

# Wicklow Mountain Views



THE NEWSLETTER OF WICKLOW UPLANDS COUNCIL

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## A Letter from the Chair



Something that came across to me strongly when I first became involved with Wicklow Uplands Council, was the great emphasis on the community and co-operative approach. Over the years since, I have become convinced that this is the essential way forward not only in dealing with matters at local level but in handling all the problems that we are facing - up to and including climate change.

This approach has come to the fore once again during the Covid crisis. The way that the upland communities have come together and the level of mutual support evident throughout, has been really impressive.

Despite all the challenges caused by the Covid measures, an enormous amount of work has been achieved with a big thank you due to the staff, board members and supporters of the Council for their great work and positive approach during the past year.

The Uplands Path Condition Survey was completed, highlighting not only the effects of increased recreational use on the landscape, but also some more critical long-term challenges facing the upland environment. The PURE Project, of course, has continued to achieve outstanding results. Its Pure Mile initiative is another example of what can be achieved by community involvement.

The Final Report of the Wicklow Deer Management Project has also been submitted to the funding Departments and will be publicly available shortly. The project's findings have confirmed the serious problems caused by the

very high population of deer in Wicklow and demonstrate the urgent need for increased deer management efforts to be implemented. We are eager to secure a new funding commitment to build on the foundations laid by the three year project.

The SUAS Project, one of the most important projects ever undertaken in the uplands, is in its final year. It is providing vital data and experience on the ground as we work towards defining a comprehensive and practical vision of what needs to be done to protect our uplands and to secure this precious landscape and natural resources. Their Peatland Restoration Project, in co-operation with the Wicklow Mountains National Park, is likely to be one of the major environmental tasks for the future. And again, co-operation has been shown to be the key factor. The people on the ground must be involved from the start. In real life they know the lie of the land better than anyone.

There has been further success in expanding the network of interlinked walking trails. Excellent work has been done by the many people involved, however I would like to mention especially, Carol Coad, the Rural Recreation Officer with County Wicklow Partnership for her continued support and invaluable guidance.

Wicklow Uplands Council plays a large and increasing role in the areas of biodiversity, heritage and sustainability. This is not surprising as these areas are becoming ever-more important in the life of the uplands and the people who live, work and recreate there. Our role has been widely acknowledged for instance by being kindly invited to make a presentation to the National Biodiversity Conference 2022, and Brian Dunne did an excellent job.

The major new developments at Avondale, the Blessington Greenway and the Glendalough Masterplan are most welcome. The large population centre on our doorstep, and the vastly increased numbers of visitors to our countryside present both problems and opportunities. There are likely

to be ongoing challenges with litter, parking, dog control and so forth, however, if the necessary facilities are provided, there are also many business possibilities.

The biggest single worry currently facing Wicklow Uplands Council is how to ensure adequate and sustainable core funding is put in place. The Heritage Council and Wicklow County Council have provided continued support over the years and we are extremely grateful to them.

Mr. Denis O'Brien has been a very generous supporter for many years, which we greatly appreciate. That funding is now in its final year and I would like to express a sincere and personal thanks to Mr. O'Brien.

The scope of projects and activities that the Council manages and administers has grown enormously, putting great strain on our staff and resources. The bottom line is that a substantial source of sustained core funding is now urgently needed to ensure continued success. Without it, we simply could not employ staff or in turn leverage the significant levels of project funding for the wide-ranging initiatives mentioned above.

I would like to extend my thanks to the many project partners, stakeholders and diverse landowners that the Council works alongside to achieve the wide scope of work taking place across the uplands.

And last but not least, It was great to see so many of the members and supporters attend our Summer Panel Meeting and AGM and the more recent SUAS Project Conference. With so much to discuss, both events created the perfect opportunity to share the many positive developments taking place and to acknowledge the work of the communities and members we represent.

**Louis O'Byrne**  
Chair, Wicklow Uplands Council



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta  
The Heritage Council



# Long Distance Walking Trail Edges Closer To Reality

Wicklow Uplands Council has held a long-term ambition of developing a new addition to the long-distance walking trails on offer in the east of Ireland – with the Wicklow Uplands and some of its most spectacular views, diverse settings, along with settlements and key tourism attractions, all featuring close to the selected route.

To achieve this, an over-arching vision of creating a series of interconnected trails that could be presented as individual amenities or enjoyed as part of a longer experience, has been slowly yet steadily developed over the last decade, with a range of stakeholders collaborating to achieve this goal.

