

Community Wetlands Forum Budget Submission

2015/16

**Contact
Seamus Boland or James Claffey**

Introduction

The Community Wetlands Forum was established under the umbrella of Irish Rural Link in September 2013. The forum came together as a result of the work already undertaken by Irish Rural link on behalf of community groups affected by the Peatlands' directive and in the development of wetlands as an enhanced asset in the community.

The difficulties associated with implementing the Peatlands' directive, particularly regarding the adverse experience of turf cutters, have shown that there is a disconnection between communities and the objectives of conservation as they would apply to wetlands. Because of this, many wetland areas are left in perilous states, with essential management needed for their protection. Equally where wetland community groups have taken action, the results, both for the wetlands and the communities are spectacular. There is as you will know a small number of communities who have established development plans in their areas. From our work on this we are coming across many who would wish to start the process, but feel they will need support, given the controversial publicity around the implementation of the Peatlands directive.

The rationale supporting a Wetlands Community Forum is based on the development of wetlands using the tools of community development as a means of ensuring that all actions taken have the full support of the community. It means that the community become engaged in acquiring a greater knowledge of the value of wetlands and can use this to their own benefit. It also means that the community become involved as early as possible and that the necessary local stakeholders are included.

In establishing a network of wetland groups it is proposed that the aim is to: Facilitate the sharing of knowledge, ideas and organisational methods. It will also introduce groups to the latest research, national and international experts, similar networks and funding possibilities.

It will also provide skills in the use of community development principles as a means of bringing all parts of the community with them.

Clearly the group currently in its infancy will need support, particularly some funding. As of now there is a group of 11 local networks with interest in more joining. These include Abbeyleix, Corlea, Cabragh, Laois Offaly wild life trust, Cloughjordan, Kenagh, Boora, Clara, Kerry, Westmeath and Kildare.

Supporting the Network

While Irish Rural Link is currently providing some administrative support, it will not be able to supply expert related assistance in the form of research and technical wetlands expertise. Examples of such support include;

- The identification of potential wetland sites in communities and communities who wish to evaluate their own areas.
- The co-ordination of targeted event, seminars on community involvement.
- The provision of direct assistance to groups who wish to explore new projects.

As a beginning we would like to hire the services of a graduate or someone whose qualifications or experience could be put to use with this group. As a means of funding this Irish Rural Link would propose that government will consider means in which the EPA, perhaps in partnership with the relevant department would make available funding in the region of €10,000 to begin the process.

Environmental Protection

In times gone by, the value of wetlands was significantly undervalued by society in terms of its economic, education and social value. In more recent times, the value placed on wetlands has increased significantly, many wetlands community groups within the network state their main focus is on conservation, education and recreation with conservation being the priority. At present there is a range of state agencies concerned with the preservation of wetlands which is vital to their survival but communities must be educated about conservation and the value of the wetlands to the local community. The budget allocated to environmental protection of wetlands must continue and allocated to appropriate sites most in danger. It is important to note that the protection of wetlands site is not only vital for landscape purposes but also for the protection of the species that live within these sites. One of the main challenges facing the implementation of conservation legalisation is the lack of

resources and personnel. The infrastructure must be put in place to implement the conservation legalisation.

It is widely acknowledged that Ireland's natural landscape is the biggest attraction for tourists and wetlands are a significant part of this landscape. As these sites increase in terms of their economic value, a balance between economic and conservation value must be achieved. For some, the construction of a boardwalk on a wetlands site has a negative impact on the environment while others see it as an amenity to promote the site and educate the local community whilst also having a social benefit. It is critical that agencies and communities work together to achieve the appropriate balance. A budget should be allocated to encourage and support community awareness and participation in managing and conserving wetland sites.

Research

Like any area of landscape, research is required to identify and establish correct methods of conservation and restoration. There remains no clear method of evaluating the economic value that ecosystems process to the local and national economy. A study needs to be commissioned on the best methods of evaluating wetland sites in monetary value.

The preservation of ecosystems relies on a co-operative approach between agencies, government and communities but communities must have an active role and take responsibility for the resources in their locality. How do we achieve this bottom up approach?

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 300 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'