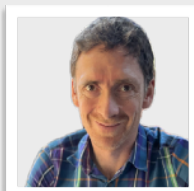




Welcome message



Dear readers,
Welcome to issue three of our project newsletter!

We are now well into the new Common Agricultural Policy cycle and farmers, advisors and others in our project area are becoming acquainted with the ACRES CP results-based agri-environment programme. In Wild Atlantic Nature we are aiming to build on this approach by supporting large-scale and complex peatland restoration projects via our new land restoration programme, and develop local capacity for nature conservation through our Natura Communities initiative. This work is supported by the National Parks and Wildlife Service Conservation Measures Unit and our Shared Island programme. You can read more about Natura Communities, Shared Island and our land restoration programme inside, along with lots of additional news and features.

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 National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), 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

Natura Communities *by Margaret Flaherty*



Natura Communities, a new initiative from LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and supported by National Parks and Wildlife Service, aims to connect local communities with Natura 2000 sites in their area. The vision is to build capacity in communities to enable the delivery of locally-led nature conservation and ecosystem restoration projects, where local communities have the knowledge and skills in all levels of conservation project management. By directly investing in communities, there is the potential to support long-term conservation; whereby experience and expertise is developed and retained by a competent and dedicated

workforce, living and working in their local area. Building capacity to engage in this type of work has two broad benefits; it will deliver social benefits for people in these areas (e.g. through creating opportunities for local employment) whilst improving the ecological quality of habitats. A group is already up and running in North Connemara/South Mayo with 10 full-time employees (see photo below, and page 9) and two other groups are in the process of getting established in North Mayo and West Donegal.

We also recently launched the Natura Communities website, which is a hub with background information on the importance of blanket bogs, case studies on the delivery of restoration/conservation projects and funding opportunities, which will hopefully encourage communities on a pathway towards protecting and conserving our precious blanket bogs. The launch of the website was coupled with the launch of the Natura Communities Seed Fund, a small grant to help communities mobilise complementary funding for blanket bog restoration projects.



Follow Natura Communities on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram

The Hare's Corner comes to Mayo in 2023/24

In May 2023, Burren Beo Trust, in partnership with Wild Atlantic Nature, launched The Hare's Corner in Mayo with Minister Malcolm Noonan. The initiative offers landowners practical and hassle-free support in

enhancing biodiversity on their land through the creation of habitats such as ponds, native orchards and mini-woodlands, as well as support to develop bespoke plans for nature and peatland conservation. Thanks to funding from Lifes2Good Foundation, 153 Hare's Corners were created in Mayo in 2023 with community groups, farmers and other landowners. It is anticipated that a new round of applications will be open in 2024. For more information see burrenbeo.com/thc



Minister Malcolm Noonan pictured at the launch of the Hare's Corner at Gleann Búí Farm in Aghamore, with representatives of Burren Beo, Wild Atlantic Nature and Lifes2Good Foundation

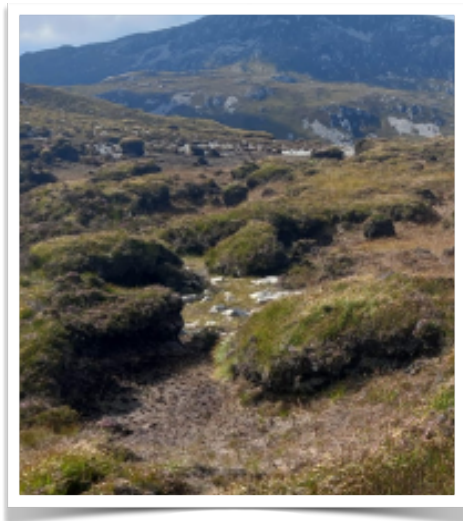
Wild Atlantic Nature landscape scale restoration scheme *by Victoria McArthur*



The Wild Atlantic Nature pilot results based payment scheme (RBPS) ran for two years and ended in December 2022. The pilot scheme gave farmers in eight of the project’s target SACs the opportunity to participate in a RBPS scheme that had been specifically developed for upland farms. The lessons

gained from the Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS scheme has helped to inform the development of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM)'s results-based Agri-Climate Rural Environment Cooperation Project approach (ACRES CP). With the primary land use for Ireland’s peatlands being agriculture, the ACRES CP scheme currently provides the main implementation mechanism for restoration actions through the farming community, and funding is now available to ACRES CP farmers to support the restoration of peatlands. However, it

is foreseen that this funding will only facilitate small scale restoration, and many damaged peatland sites require a more landscape scale approach to address issues such as heavy erosion (pictured above).