Tentatively titled, 'The Wicklow Uplands Way', the envisaged route begins (or ends) in Bray before ascending to Rathdrum and the newly redeveloped Avondale House and Forest Park, and in time, onwards to Avoca and Woodenbridge. This route also passes close to Roundwood and other settlements, where hospitality options would support visitors and provide additional amenities for local communities to enjoy on their doorstep.

Following a number of years of development work, 2020 saw the Bray Head Loop and the Belmont Way officially open, offering not

only two new individual trails but also the more challenging option from Bray all the way to the Sugar Loaf Way – a route that takes in the stunning vista of Bray Head, the mature woodland and farmland of Belmont Demesne and the more demanding, yet rewarding, incline of both the Little Sugar Loaf and Great Sugar Loaf hills.

Wicklow Uplands Council is delighted to be able to share that work will soon be underway on the next stage of the long-distance trail – a 9.5km stretch that will link the Sugar Loaf Way with the scenic Vartry Reservoir Trails. Combined, this opens the possibility of a linear route, from Bray all the way to Roundwood, an impressive distance of some 25km.

Transport options to enable recreational users to experience these trails individually, in stages, or as a multi-day venture using the public transport network, has always been a key consideration to the routes chosen. Train stations and public bus services at Bray and Rathdrum are now matched with the arrival of the 181 and 183 local link bus service, both of which pass through Roundwood and other upland villages – creating much more accessibility and options of where to begin and end walks. It also has the added advantage



Illustration of the Wicklow Uplands Way route

of removing private vehicles from the upland road network and limited parking facilities.

This latest stretch is being delivered by Wicklow County Council in conjunction with Wicklow Uplands Council, having successfully received a funding allocation under the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme in 2019 to develop this integral section that passes through Calary and along the mountainside plateau that leads into the uplands, bringing with it the Council's vision of a long-distance route ever-closer to becoming a reality.





# PURE Project's Impact Continues To Grow

Since its launch in September 2006, the PURE (Protecting Uplands & Rural Environments) Project has continued to make great strides in tackling the challenging issue of illegal dumping and fly-tipping across the Wicklow and Dublin upland region.

Key to the environmental project's success, is working closely with regional communities and engaging with a huge array of stakeholders to positively contribute to ensuring that the uplands' conservation, biodiversity and heritage are both celebrated and protected.

Removing tonnes of illegal dumping and litter so far this year through its various initiatives, PURE's lasting impact across Ireland's largest continuous mountain range can not be overestimated, nor can the public's fondness towards it, with an ever-growing number of volunteers seeking to participate in the PURE Mile a testament to its success.

First launched in 2010, the PURE Mile is a unique environmental, community initiative, which encourages communities and groups to adopt a mile of road, (or miles) or other settings, and to work together to enhance these areas by keeping them tidy, free of litter and to research information about local wildflowers, plants, trees, animals, and the built, cultural, and social heritage. Some groups have taken the extra step of creating websites, heritage booklets and walking routes to the benefit of locals and visitors alike.

For the 2022 Pure Mile, there were over 800 miles of roads, mountains, woodlands, valleys, forestries, and upland amenities, signed up - the largest number ever since the initiative began.

Along with community groups, under the 'Clean up the Uplands' category, the PURE Mile continues to welcome special interests groups such as sports and recreational groups, scouts, schools and a growing number of corporate bodies, who are currently active across all areas of the uplands.

With over 1,000 litter picks/clean-ups undertaken by Pure Mile Groups in the first 6 months resulting in the collection of over 3,000 bags of litter, rubbish, and dumped material being removed from the Wicklow and Dublin upland region, the thousands of Pure Mile volunteers involved should indeed be celebrating their collective accomplishments.

Following a two year hiatus, the PURE Mile Gala made a welcome return to The Brooklodge Hotel in October for a wonderful evening organised to thank and acknowledge the efforts of each and every group and volunteer participating this year.

Also, the 'PURE Truck' that for the last 16 years has become an iconic sight across every area of the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands that's unfortunately suffered from illegal dumping and fly-tipping activities, is soon to be replaced having received capital funding from the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications in 2021.

2022 has also seen a new, freephone number launched to encourage the reporting of illegal activities, and as the project's impact and influence continues to grow, so too does the team tirelessly working to deliver its success, with the recent arrival of an administration assistant to the busy Tinahely office.

