

RESTORING NATIVE WOODLANDS: THE EXPERIENCE FROM THE PEOPLE'S MILLENNIUM FORESTS PROJECT

Michael Doyle, Forestry Consultant
4 St Manntan's Court, Wicklow Town
Tel: 0404 68673 / 086 2527294
Email: doylem@eircom.net

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Abstract

The People's Millennium Forest was the first project of national significance to highlight the importance of our remaining semi-natural woodlands. Although the area of woodland identified for establishment, restoration and conservation was relatively small (596ha) the project was wide-ranging and aimed at involving every household and institution in the country.

The mission of the People's Millennium Forests was to ensure that future generations could enjoy the benefits of Ireland's native forests. The project's objectives were to enrich and expand Ireland's native forests, to help people appreciate Ireland's native forests and to improve management of our native forests. Coillte Teoranta and Woodlands of Ireland jointly managed the project. The major sponsors were the Allied Irish Bank and the National Millennium Committee with the Forest Service also giving financial and technical support.

Sixteen sites were selected in all, ranging in size from 11 to 96 ha, spread over every province in the country with two sites in Northern Ireland. Overall 1.2 million trees were planted, a tree for every household in the country. A certificate was sent to every household identifying where a tree was planted on their behalf.

Three outreach officers were appointed and they organised walks, visits to schools and seed collection programmes. A mobile exhibition called "the road show" was launched and it visited towns and events throughout the country, with interesting exhibitions and educational programmes on native woodlands. Other promotional initiatives included the restoration of a Yew Walk in Clonfert Abbey, the commission of three native timber sculptures, native woodland management courses, seed collection programmes and a public relations plan, which included a web site.

Background

In 1999 Woodlands of Ireland made a submission to the National Millennium Committee to create a native woodland to commemorate the millennium year. The submission was looked on favourably, with the recommendation that a suitable partner should be sought to implement the project. Coillte agreed to be a partner and the project was approved.

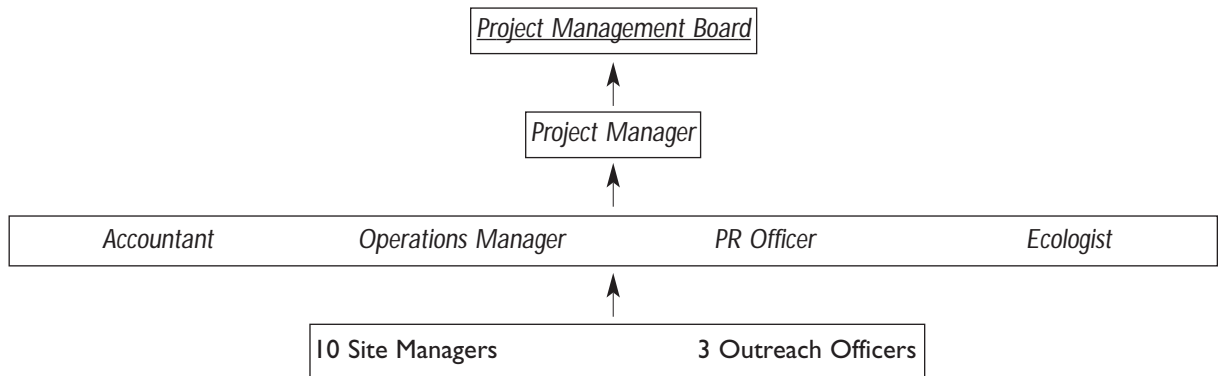
Management Team

A professional team, with some expertise in native woodland management, was selected to manage the project and a business plan was drawn up. The manpower available to carry out the fieldwork was also identified. The management team reported to a Management Bord with representations from the main sponsors and other large organisations such as National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

Funding

AIB (€2.54m), The National Millennium Committee (€2.03m) and the Forest Service (€0.50m) provided funding for the project. Coillte Teo is not listed as one of the sponsors but the company made available 294.8 ha of their highly productive woodland to the project. They also provided, free of charge, a management team to run the project. Funding was granted from the sponsors on condition that 1.2 million trees would be planted, a tree for every household in the country.

Overall Structure of the Project



Management team training

Native Woodland Management was a relatively new concept in Ireland and the management team underwent a short training course in Scotland before undertaking the project fieldwork.