With this in mind, LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is currently developing a pilot land restoration programme intended for larger landscape scale restoration sites that cannot be addressed under the ACRES CP funding streams. We will be working closely with farmers, landowners and the ACRES CP teams to identify potential restoration sites, developing bespoke restoration action plans and assisting in the implementation of restoration measures. It is hoped that the Wild Atlantic Nature pilot land restoration programme will help to assess the requirement for a national landscape scale restoration programme and how it might be implemented.

The land restoration programme will be launched in the New Year and we will be in contact with farmers and local ACRES CP teams with more information as well as organising local information events.

Peatlands Survey Update *by John Derwin*

From 2023-2026, LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature are undertaking habitat surveys across a number of project sites. These surveys are required so that the peatland habitats can be identified and assessed and to allow for restoration plans to be developed with interested landowners.

In total, there are 14 project sites that need to be surveyed over an area of approx. 135,000ha. The survey involves mapping polygons in GIS and identifying the habitats in the field. Once the habitats have been mapped, vegetation quadrats are recorded to quantify species composition and structure of the habitat. 15,000ha were surveyed within the Owenduff/Nephin Complex SAC in 2023, with an additional 40,000ha to be surveyed each year from 2024-2026. In 2024, Glenamoy Bog Complex, Slieve Tooley and Glenveagh National Park are scheduled to be surveyed. In 2025, Maumturk Mountains, The Twelve Bens and Bellacorrick Bog Complex are scheduled to be surveyed, with Connemara Bog Complex due for completion in 2026. The project team and its contractor, Woodrow Sustainable Solutions, will be in touch with landowners and relevant authorities in advance of undertaking surveys.



Shared Island Fund peatland restoration project update *by Derek McLoughlin*

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is spearheading a €15m cross-border Shared Island Fund peatland restoration project that runs from 2023 to 2025. The aim is to develop capacity and expertise, share knowledge and deliver peatland restoration in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is coordinating the funding via the National Parks and Wildlife Service in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and NatureScot.



A lack of technical and organisational capacity in peatland restoration is a barrier to preventing the ongoing decline of our peatlands - this funding will help to bridge that gap. Our objective is to develop lighthouse demonstration sites in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland 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. In Ireland we are currently demonstrating restoration of erosion impacts, reactivation of drained peatlands and forest to bog restoration in counties Mayo and Leitrim.

For 2024, we will be advancing our restoration project as well as providing further training for farmer and community groups. We also look forward to developing a community engagement program that focuses on peatland restoration as an ecological, creative and communal practice to facilitate shared learning between scientists and arts.

Further information on the Shared Island Fund: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c3417-shared-island/>

Shared Island Fund peatland restoration training *by Andrew Speer*

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature hosted peatland restoration training for 80 participants funded through our Shared Island Fund and delivered by The Crichton Carbon Centre (CCC), a partner of NatureScot, based in southwest Scotland. We ran two, two day training courses in Glenveagh National Park, North Donegal and Mayo. We had a wide range of stakeholders and future peatland restoration practitioners in attendance from public authorities, NGOs, academia, private companies and community groups. Dr Emily Taylor (General Manager, CCC) and Anna Basley (Peatland Programme Manager, CCC) shared their extensive experience designing and delivering peatland restoration projects across Scotland over the past ten years. The wide range of participants added a wealth of experience, discussion and perspective to an informative and practical course. The course provided an excellent opportunity to meet others on the same journey regarding our uplands and discuss common concerns, challenges and issues facing us in the coming years. The course covered a range of topics from practical restoration techniques, planning a project, communication, permissions and consent.



More than 150 farmers have joined WaterLANDS project *by Guadumeth Chico*

WaterLANDS is a Horizon 2020 EU funded project under the Green Deal with six restoration ‘Action Sites’ across Europe. The Irish Action Site, led by LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, is located at the Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC in Co. Leitrim and Co. Cavan, where peatland restoration actions began last summer.