Wicklow Uplands Council, who are project partners along with Department of Environment, Climate, and Communications, Wicklow County Council, South Dublin County Council, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, Coillte, and the National Parks & Wildlife Service, would like to congratulate and thank all involved with ensuring our uplands remain cherished and pristine for future generations to explore and enjoy.



**Report fly-tipping/illegal dumping in Wicklow and Dublin Uplands**

**1800 365 123**

# Upland Path Condition Survey Completed



Hill-walkers on the slopes of Cloghernagh using a path suffering from erosion and peat damage.

Renowned for their natural beauty, the Wicklow Uplands understandably attract a great number of visitors, with events of the last couple of years seeing a large increase in people seeking to enjoy the mountains for both physical and mental health reasons.

With its location so close to Ireland's largest population centre, the Wicklow Mountains National Park and the surrounding uplands, experience higher levels of footfall than other mountain ranges, with impacts spread across many popular routes.

Aside from managed trails such as the Wicklow Way, there is a sizable network of informal paths that criss-cross the uplands, connecting routes, peaks and popular points of interest for hikers and walkers. Evolved through usage over the decades, the impact of this ever-increasing footfall on these paths contributes to the loss of vegetation and soil erosion.

Combined with Ireland's wet climate and Wicklow's peat soils, these paths have created scarring to the landscape. With much of the areas affected located within or close to designated Special Areas Of Conservation (SAC), this environmental issue extends to sensitive habitats and its associated biodiversity, that includes rare upland flora.

With noticeable erosion on many of the region's popular hill-walking routes, it was decided that an extensive survey was required to better inform landowners,

both state and private, as to their overall condition. In turn, it was envisaged that the findings would aid decisions on any long-term sustainable management plans and identify any remedial work required to prevent or remedy existing damage.

Mountain Meitheal conducted a survey of selected paths in the Wicklow and Dublin Mountain region in 2002-2003, which provided a valuable baseline to determine both improvement and deterioration of the paths featuring in both assessments. Building on this, an up-to-date path condition survey would provide data to inform any future assessments. It was agreed that the methodology to be used, would be in keeping with the surveying techniques used in other upland areas in an effort to create an easily-understood framework that could be replicated elsewhere or in the future.

Given the scope and scale of the task at hand, a multi-stakeholder approach was certainly required, with Wicklow Uplands Council and Wicklow Mountains National Park (NPWS) leading the project, along with project partners, Coillte, County Wicklow Partnership/Rural Recreation Officer, Wicklow County Council, Mountaineering Ireland, Mountain Meitheal and Dublin Mountains Partnership, who assisted in the planning and delivery throughout.

Collectively, the project partners identified over 160km of upland paths where erosion was evident and set

about designing and delivering the project, with funding to conduct the survey successfully obtained through Ireland's rural development LEADER programme.

## Conducting The Survey

Following a tender process in 2020, 'Walking the Talk', a UK based consultancy firm with substantial experience in upland path surveying and management in Scotland and Ireland, was appointed to undertake the survey and author its findings. Led by Chris York, the specialist firm is no stranger to the Irish uplands, with notable work on the Galtee Mountains and the popular peaks of Mount Errigal and Croagh Patrick, as well as several sites in Northern Ireland.

Initially delayed by Covid measures, fieldwork was undertaken in April and July 2021 by Chris York and Marc Vinas, supported by Matt McConway and Vince McAlinden. In keeping with the principles of the project to broaden local expertise on addressing this challenging issue into the future, and to also provide local support and knowledge, the Council's coordinator Brian Dunne, Ann Fitzpatrick and Wesley Atkinson of NPWS and Mountaineering Ireland's Access and Conservation Officer, Helen Lawless, accompanied Chris at various times during the survey activities.

The final survey included 50 paths or routes across the Wicklow Mountains, which were divided into a total of 350 sections and amounted to approximately 167km. Using the observations and data collected, the report, now in its final stages of authoring, illustrates the condition of each path and the extent of, or potential for, deterioration that was found to be present.

Perhaps more importantly, it also makes recommendations on the appropriate path repair and restoration techniques that should be considered. These range from 'light touch work' and early intervention measures through to major repair and realignment, dependent on the level of erosion found, anticipated footfall, gradients and other considerations such as biodiversity or soil type. There are also some paths identified where no repair work is recommended for various reasons such as routes that cross wider, degraded blanket bogs



where peatland restoration would be a priority over path management.