Identify suitable sites

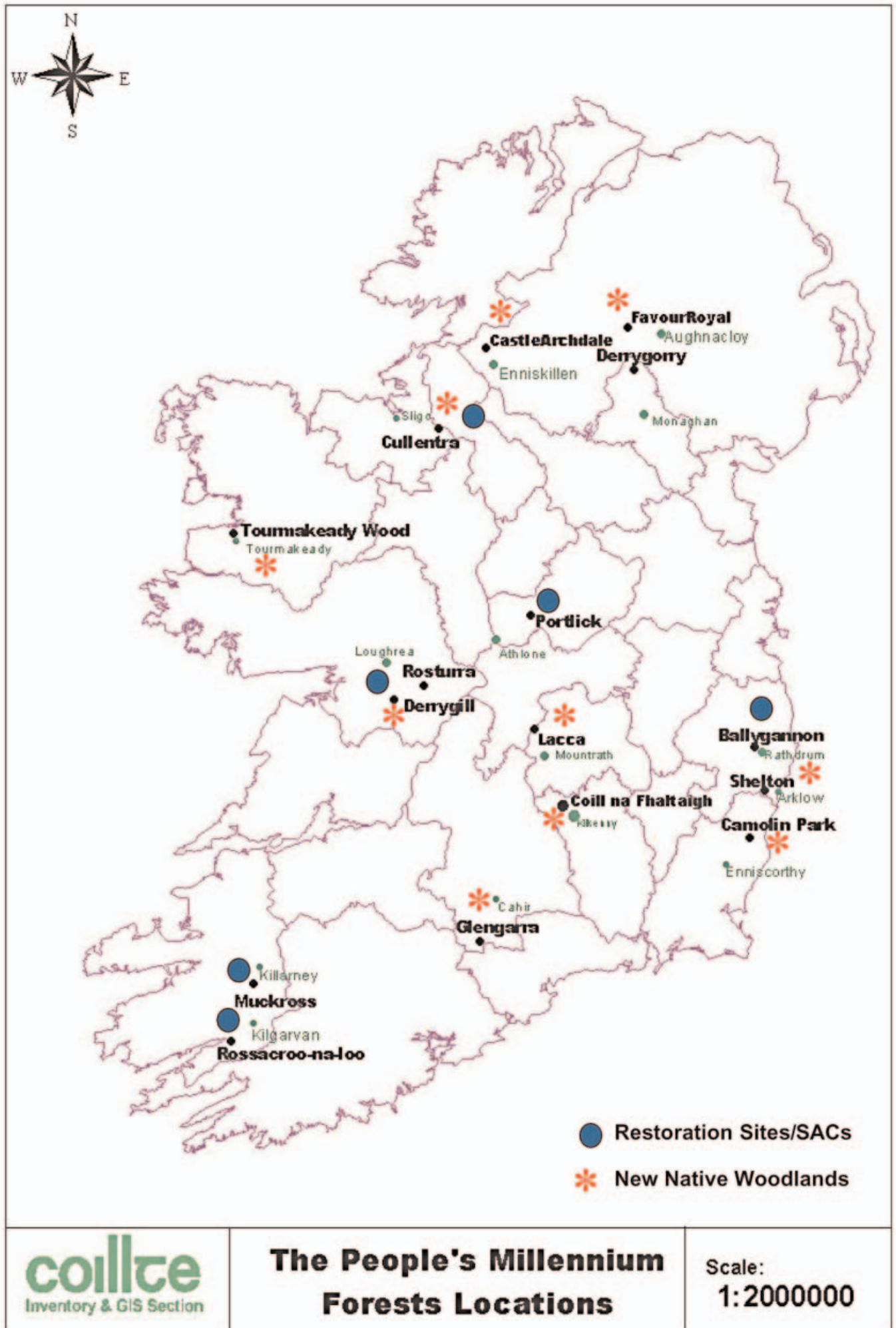
It was important to obtain sites suitable for native woodland development. A team of seven experts travelled the country and selected sites that represented a range of native woodland habitats. The sites selected consisted of one Nature Reserve, five SACs, two sites adjacent to SACs, six sites of old woodland origin, one riparian site and one classified as agricultural land.

Ecological and Archaeological surveys

Ecological and archaeological surveys were carried out on each site before work commenced. The establishment and restoration operations were carried out in accordance with the recommendations of these surveys.