Initial works focused on controlling invasive species on near-natural blanket bog, promoting the improvement of the habitat and the quality of the blanket bog. In order to implement these actions, the Irish team has been working very closely with local farmers through open information evenings, workshops and individual farm visits to better understand each of the farms across the SAC and find the best solutions for individual farmers.

Currently, over 150 farmers have joined the WaterLANDS programme and 83 are included within the restoration plans for 600 hectares of blanket bog. A total investment of over €3 million will be used to restore blanket bogs, provide peatland restoration training to local communities and pay for the works done by the landowners. Restoration plans are designed with the landowners, incorporating their thoughts and ideas and promoting co-creation practices.



Along with the restoration, the WaterLANDS team has also implemented an extensive and ambitious integrated research monitoring plan to demonstrate the impacts of peatland restoration. Following the smart indicators approach, the team is installing equipment to better understand the hydrological integrity, the climate regulation functions and the biodiversity of peatlands before, during and after restoration. The information collected will provide scientific evidence of restoration impacts on blanket bog and will help to better understand this rare and unique habitat. Finally, the team is also working in developing new scorecards to improve the observations and evaluation of the habitats through the Results Based Payment Schemes (RBPS) approach.



Technical networking visit to LIFE projects in the Azores Islands *by Javier Ferreiro*

IBADER of the University of Santiago de Compostela, as an associated beneficiary of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, travelled in October to the Azores Islands, in a technical networking visit to meet with members of the Government of the Azores and the University of the Azores, who are involved in the LIFE IP CLIMAZ and LIFE IP AZORES NATURA projects, among others.

The visit facilitated observation of the results of the Azorean projects, which can inform the work of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature. In the same way, the presentation of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature encouraged the transfer of the knowledge generated and the replicability of the strategies followed, and the solutions adopted, also opening new channels for future collaboration between the entities involved.



Event highlights

Official launch of the Wild Atlantic Nature schools programme in Co. Donegal

In May, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine Charlie McConalogue T.D. launched the Wild Atlantic Nature primary school programme designed to educate children on the environmental and economic advantages of our blanket bogs. The programme, which was developed by the Heritage Council, is being rolled out to schools in Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Sligo and Leitrim following the successful completion of a pilot phase.

The education programme takes children on a journey through the wonders of bog habitat, learning about how the bogs can control floods, provide clean drinking water and high-quality food, support biodiversity and help tackle climate change by storing millions of tonnes of carbon. As our future farmers, children are learning how to actively manage habitats through sustainable farm practices.



EU CAP Network Focus Group

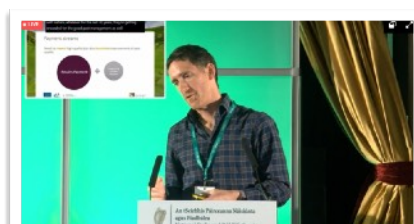


LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature were represented by Gary Goggins on the EU CAP Network Focus Group related to enhancing biodiversity on farmland through high-diversity landscape features. The focus group was tasked with identifying challenges and opportunities for farmers, highlighting good practice, identifying research needs from practice and suggesting innovative ideas for future projects. Outputs included a report and five mini-papers, several of which include examples of good practice from Wild Atlantic Nature.

Presentations at national and international conferences and local events

2023 was another busy year for LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature communication and dissemination activities. Derek McLoughlin gave a presentation at the British Ecological Society Conference in Belfast, and attended several EU events to share experiences from the project. Gary Goggins was invited to give a presentation at a Landscape Europe Workshop in Lithuania and the IUCN Peatlands Programme Conference in the UK. LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature were also at the National Ploughing Championships in the National Parks and Wildlife Service tent, where we met with many farmers involved in our project activities. Vicki McArthur and Andrew Speer spoke to students in ATU Letterkenny about careers in nature conservation, and had a stand at the annual Clonmany Agricultural Show in north Donegal. The project was also delighted to have a stand at the Bangor Sheep Fair in North Mayo, which has made a welcome return after several years

absence. One of the year's highlights was Tae in the Bog, which involved music and ecology at Easkey Bog in Sligo, as part of the Paddy Killoran Music Festival. Wild Atlantic Nature also featured on the RTE Six-One news, when Colman O'Sullivan spoke with farmer Gary Ginty about his experiences with the project.



