element of the project.

A project team has been established, which will work in close cooperation with other River Basin Management Plan projects and implementation bodies such as the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) and the Local Authorities' Blue Dot Catchment Programme. The project, Coordinated by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, is expected to run until March 2028. Project partners include the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Coillte, Teagasc, Local authorities, the EPA, the Forest Service and a number of LEADER companies. The total project budget is €20.2 million.

The project was officially launched by Malcolm Noonan, T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage on 29th April 2022 at an event in Kilmallock, County Limerick.

LIFE IP Peatlands and People begins delivery of project's economic and social catalysts

While background work on the restoration and rehabilitation of peatlands in Ireland's midlands under LIFE IP Peatlands and People continues, several research projects have been awarded by the EPA to ensure appropriate monitoring practices are in place to understand the benefits of this restoration.

The successful Just Transition Accelerator programme is now entering its second round. The first programme culminated in Ireland's Sustainable Future Conference in June 2022, where the eight participating companies showcased their innovative solutions, including AI to tackle food waste, sustainable packaging and disruptive technologies for grid and fleet management. Early-stage companies involved in climate action, or the sustainable economy, were encouraged to apply to Accelerate Green 2023 for the chance to collaborate and gain further knowledge of green innovation. With an application deadline in early December, the outcome will be published in 2023. Keep an eye on www.accelerategreen.ie for more updates.

The consultations for the People's Visitor Discovery Experience are also starting. Those participating will help shape the development of a new flagship experience in Ireland's midlands, where visitors can experience sustainable living in action and how we can co-exist in harmony with nature. Its mission is to open the door to a new sustainable world for all. For more information visit the project website or sign up to our mailing list for details of upcoming consultations.

Corncrake/Traonach LIFE *by Patrick Fitzmaurice*

Corncrake/Traonach LIFE is a five year EU funded project aimed at improving the conservation status of one of Ireland's most iconic farmland bird species. The project works across west Connacht and Donegal co-operating with farmers, landowners and local communities.

Corncrake/Traonach LIFE is currently approaching the end of its second year. In 2022, the national corncrake census recorded 197 calling male corncrakes in Ireland. This is a 5% increase in the number of birds recorded in 2021 and represents a very positive improvement in corncrake numbers. A total of 148 of these calling male corncrakes were found in the LIFE project target areas, indicating a 14% increase of birds in these areas.

Corncrake/Traonach LIFE Primary Schools Programme

Corncrake/Traonach LIFE rolled out its pilot primary schools programme in 2022. Eight schools in our project areas and 130 children from 4th to 6th class participated. Our three visit programme included two school visits and one field trip per school. This activity based development programme included ecology, farming practice and habitat creation. It also involved interactive quiz, arts and craft activities, as well as wild flower propagation.

Cairde Na dTraonach

Cairde Na dTraonach is the outreach programme of Corncrake/Traonach LIFE where people from around Ireland can collect wild flower seeds such as wild parsnip, common hogweed, nettle, yellow rattle, and wild angelica, and forward the seeds to our project for sowing when creating early cover plots for corncrakes. More information on Cairde Na dTraonach available on www.corncrakeLIFE.ie

#TheBlanketBogProject *by Guaduneth Chico*

Last summer, Nottingham Trent University (NTU) set up a study site at Glenveagh National Park (Donegal) as part of their global assessment of blanket bogs. In collaboration with the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and Glenveagh National Park, the team lead by Dr Guaduneth Chico is assessing blanket bogs at a global scale with 21 sites across Ireland, Spain, England, Scotland, Norway, Canada and the Falkland Islands. The aim of the project is to identify and evaluate the current status of blanket bogs globally, but with particular interest on the impacts of both natural and anthropogenic pressures. Using camera traps, peat cores and LiDAR techniques, the team will calculate annual erosion rates and carbon loss on Irish blanket bogs and investigate any relationship between livestock and the erosional process. Thanks to the support of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and Glenveagh National Park, the team will undertake further research on blanket bogs in Donegal, exploring the influence of altitude and orientation in erosion processes and how different mammals, such as deer and sheep, impact the exposed peatland surface. The overall expected outcome of the project is to facilitate greater protection and improve the management of blanket bog habitats by providing robust research evidence of the current status of Irish blanket bogs. The team also has two additional sites, one in the Wicklow Mountains National Park and one in Kerry, with plans to set up new sites in Mayo in summer 2023. If you would like to know more about the project, visit www.theblanketbogproject.com