Site Location and Areas

Site	Total area	Area Planted
Ballygannon	52.5 ha	18.8 ha
Shelton	45.8 ha	36.0 ha
Camolin	11.0 ha	10.8 ha
Woodlands	95.5 ha	83.2 ha
Glengarra	19.3 ha	17.8 ha
Rossacree-na-Loo	45.9 ha	3.2 ha
Muckcross	25.0 ha	Nil
Rosturra	51.2 ha	39.2 ha
Derrygill	22.5 ha	21.5 ha
Tourmakeady	35.2 ha	26.4 ha
Derrygorry	42.3 ha	38.1 ha
Cullentra	57.3 ha	16.5 ha
Lacca	17.3 ha	13.0 ha
Portlick	53.4 ha	8.7 ha
Castle Archdale	11.0 ha	8.0 ha
Favour Royal	12.0 ha	10.0 ha
Totals	597.2 ha	51.2 ha



Main Challenges

The project work commenced in late 1999 and the target was to complete the main core work before the end of year 2000. Some of the most difficult challenges were:

- To identify suitable sites
- To source native planting stock
- To design, manufacture and erect signage on sites on time
- Identify the grid location of every household tree and issue certificates to each household
- Prepare sites and plant 1.2 million trees
- Implement an outreach programme
- Respond to queries from the general public and the media.

Household tree scheme

The National Millennium Committee requested that a certificate be issued to every household in the country confirming that a tree had been planted on their behalf and stating its location. This scheme proved to be very time consuming and costly but it did have the effect of creating awareness countrywide, in every household, of the importance of our native forests.

Signage

Signage turned out to be a major challenge and could have been a complete project on its own. The work was wide ranging and some of the operations included:

- Design finger board signs and apply for planning permission.
- Engage graphic designer and supply necessary information, such as history of the site and map of the main features of the site.
- Produce grid map showing tree location and list of household tree numbers to match.
- Proof read drafts and send to manufacturer
- Proof read before final production
- Transfer to joinery for framing
- Transfer and erect signs on site

Public Relations/Media

The project attracted widespread attention both from the public and the media. It made the news headlines as the flagship of the millennium projects and was covered by national television and radio. There was a huge public response to the project and people wanted to see where their tree was planted. Although there was some criticism of the project the vast majority of enquiries were positive and complimentary. Every site had an official launch and a well-known personality was engaged to perform the opening ceremony.

Mobile Exhibition

A mobile exhibition, with all the information about the project, visited every county and targeted main events such as the national ploughing championship and other large regional events.

Outreach Programme

Three outreach officers were appointed to carry out this programme. Some of the highlights of the programme were:

- Visiting national schools throughout the country and arranging supervised field trips to the woods
- The publication of "Our trees" book, which gave a comprehensive guide to growing native trees.

- Setting up a website (www.millenniumforests.com) giving information on our native woodlands and details of all the Peoples Millennium Forest sites. A copy of the ecological and archaeological surveys for each forest is also available on the site. The site is still active and is well worth a visit.

The outreach staff were also involved with the mobile exhibition when it visited their area.

Other Activities

Some of the other activities included the commissioning of wood sculptures in two of the sites, Cullentra, Co. Sligo and Ballygannon, Co. Wicklow. A sculpture was also commissioned for the winner of the 2000 Tidy Towns competition and it can be viewed in the square in Kenmare, Co. Kerry. The yew walk in Clonfert, Co. Offaly was also restored. Courses on seed collection of native tree species were run in Wicklow, Killarney and Sligo and were very well attended. Open areas were left unstocked on a number of sites and the colonisation of these selected areas were monitored. In two sites areas of good quality birch were selected and a silvicultural work programme put in place to monitor the commercial potential of birch woodland.

Highlights of the project

The highlights of the project included

- The establishment of 351ha of native woodland and the restoration of a further 256ha
- The success of containerised oak. Acorns were collected in October, planted in plastic tunnels in February and were ready for planting in August. The trees proved to have a very good survival rate and very fast early growth.
- The excellent performance of some of our native species such as birch and alder.
- The public awareness created and positive reaction from the public in general was very encouraging
- Very valuable experience was gained on native woodland management and conservation
- This experience was invaluable to the Forest Service's "Native Woodland Scheme" which was launched soon afterwards.

Threats

The main threats to the sites are:

- Invasive non-native species such as rhododendron, sycamore, beech and Sitka spruce.
- Damage from deer browsing
- Illegal dumping
- Vandalism to signage, picnic tables, gates and entrances.

The future of the Millennium woodlands

Recent audits of the site gave very positive results and the new native woodlands are now well established and almost at free growth stage. Areas in need of attention were programmed for attention in 2003 and work is ongoing on these sites. Coillte has undertaken responsibility to maintain the sites into the future.

A brief 30-year plan is in place for all sites. From this plan a more detailed 5-year plan is generated and updated every year. Master files have been set up on Coillte's computer system where information on all the sites will be stored and made available when required.

It was a unique experience to work on the People's Millennium Project. There is now a great opportunity to enhance our knowledge of native woodland management from observing the performance of these woodlands into the future.