News from partners

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



LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature networking action has continued its progress after the creation of the Southern European blanket bog working group by IBADER-USC, as an associated beneficiary of the project. Thanks to the synergies created by this working group, 'The Blanket Bog Project' (www.theblanketbogproject.com) has travelled again in September 2023 to NW Spain (Galicia), to continue with the collaboration with IBADER-USC developing the erosion experiment in blanket bogs. 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, Canada and Spain.

The expected outcomes of The Blanket Bog Project are promising and potentially relevant. This research aims to identify blanket bogs globally, understand its range of characteristics, estimate how much carbon this habitat stores, assessing erosion rates and its causes, working together with the stakeholders to protect and restore blanket bogs globally, and establishing an extensive network to link projects together and compare blanket bog management techniques, promoting the protection and restoration of this very important habitat based on scientific evidence.

Teagasc Upland Farming and Landscape Management Symposium

Over 150 people attended the Upland Farming and Landscape Management Symposium in Westport, County Mayo in November 2023. The symposium was organised by Teagasc in collaboration with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) from Northern Ireland. The symposium brought together farmers, scientists, policymakers, knowledge transfer professionals and practitioners, as well as a number of rural and community organisations from across the island of Ireland engaged with farming, managing and utilising upland landscapes. The symposium had a mix of scientific presentations and panel discussions, with farmer and wider stakeholder contributions.

The event was structured in four key themes around Carbon, Water, Biodiversity and Livestock, and highlighted the key role for economically, socially and environmentally sustainable farming systems, with the farmer at the centre, to deliver positive results from uplands across these multiple objectives. In summing up the symposium, Dr Stan Lalor, Director of Knowledge Transfer in Teagasc commented on the positivity that was evident, both from farmers and from wider stakeholders, in the sustenance and development of farming systems in the uplands. Significant momentum has been created around how upland farming systems can be developed through collaborative initiatives, and can be supported through policy and results-based incentives. However, the overall economic and social viability of farm systems to support farm households and rural communities will be a fundamental requirement in order to achieve and enhance the environmental potential that exists within upland landscapes. The event was attended by the Mayo Wild Atlantic Nature Knowledge Exchange Group (pictured).



News from related projects

Lough Carra LIFE *by Kieran Flynn*



Lough Carra, a small lake to the south of Castlebar, Co. Mayo, is well known to generations of visitors for its trout fishing and its idyllic surroundings, with turquoise clear waters and white Marl crusts covering the rocks on its lake floor and shore. One of the finest examples of a Marl Lake habitat in Europe, Lough Carra is designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and a Special Protected Area (SPA).

Lough Carra is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of modern land management, specifically the increased levels of nutrient run-off from agricultural land, and the ongoing conversion of semi-natural habitats into grasslands for livestock. Recent decades have seen a continuous decline of the water quality of the lake and the surrounding habitats, prompting the establishment of the Lough Carra LIFE project. This year, a pilot Results Based Agri-environment Payments Scheme was developed in collaboration with local farmers to address some of the issues relating to agriculture. More than 30 farms took part, with the development of Farm Plans, results-based monitoring, supporting actions, and a series of farmer workshops. Plans are in place to expand the Scheme for 2024.

Biodiversity management plans and habitat enhancement plans for key species have been developed throughout the catchment area, and controls on invasive species have been implemented. Working with Geological Survey Ireland, the project commenced a Groundwater Study of the Lough Carra catchment, helping to understand better the connections between groundwater and surface water in the catchment, and so targeting project actions more effectively. A comprehensive programme of lake monitoring has been designed and implemented, helping to further build understanding of what is happening to the lake and implement suitable measures accordingly. Further information about the project can be found at loughcarralife.ie



LIFE IP Peatlands and People *by Arthur Devine*

As LIFE IP Peatlands and People prepares to enter its fourth year, pilot studies conducted by Bord na Mona under the project's "Peatlands Excellence" pillar suggest that initial planting of Sphagnum moss on rehabilitated raised bog is working well. The current goal is to plant 150,000 small clusters of Sphagnum across 30 hectares of recently restored Bord na Móna bogs. Planting Sphagnum on suitable areas of rewetted peatland aims to expedite the colonisation of bare peat which will in turn, and in time, develop peat forming conditions and ultimately turn these peatlands back to being carbon sinks.

The sourcing round for SMEs, start-ups and companies to take part in the third Accelerate Green programme has just closed. The programme itself will officially commence in January 2024. It is a transformative accelerator programme developed to equip Irish business owners in the climate action and sustainability sector with the skills and knowledge to scale their business here in Ireland and beyond.



