

WOODLANDS OF IRELAND – COILLEARNACHA DÚCHASACHA ORIGINS, ACTIVITIES AND VISION FOR THE FUTURE

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KEYWORDS: partnership, native woodland policy, People's Millennium Forests, Native Woodland Scheme, public awareness

Abstract

The Woodlands of Ireland Group was established in 1998 to represent all those with an interest in native woodlands, including foresters, ecologists, statutory bodies, ENGOs, contractors and the nursery sector. Woodlands of Ireland (Wol) is co-funded by the Forest Service (Department of Agriculture and Food), the Heritage Council and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government).

Since its inception, Woodlands of Ireland has been at the forefront of native woodland conservation in Ireland through initiatives such as the People's Millennium Forest Project and the development of the Forest Service Native Woodland Scheme. Woodlands of Ireland continue to support the development of the scheme through the provision of training courses – in association with the Forest Service – aimed at foresters, ecologists, contractors and others directly involved in the scheme.

The Woodlands of Ireland Steering Group provides guidance and expertise on the overall management of the organisation. A Technical Advisory Group also provides technical advice and support on initiatives. This group have recently contributed to a set of Silvicultural Guidelines outlining management systems appropriate under the Native Woodland Scheme. The group has also made submissions to the National Roads Authority on the appropriate management of roadside verges and to the Department of Agriculture and Food on the review of REPS with regard to the management of semi-natural woodland on farms.

Woodlands of Ireland promote public awareness to highlight the importance of native woodlands as a valuable part of our natural heritage. It is highly appropriate that Ireland's first major conference on native woodlands took place during National Heritage Week 2004.

Introduction

Native woodland once covered most of the island of Ireland, yet today surviving fragments today comprise approximately 1% of the country's land area. Without active management and protection these valuable ecosystems will fast become a fading legacy. During the late 1990s, there was growing concern for the future of Ireland's few remaining semi natural woodlands. The late Freda Rountree, then Chairperson of the Heritage Council, and the Tree Council of Ireland, convened a meeting in Kilkenny in 1997 and invited a group of key native woodland stakeholders with a view to composing a major native woodland initiative to celebrate the new Millennium. A direct result of this meeting was the formation of Woodlands of Ireland in 1998, an organisation that would be dedicated to the protection, enhancement and expansion of Ireland's native woodlands with support from the Heritage Council, The Forest Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (then Dúchas).

Structure

The organisation normally employs one full time Project Manager. A Steering Group provides support and guidance on key initiatives and management of the organisation. This Steering Group represents a broad spectrum of interests and includes representatives of the Heritage Council, the Forest Service and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in addition to ENGOs, state bodies, foresters and ecologists. Steering Group meetings provide an open forum for discussion resulting in a focussed approach to native woodland conservation and management.

A Technical Advisory Group consisting of over 25 experts in various aspects of native woodland ecology, management and conservation, provide support on specific technical matters that arise. This recently included input to the development of a guide on the silviculture and economics involved in managing native woodland for wood production within the context of the Native Woodland Scheme. The publication entitled: *Realising Quality Wood from Ireland's Native Woodlands* will be published in the near future by Woodlands of Ireland.

The People's Millennium Forest Project

The prospect of the new Millennium in 2000 generated much interest and debate on how best to celebrate the occasion. At the time, the Government formed the National Millennium Committee (NMC) to identify and provide funding to worthwhile projects. The aim was to engage the general public and positively contribute to local community development. Woodlands of Ireland availed of this opportunity and proposed a project that would highlight the importance of native woodlands as a valuable component of our natural heritage. The People's Millennium Forests Project was to become the flagship of the NMC.

The scope of the proposal was beyond the capacity of Woodlands of Ireland, which had only one full time employee. The NMC agreed to support the project but recommended that a suitable partner be sought to effectively manage the initiative. Coillte Teoranta kindly agreed to become a partner and with the support of the NMC, AIB, and the Forest Service, 16 sites were carefully selected for native woodland restoration. A detailed description of the management of the project is covered in M. Doyle's paper 'Restoring native woodlands: The experience from the People's Millennium Forests Project' (this volume).

Although the People's Millennium Forests Project has largely been implemented, a number of long-term tasks are ongoing. These include a long-term monitoring project to assess woodland succession in four of the millennium woodlands and the development of a native woodland database under the auspices of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Native Woodland Scheme

Following the People's Millennium Forest Project, the native woodland movement had gained momentum and was strengthened by increased public awareness. In 1999, Woodlands of Ireland submitted a proposal concerned with the grant-aiding of native woodland conservation and creation, to the Forest Service for consideration. The Native Woodland Scheme evolved as a direct result of this submission and was officially launched in 2001. This scheme - developed and implemented in partnership with Woodlands of Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Regional Fisheries Boards and a host of other relevant bodies - offers grants and annual payments to landowners to conserve and enhance existing native woodland and to create new areas of native woodland. The scheme's scope and flexibility allow for a wide range of innovative approaches, such as the implementation of continuous cover forestry, the encouragement of natural regeneration, the conversion of non-native forest to native woodland status, the clearance of invasive species such as rhododendron, and the development of riparian native woodland corridors along our rivers and lakes. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of the scheme is that it offers a mechanism, after centuries of decline and neglect, to actually start increasing the area of native woodland cover in Ireland and to appropriately manage remaining woodlands.