A notable and early set of recommendations extracted from the survey, contributed to a successful application being made to the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS) by Wicklow County Council, with support from Carol Coad, the Rural Recreation Officer for county Wicklow. A funding allocation of €450,000 was received under Measure 3 of the scheme to undertake extensive remedial stonework on the popular Great Sugar Loaf in north county Wicklow.

The report identifies many challenges in making Wicklow's upland path network more sustainable, particularly given that much of the network is across peat of a depth of 50cm or more, some of it on steeper slopes where repair options are limited and costly.

One of the most important messages emanating from the report, is the need

to build a locally-based team of skilled path workers to tackle the range of issues identified in the survey.

Rather markedly, the report estimates that at least 4,000 days of labour would be required to reduce the impact of recreation on the surveyed paths. An ongoing commitment to maintenance would also be essential. By way of quantifying that estimate, it is the equivalent of a team of 4 working continuously for almost 5 years just to tackle the work outlined in the report.

A recent online public event to share the findings in advance of its publication, saw an audience made up of a varied group of interested parties, participate in the initial discussion around the current challenges and how best to proceed with the information and professional insights gained through the completion of the survey.

Touching on a number of topics, the one that perhaps resonated the most with

the online audience, was the project's invaluable contribution to making informed and wide-reaching decisions to ensure conservation, protection and sustainability remain at the heart of any actions or intervention measures inspired through the Final Report's publication.

It is envisaged that the comprehensive findings detailed in the report will assist greatly with future funding applications to hopefully commence remedial work soon. The report should also inform future land management in the Wicklow Mountains, as the management of recreational impacts cannot be treated in isolation from other aspects of land management.

The Final Report and a video of the recent online public event titled 'The Condition Of Upland Paths In The Wicklow Mountains', will be made available on our website in the coming weeks.

## Celebrating Heritage Week



One of the annual public events that Wicklow Uplands Council looks forward immensely to organising, is its contribution to the National Heritage Week programme.

Joining nearly 1,700 events and digital projects for the mid-August celebration, a guided 'walk and talk' led by Dr Críostóir Mac Cárthaigh on the slopes of west Wicklow's Granamore was organised to explore this year's theme of sustainability and biodiversity.

Once owned by the Duke of Devonshire (Lord Waterford), the mountainside location is filled with features that each tell a fascinating story of how the land has been utilised throughout the years – offering great insights into how Wicklow's upland communities' relationship with the surrounding hills has evolved throughout the centuries.

Now part of the Wicklow Mountains National Park, the guided walk visited the area's old ruins, lazy beds, grouse butts, a mass rock and discussed the local customs and practices which have left their indelible mark to the landscape.

Organised in conjunction with the SUAS Project, project manager



*Dr Mac Cárthaigh discussing a 'quern' stone with local hill-farmer Denis Halpin.*

**Below:** *The large Mass Rock on Granamore, one of the heritage features visited during the Heritage Week event.*

Declan Byrne shared how some of these farming methods have inspired a return to more traditional ways of sustainable, collaborative farming and land management practices by the Granamore Commonage Group who are actively participating in the scheme. Of particular interest to the attendees were the hill-farmers ongoing actions focussed on habitat and biodiversity restoration, something that's also been recognised in this year's Farming for Nature Awards.

The evening event created a wonderful opportunity to share and discover some of Wicklow's sometimes hidden heritage with a much wider audience. For those unable to attend, Dr Mac Cárthaigh, who is renowned for his work at the Cnuasach Bhéaloideas Éireann/ The National Folklore Collection, is currently researching Granamore's history as part of a heritage recording initiative commissioned by the SUAS Project. It is expected that the report will be published later this year.

**Wicklow Uplands Council is supported by the Heritage Council under the Heritage Capacity Funding 2022.**



# Conclusion of the Deer Management Project

With sightings of wild deer far from their natural woodland or upland habitats, now a daily occurrence throughout county Wicklow, the issue of how to better manage their ever-expanding population has been the subject of much discussion for a number of years.

With no natural predator on the island, Ireland's deer population is widely considered to have grown to unsustainable levels in parts of the country, with Wicklow and perhaps the Dublin Uplands too, the region most affected.