In addition to developing and designing the People's Discovery Visitor Experience, University of Galway are also leading on the development of IrelandNetZero, an interactive digital sustainability simulator that will enable participants, including corporates and communities, to lead environmental and sustainability efforts in organisations. IrelandNetZero will be housed in the People's Discovery Visitor Experience and will be used as an educational tool in an MSc on Sustainable Leadership.

News from community networks

Dúlra - Restoring Nature's Balance *by Sinéad Grimes*



Dúlra, meaning 'Nature' in Irish, is a community-led peatland restoration project operating within three Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) in South Mayo and Connemara – namely the Mwealrea/Sheeffrey/Erriff Complex SAC, Connemara Bog Complex SAC and Twelve Bens/Garraun Complex SAC.

This Natura Communities project is funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and is led by FORUM Connemara CLG, in partnership with the Leenane Development Association and LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and is overseen by a steering group made up of local farmers, state agencies, and community groups.

Dúlra has an invasive species control element targeting *Rhododendron Ponticum*. While its vibrant pink flowers may seem picturesque, this non-native plant has rapidly spread and outcompeted native vegetation, leading to a decline in biodiversity and the loss of habitat for native wildlife.

The team, consisting of ten trained and skilled locals led by Dermot Flaherty, has been actively collaborating with farmers and landowners to control *Rhododendron* spread in the Erriff, Delphi, Letterfrack and wider Connemara areas. The team's expertise, aided by environmental guidance from project ecologist Conor Ryan and project facilitator Roisin Gannon, has been crucial in combating this ecological threat. The team uses the NPWS-recommended stem herbicide application approach for tackling rhododendrons.

The team has recently extended their focus to areas in South Connemara where they have started collaborating with farmers to identify priority areas affected by *Rhododendron* infestation. The team has mapped these areas and is aiming for a rollout of community training in South Connemara in the New Year. Dúlra is also engaged in other areas of peatland restoration actions and trials including rewetting, bank reprofiling, trialling wool use in peatland restoration, biochar making and tree planting.

For more details, contact Roisin Gannon, Project Facilitator, or Dermot Flaherty, Operations Manager, at 095 41116 or visit <https://www.forumconnemara.ie/dulra>.



Glac páirt leis an gComhairle Oidhreachta chun Oidhreacht Nádúrtha na hÉireann a chosaint

Seo conas is féidir leat bheith páirteach inár eláir:

- Bí páirteach in iarrachtaí caomhálthe le d'Oifigeach Oidhreachta nó Bithéagsúlachta áitiúil.
- Fiosraigh an bhithéagsúlacht áitiúil trí úsáid a bhaint as ár bpacal eolaíochta saoránach, atá ar fáil ag do leabharlann áitiúil.
- Déan ceiliúradh ar an oidhreacht nádúrtha i rith na Seachtaine Náisiúnta na hOidhreachta agus na Seachtaine Bithéagsúlachta Náisiúnta.
- Saibhrigh aigni óga trí pháirt a ghlacadh inár Scéim Oidhreachta sna Scoileanna.
- Cabhraigh le hÍomhá Iomlán dár bhfiadhúlra a chruthú trí do thorthaí a sheoladh chuig an Ionad Náisiúnta le Sonraí Bithéagsúlachta.

www.heritagecouncil.ie

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council

Plans announced to establish National Peatlands Centre of Excellence at University of Galway

University of Galway has announced plans to establish the National Peatland Centre of Excellence to help tackle national and global challenges related to peatlands and associated decarbonisation, biodiversity loss, just transitions and culture.

This initiative follows the successful Peatland Futures event held at the university, which brought together experts, policymakers and stakeholders to deliberate on the future of peatland and wetland research and innovation in Ireland.

Representatives from government departments, universities and community and farming organisations took part in the event.

A crucial component of Peatland Futures was the collective call to action for wetland and peatland restoration and conservation.

Recognising the significance of improving peatland conditions for long-term environmental benefit, participants were united in support of establishing a national centre of excellence to provide essential support, knowledge, training, policy insights and resources necessary for conservation efforts.