LIFE INSULAR *by Javier Ferreiro*

IBADER-USC, NPWS and Coillte Nature, partners of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature project, are very excited to have joined efforts and started a new LIFE project. This is LIFE INSULAR (LIFE20 NAT/ES/001007), a 5 year transnational project between Ireland and Spain, with a total budget of €5.2m, implementing a transnational strategy for integrated restoration of insular fixed dunes habitat and its contact habitat on the islands of the Atlantic Ocean, promoting their favourable conservation status and increasing their resilience as the main measure of adaptation to current global changes. Eight different Irish and Spanish Natura 2000 SACs were selected to develop conservation actions, addressing common conservation problems and threats to increase the area and improve the structure and future prospects of the targeted island habitats in 5 different islands from both Member States:

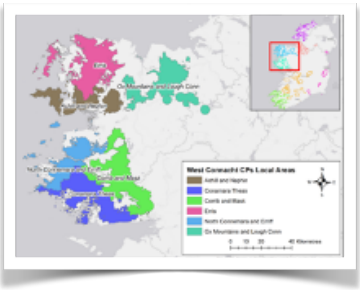
Irish Atlantic region: in Ireland, four SACs in counties Donegal and Wexford have been selected.

Spanish Atlantic region: three SACs across Cíes, Ons and Sálvora islands.

Spanish Macaronesian region: La Graciosa island.

Islands of the Atlantic Ocean (spread across Atlantic and Macaronesian regions) have been identified as one of the most biodiverse areas in the EU, but also one of the most threatened as they generally present shared environmental problems, nowadays aggravated by global change. LIFE INSULAR will apply best practices of proven effectiveness, like elimination of old forest plantations and encroached trees, elimination of plant IAS, protection measures against anthropogenic pressures, restoration of insular habitats through sowing/planting their characteristic plant species collected/cultivated by the own project. See www.lifeinsular.eu

ACRES West Connacht *by Mary McAndrew, Project Manager*



The Agri Climate Rural Environmental Scheme (ACRES) is the new €1.5 billion environmental scheme, which replaces GLAS in 2023 and will benefit up to 50,000 farmers There are two streams to ACRES. **ACRES General,** which is a mix of result-based and prescriptive actions and is available nationally, and **ACRES Co-operation (CP)** approach, available in 8 priority zones (*see map*). ACRES CP is a results-based payment model whereby farmers' payments will reflect the environmental quality of their farmland.

ACRES West Connacht are working in Northwest Connacht and South Mayo/Connemara zones. These two zones have been broken down into six local areas, with a local project officer assigned to each of the six areas to offer tailored local advice and support to farmers and advisors. The Cooperation zones are focused on a locally led approach with local solutions to local problems, which will reward and incentives positive environmental outcomes.

There is €10,500 available per farmer per year for the five years of the programme. This includes a maximum payment of €7,000 p/a in result based payments and €3,500 in Non-Productive Investments (NPIs) and Landscape Actions. Examples of NPIs include invasive species control, drinkers, crossing points and fencing. Examples of Landscape Actions include water quality measures and wildfire resilience.

Farmers will be notified in January 2023 of their acceptance into the scheme. Advisors will score private land in the summer of 2023 (June to August) and there will then be an opportunity for farmers to select actions to help improve their score. Commonages will be scored by the project team and there will be no fees to the farmers for this. The project team will liaise with commonage shareholders to discuss scores and develop actions to help improve habitat quality.

For more information see https://www.acreswestconnacht.ie/ or email info@acreswestconn.ie. All local area staff contact information will be available on the website.