In response to the multiple issues arising from their presence, government funding for "the provision of Deer Management Services in the County Wicklow Region" was made available. Following an open tender process, the 'County Wicklow Deer Management Project', which sought to create a strategic and sustainable management plan to address the challenges, was officially launched in 2018.

Managed by Wicklow Uplands Council in conjunction with the Wicklow Deer Management Partnership (WDMP), it set out to achieve an ambitious set of objectives including the creation of a framework that collected field data on an ongoing basis to better inform decision-making and the implementation of various actions to address both local and regional challenges.

Jointly funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the then Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the three-year pilot project sought to also build and deliver a response that mitigated against the negative impacts such as ecological damage and economic loss. However, its principal aim was to find a management approach that maintained a healthy deer population that was in natural balance with its environment.

Although initially planned to conclude in 2021, some of the work understandably had to be curtailed during Covid Measures, resulting in an extension of its duration until March of this year. Now completed, the final report will share the many findings and recommendations emanating from the delivery of the project. Currently, a short synopsis of the headings is possible,



*Sika females and fawns photographed on The Spinc in the Wicklow Mountains National Park.*

with greater detail to be found upon the report's publication.

Firstly, critical to the project's overall success was its structure of establishing Deer Management Units (DMU's) in locations where the impacts of substantial populations were known to exist. With a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach in mind, each unit consisted of landowners, hunters and other interested parties committed to collectively creating and implementing an agreed management plan specific to their area. Owing to great interest in the project, a total of five units were established, two in west Wicklow around the Manor Kilbride area, two in the south and one in the east of the county.

Each led from the bottom-up, the entire project was professionally coordinated through the appointment of a highly qualified Project Manager, Pat Mellon, whose role was vital in providing oversight, support and guidance. The report notes that to ensure ongoing engagement with the diverse range of stakeholders to achieve numerous deliverables, a similar role would certainly be needed for any future initiatives. The report also found that deer management plans developed by each DMU, were essential to underpinning the long-term objectives.

The collecting of data to build a better understanding of numbers, population health, grazing habits and any noticeable impact deer were having on conservation habitats and biodiversity, were recorded throughout the project using field tests and observations.

The true economic impact of deer grazing in areas outside of their natural habitats, although difficult to quantify within the scope of this project, it is clear that damage to commercial forestry and agricultural grassland is widespread.

One field test deployed in all DMUs, was the laying of special metal cages onto grassland to enable the measurement of grazing activities by comparing yields from inside the protected areas, with the areas outside of them – a methodology discussed and approved by Teagasc in advance.

Native and broadleaf trees are particularly vulnerable to deer damage through browsing, ring-barking, fraying and bole scoring. The project recognised the need for more detailed research into the impact of deer on sensitive conservation habitats and associated biodiversity, for example. trampling, browsing and so forth.

A TB testing pilot initiated by the project, recorded an incidence rate of 16.6% in suspect deer samples sent for analysis. The objective of this hunter-level surveillance pilot was to determine usefulness to identify hot spots of TB in deer. The results proved that this surveillance model could be used to successfully identify 'hotspot locations', and merit further investigation for disease control, and importantly, could easily be introduced to other locations.

If culling activities were required, a greater focus on adult females delivered the most effective long-term results. The project also saw a welcome increase to the out-of-season deer control measures under



Section 42 licensing. It was also noted that landowners should give greater consideration to the leasing of hunting rights to ensure an appropriate approach is in place. This relationship should include the sharing and collection of accurate data between landowners and hunters.

Embracing technologies such as the smartphone app SMARTDEER and the HAMS (Habitat Area Management System) used by Coillte and more widely across Europe, or indeed a single integrated system for all stakeholders, presents a significant opportunity to monitor the national deer population in real time.

The report also noted the issue of animal welfare due to grazing pressures and the often-underreported problem of road traffic accidents and collisions involving roaming deer.

With part of the sustainable model requiring selective culling, the project suggests that the demand for venison as a food source may be assisted by promoting it as a healthy, sustainably-sourced meat choice.

Additionally, and in support of this regional work being undertaken, the report recommends the National Deer Management Forum be reformed as a matter of urgency.

It is clear from the findings of the

final report, that a long-term, well-resourced and coordinated project is certainly required to properly address the many issues highlighted. Substantial work has been achieved since 2018 and the Project Steering Group is very keen to build upon the knowledge gained and the structures formed during the term of the project. It is actively seeking funding to provide continuation of service and to capitalise on the successful conclusion of this pilot project.