The scheme also plays an important role in fulfilling our national and international obligations under the Wildlife Act (1976), the Wildlife (Amendment) Act (2000), the EU habitats directive and the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.

Woodlands of Ireland's Technical Advisory group worked closely with Forest Service staff to develop the grant scheme and to compile a Native Woodland Scheme manual. Wol are actively involved in the provision of Native Woodland Scheme training courses, which are ongoing. Details of the Native Woodland Scheme are comprehensively covered in K. Collins paper 'Funding a future for Ireland's native woodlands: The development and application of the Native Woodland Scheme' (this volume).

COST Action E27

COST is an intergovernmental framework for European Co-operation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research, allowing the co-ordination of nationally funded research on a European Level. COST Action E27 was established in 2002 to harmonise the wide range of protected forest area categories used in European countries within the context of existing international systems of protected areas. The main objective of this action is the improvement of information on protected forest areas in Europe, reporting mechanisms and harmonisation of key terms. Wol are members of this Action and regularly attend COST E27 management committee and working group meetings.

Roadside Planting - National Roads Authority

The National Roads Authority is currently developing a protocol for the management of roadside verges. Wol has provided technical advice on the ecologically sensitive management of roadside verges and the use of native tree and shrub species. Roadside plantings represent an opportunity to develop linear native woodlands across the country and to conserve our indigenous gene pool. Wol will closely monitor this project and continue to provide technical support as required.

Rural Environmental Protection Scheme

There is considerable scope for inputting to the management guidelines for woodlands on farms under the Rural Environmental Protection Scheme (REPS). Although Wol have attended consultation meetings with the Department of Agriculture and Food in May and June 2003 during the review of REPS and submitted a position paper on semi-natural woodlands on farms, a native woodland option has not yet been incorporated into REPS.

Irish Forestry Certification Initiative

The Irish Forestry Certification Initiative is a process that aims to:

- Advance sustainable forest management in Ireland
- Develop a certifiable forest management standard for Irish forests based upon the principles and criteria of The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)
- Engage the general public and relevant interest groups in the development of the Irish FSC standard

Woodlands of Ireland was elected to the steering group of IFCI, on the social chamber in 1999. In the last year considerable progress has been made in the forest certification process. Declan Little of Woodlands of Ireland and currently Chairman of Irish Forestry Certification Initiative Ltd. (IFCI Ltd.), recently reported that virtually all 10 FSC Principles and associated criteria have been reviewed by the Technical Working Group, which is comprised of representatives from the 4 constituent chambers of IFCI Ltd. When the revised draft standard is completed it will be circulated for public consultation. IFCI Ltd. is a member-based organisation and members are affiliated to chambers according to member profile and chamber definition.

Public Relations

It is not the intention of Woodlands of Ireland to promote itself widely as there are numerous woodland-related organisations in the field. However, it is important to ensure that the forest and conservation agencies, in particular, are aware of our activities. Woodlands of Ireland regularly update native woodland stakeholders through its quarterly article in 'Crann magazine' and on the official website: www.woodlandsofireland.com. Information on native woodlands, Wol activities and upcoming events are posted on the website.

Conclusion

The success of the Native Woodland Conference in September 2004 represented a major initiative at raising awareness and highlighting the importance of conserving and expanding Ireland's native woodland resource. The fact that over 270 people attended the conference over four days is a clear indicator that the conservation of native woodlands is an issue that is high on the agenda of a broad range of interest groups. Over 30 lectures presented by the leading experts in native woodland conservation and management from Ireland, the UK and mainland Europe are presented in this publication.

One of the key areas to be addressed in future includes the development of riparian woodland management expertise and training courses. Although Ireland is in the nascent stages of native woodland conservation and establishment, current indicators point to a bright future. The 2005 budget for the Native Woodland Scheme will determine the work programme for the year ahead but a significant increase on last year's funding allocation is expected. The Native Woodland Scheme has evolved considerably since it was first launched in 2001 and is currently being reviewed within the Forest Service.

Woodlands of Ireland will continue to influence the development of native woodland policy; support the progression of the Native Woodland Scheme and identify other opportunities for native woodland restoration and establishment in Ireland.

Acknowledgements

Woodlands of Ireland wish to thank current and previous Project Managers including John O'Reilly, Declan Little and Cara Doyle and the members of the Steering and Technical Advisory Groups who have contributed to the organisation and its initiatives since its establishment in 1998. Wol is particularly grateful for the generous financial support of the Heritage Council, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government) and the Forest Service (Department of Agriculture and Food). Woodlands of Ireland furthermore wish to convey our gratitude to all those who contributed to the success of the conference especially the organisational and editorial committees.

References

Doyle, M. Restoring native woodlands: The experience from the People's Millennium Forests Project (*this vol.*)
Collins, K. Funding a future for Ireland's native woodlands: The development and application of the Native Woodland Scheme (*this vol.*)