News from community networks

Bundorragha catchment Rhododendron control project *by Conor Ryan, Project Coordinator*

The Bundorragha Catchment Rhododendron Project is a one-year pilot project, which commenced in early 2022. The project is co-ordinated by Leenane Development Association (in partnership with The Pearl Mussel Project EIP) and funded through LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and aims to develop and demonstrate a community based approach to control and eradication of Rhododendron at a catchment level. A core premise of this project is the building of capacity (through skills and experience) for nature based land management within local communities. The target area has extensive areas of high quality peatland and upland habitats and is one of the top eight catchments in Ireland for extant populations of freshwater pearl mussel. The land ownership is a mix of privately owned land and commonage, most of which is part of the Natura 2000 network.

The benefits to landowners for participating in this type of project are potentially threefold: free control of invasive species on landholdings, improved habitat quality, and payment for participation in training and delivery of Rhododendron control. A task based framework was utilised in planning and delivering this project, with a total of 6 overarching targets including stakeholder engagement, mapping, review of Rhododendron control practices, training, action plan and Rhododendron control delivery.

1. Stakeholder Engagement and Consultation

Consultation with all relevant stakeholders including farmers, private businesses and local community groups was conducted at the outset of the project. A steering group, comprised of various stakeholder representatives, was convened early in the project. This group provided a useful network for sharing information. Individual and commonage landowners were largely consulted through direct meetings on the ground.

2. Mapping

The extent and severity of infestation of Rhododendron was surveyed and mapped by a team from Wetland Surveys Ireland. These infestation maps were very helpful in providing a basis for planning, recording and assessing Rhododendron control work. The primary means of surveying was walking surveys, however increased usage of drones and remote sensing (satellite imagery) represents a potential time and cost saving for surveying. The correct seasonal timing of mapping work is also important, as Rhododendron foliage is easier to identify when deciduous vegetation is in seasonal dieback phase.

3. Review of Rhododendron Control Practices

Site visits, facilitated by members of NPWS and Coillte, were conducted to a variety of Rhododendron control sites throughout the western seaboard. A literature review of best practice methods was also conducted, and Patricia Deane from the MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP project shared their experiences. Best practice guidance indicates that areas of slight to moderate infestation should be prioritised for initial treatment as the treatment costs increase exponentially in tandem with the level of infestation. The received consensus was that chemical control via the application of dilute

glyphosate herbicides was the most effective means of Rhododendron control. Glyphosate solution can be applied to target plants via three means: stem injection, stump treatment, and foliar spraying. Given the sensitivity of the Bundorragha Catchment, it was concluded that stem injection and (to a limited degree) stump treatment would be the main mode of Glyphosate application for this project.

4. Training

There were two components to training, namely delivery of accredited courses and practical in-field training. Certified courses in handling and application of herbicides and maintenance and usage of chainsaws were held at Leenane Community Hall and at local forestry sites. Practical training in Rhododendron control was initially delivered by visiting experts including Tim Cahalane from Killarney National Park. As the skillset and experience of local workers developed, they in turn assisted with practical training of new workers. During the latter stages of the project, outreach work with other communities in Co. Mayo, including Ballycroy and Achill was conducted.

5. Action Plan

The action plan targeted the majority of areas affected by slight to moderate infestations across all holdings within the Bundorragha Catchment. The relatively small number of different landowners in the catchment aided with dispersed distribution and delivery of control work. A key challenge for planning and delivery of the project was procurement of project specific insurance. Fortunately, FBD insurance were able to devise suitable cover for the project. It was envisaged that landowners would conduct much of the work themselves, however this did not transpire due to landowners' individual time constraints. The project was fortunate to source a reliable crew of workers from the wider locality and this crew operated on a part-time to near full-time basis during the main phase of the treatment work.