Speaking at the Peatland Futures event, Professor Jim Livesey, Vice-President for Research and Innovation at University of Galway said: "Like so many challenges, we recognise that solutions cannot be found from one perspective, so we wish to engage with landowners, farmers, policymakers, community groups, government agencies and other research institutions. Together, we can make a lasting difference for the preservation of Ireland's peatlands."

Dr Terry Morley, Assistant Professor and organiser of the Peatland Futures event, said: "Ireland has world-class peatland research and expertise and it's time we act to increase our collective capacity for

research, public outreach and dissemination, and to train the next generation of peatland practitioners. The University of Galway is uniquely situated with blanket and raised bogs at our doorstep and broad interdisciplinary peatland research expertise."

The event featured two workshops aimed at shaping the future of peatland research. The first discussed the proposal for a National Peatland Centre of Excellence, while a second focused on creating a policy summary and providing actionable strategies for informed decision-making in peatland conservation.

For further information on University of Galway's work in peatlands visit <https://stories.universityofgalway.ie/peatlands/index.html> or contact Dr Terry Morley at terry.morley@universityofgalway.ie



Closing message

Dear reader,

I hope you have enjoyed reading our newsletter and found the content informative.

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature aims to develop capacity amongst farmers, landowners and other members of our communities to be best equipped to deal with current and future challenges and to benefit from a healthy environment. We hope to expand the facilitation of local groups, such as the Dúlra project, to provide local employment by becoming experts in blanket bog restoration.

In 2024 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. We are very grateful to the many farmers and community groups that have dedicated their time to the project in 2023. As always, we welcome suggestions for how we can improve in the years ahead.

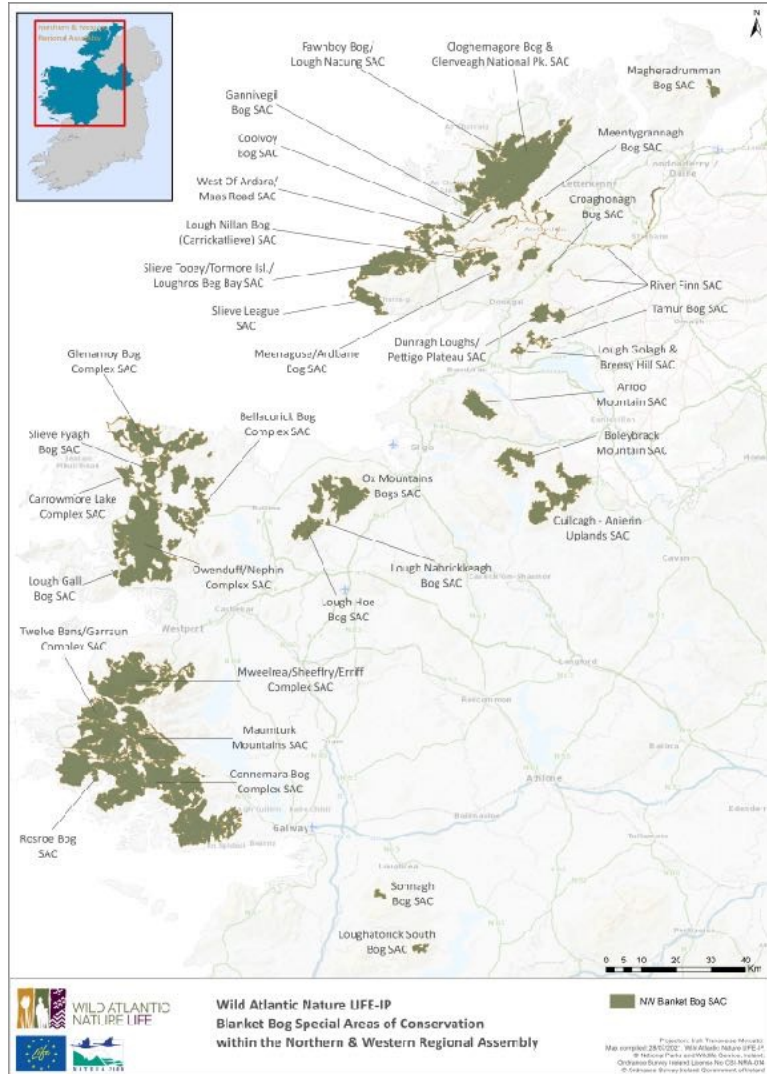
We look forward to your continued support in 2024.

Regards,

Derek McLoughlin and the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature team



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