Details of the publication of the County Wicklow Deer Management Project's Final Report will be made in due course.

## National Biodiversity Conference Returns

Under the theme of 'Act Now For Nature', Ireland's second National Biodiversity Conference, made a very welcome return in June. Streamed online and with over 400 delegates in attendance, the two-day gathering explored numerous topics through a collection of keynote speeches, presentations, plenary sessions, group discussions and networking opportunities.

Hosted at The Printworks in Dublin Castle, its importance has perhaps taken on a new relevance, following its hiatus due to Covid measures. At the core of the conference was the act of bringing people together to meet, discuss and collectively contribute to finding solutions to our current biodiversity challenges. For those lucky enough to attend in-person, it perhaps created the first opportunity in a while to properly connect with familiar faces and to make new acquaintances.

Forming part of the public consultation on Ireland's fourth National Biodiversity Action Plan, the full programme featured a host of national and international representatives from educational institutions, NGO's, government bodies and state agencies.

Perhaps indicative of the growing global commitments to address the issues at hand, Ministers Darragh O'Brien, Malcolm Noonan and Pippa Hackett, along with representatives from European Council and UN assignments focussed on biodiversity, all addressed the audience during the opening plenary session, with Taoiseach, Micheál

Martin delivering the conference keynote speech on the second day.

The event also provided the backdrop for Minister Malcolm Noonan to announce a pilot programme consisting of six new Biodiversity Officers to be recruited in six local authorities around the country. This development has led to October's welcome announcement that the programme has been extended to 10 local authorities, including county Wicklow.

Having kindly received an invitation from The Heritage Council, Brian Dunne, Coordinator for Wicklow Uplands Council delivered a presentation in the session titled; 'Connecting National Priorities: Biodiversity, Culture and Social Well-being'.

Chaired by Lorcan Scott of The Heritage Council, the collection of

presentations and discussions explored a range of issues with a panel that also included Paddy Woodworth, Sanctuary in Nature and Heritage; Dr Brendan Dunford, The Burren Programme; Helen Riddell, Bere Island Conservation and Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, Chair of the Biodiversity Citizens' Assembly.

With many of the Upland Council's projects and initiatives centered around landscape and habitat actions in the region's diverse and sensitive environment, Brian's attendance presented an occasion to highlight some of the unique challenges that the uplands now face.

The uplands increasingly exhibit signs of biodiversity loss and climate change, so the Council's participation in any discussion on forming an inclusive national response is warmly welcomed.



(L-R) Michael Keegan (Board Member of WUC and Luggala Estate Manager), Lorna Kelly (Luggala Estate), Helen Lawless (Mountaineering Ireland), Brian Dunne (Wicklow Uplands Council) and Faith Wilson, Consultant Ecologist on SUAS Project at the National Biodiversity Conference 2022.

# Conclusion of the SUAS Project



commonage stakeholders to participate as a formal, collective group.

## Project Conference

Fast forward five years, many of those who gathered in the Glendalough Hotel, were meeting once again - this time for the SUAS Project Conference organised to coincide with the Project's conclusion at the end of 2022. It was in this setting at the Glenview Hotel, that the extensive learnings emerging from the Project were openly shared and discussed with all of the diverse stakeholders present.

The event programme included a keynote presentation from Minister of State for Land Use and Biodiversity, Senator Pippa Hackett, international guest speakers, Professors Julia Aglionby and Davy McCracken, with Irish-based journalist and broadcaster, Ella McSweeney kindly filling the role of Conference Host. To demonstrate some of the landscape actions implemented through the Project, a field trip to a nearby site that's implemented landscape actions overseen by SUAS, featured the day beforehand.

The SUAS Project team made up of Declan Byrne, Project Manager; Faith Wilson, Consultant Ecologist and Brian Dunne, Coordinator of Wicklow Uplands Council, delivered an overview of the Project's extensive activities across the region, as well as leading detailed discussion on the many outcomes and learnings discovered over the last five years.

As crowds gathered in the Glendalough Hotel in 2018, for the official launch of the 'Sustainable Uplands Agriculture-environment Scheme (SUAS)' Project, there was a collective sense of excitement at the journey that was about to commence.

Taking shape over the preceding years, beginning with the formation of a vegetation committee in 2011, it culminated in the news that the SUAS Project had been successful in the second round of the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) projects - part of the European Union's strategy to foster innovation within farming and forestry sectors.