6. Rhododendron Control Delivery

The majority of affected areas with slight to moderate levels of infestation were treated using the stem injection method. A substantial portion of the severe and very severely infested areas were also treated, using a combination of stem injection and stump treatment methods. Treatment of more severe infestations was unsurprisingly found to be exponentially more labour intensive. Findings of the treatment work also confirmed or indicated that lower concentrations of herbicide can be used to treat smaller Rhododendron plants. Usage of chainsaws is more cost effective than usage of a hatchet for stem injection treatment in most levels of infestation, and mechanical methods (where these can be conducted without environmental risk) of control and removal of very severe infestations is substantially more cost effective than manual means.

A final report, which will detail all outcomes and learnings of the project, is currently in preparation.

Closing message

Dear reader,

I hope you have enjoyed reading our newsletter.

A key aim of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is to develop the capacity amongst farmers, landowners and other members of our communities to be best equipped to deal with current and future challenges. We hope to continue to facilitate local groups, such as our Bundorragha Rhododendron project, to become experts in blanket bog restoration.

In 2023 we hope to build on the momentum generated this year, and go further to assist in developing opportunities in the management and restoration of peatland habitats. We will continue to work with, and indeed to learn from, the many peatland stakeholders in the northwest to ensure the best outcome for our blanket bog sites and those living in these areas. As always, we hugely welcome comments and suggestions for how we can improve the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature project.

We look forward to continuing working together in 2023.

Regards,

Derek McLoughlin and the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature team

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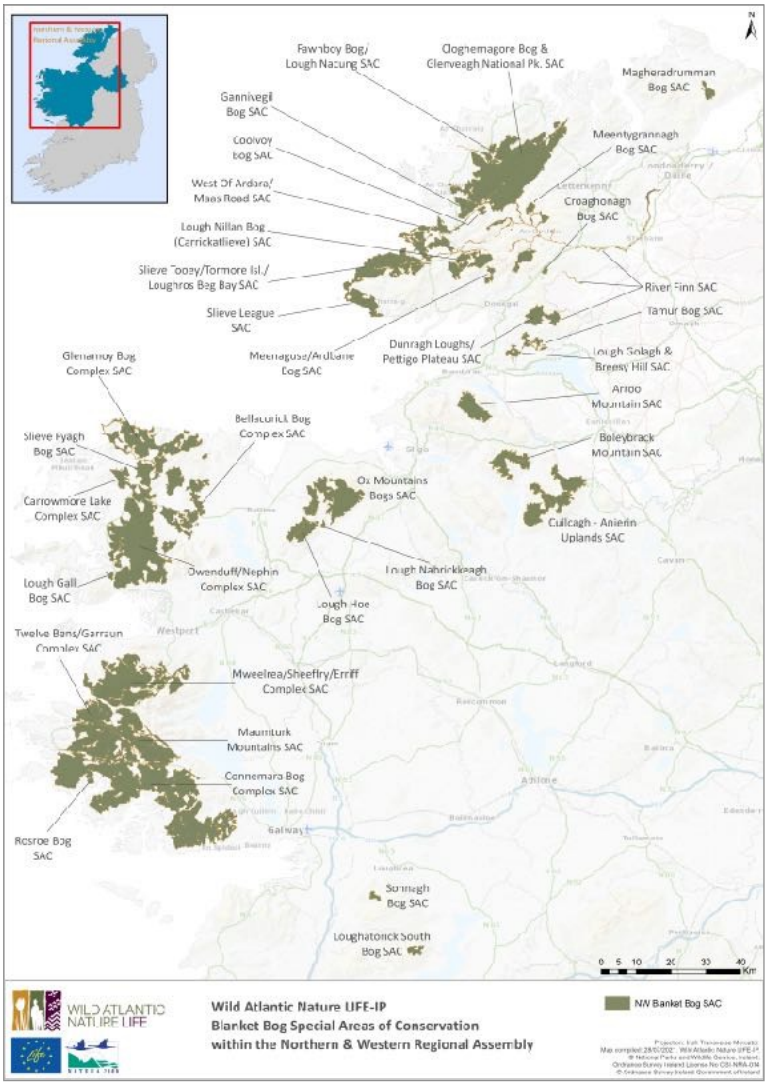

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