The objectives of the project were ambitious, and the Operational Group (OG) formed by Wicklow Uplands Council to oversee their successful delivery, presented an impressive picture to the assembled audience on how each of them would be met.

The Group, made up of representatives from organisations such as Wicklow Uplands Council, Teagasc, National Parks & Wildlife Service, Local Authority Waters & Communities Officer (LAWCO), shared a vision that addressed many of the challenges experienced in the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands; widespread biodiversity loss, damaged habitats and water courses, declining farming activities and associated income, and

perhaps more telling, the absence of an interconnected plan to reverse them.

The proposed solutions, many of which were a combination of more traditional collaborative farming methods and science-led techniques, were innovative, yet simple in their delivery. Local hill-farmers who had cared for the hills over generations, would be remunerated for actions that improved sensitive upland habitats, while fostering collaboration and partnerships with fellow farmers and other stakeholders to achieve shared conservation goals. One of the unique aspects to the Project was the development of a process to assist



Members of the Carrigeenduff Commonage Group with Ecologist Faith Wilson on the slopes of Carrigeenduff.

## Project Implementation





A black galloway heifer and calf on Corrasillagh Commonage where the mixed grazing initiative greatly assists with reducing molina grass and bracken.

As envisaged, individual hill-farmers and commonage groups inducted to phases one (2019) and two (2020), developed an agreed land management plan unique to their farmland by working alongside Faith Wilson and the Project Team. Focussing on sustainability, improved biodiversity, and if relevant, water quality, these multi-year management plans formed the basis of the programme of work to be carried out.

Thanks to the knowledge and insights discovered, the Project found itself in the very welcome position of being able to launch a third phase in 2021. Focussed solely on targeted habitat actions, it brought the total number of sites throughout the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands to 25.

Exceeding initial expectations, 75 farmers operating on over 7,500 hectares - much of which is designated Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) - have now actively participated with various initiatives introduced by SUAS

The conference audience heard from Declan Byrne, that done correctly, grazing practices are the most basic and effective management tool that can be implemented to both enhance and protect the uplands - essentially a return to many of the traditional farming techniques that were once commonplace.

By applying the principle of what he refers to as the 'Four R's', upland

habitats would return to a better and easier managed state if the Right Numbers; Right Type Of Stock (sheep and/or cattle); Right Time Of The Year (stock are on the hills) and selecting the Right Areas Of The Hills To Be Grazed.

Extending beyond sheep, a number of sites introduced cattle to observe how their heavier and uneven grazing assists with greater vegetation control and the natural formation of a mosaic of habitats. To great success, breeds such as Dexter cattle - a rare native Irish breed - are on the hills having been fitted with 'Nofence' virtual fence collars that utilise the technology of GPS and remote mapping to define an area of the hill for grazing.

Over 4,000 saplings of native Oak, Rowan, Willow, Alder & Birch, have been planted over the last 24 months, often alongside upland brooks and streams to ensure soil stability, protect water quality and to slow its descent. Planted in clusters, they will soon provide both shelter and a food source for wildlife, and in time, become a local seed source to expand habitats further.

Invasive tree species have been removed from sites such as Glencap Commons that surrounds the Great Sugar Loaf, where conifers which had spread from nearby plantations, were rapidly taking over the slopes.

### Vegetation Management

Eager to trial new techniques practiced in the UK, the project imported three 'Bracken Bruisers' to disrupt and reduce bracken growth. Perhaps for the first time in Ireland, the tractor-mounted unit and two quad-mounted units, work by damaging and weakening the stem and root network of the plant, ultimately reducing its spread. Other mechanical and chemical approaches were deployed on sites not suitable for a mounted unit.

The audience heard that the largest single threat to fragile upland ecosystems is almost certainly wildfires; which scar the landscape, destroy habitats and wildlife, and reduce the high-nature values needed to

support productive grazing. Although training and small-scale, low-intensity controlled burning demonstrations featured in early land management efforts of the Project, it is hoped that the combination of mechanical controls and appropriate grazing techniques will minimise its usage.

Shared Learning and Knowledge Exchange have remained core pillars to the Project, and indeed features strongly across the entire EIP network. For the SUAS Project, training programmes and demonstrations were organised to support and guide farmers on a host of topics such as water quality, controlled burning, livestock selection and grazing methods. As part of the public engagement commitments, several guided walks on participating farmland were also organised to provide first-hand experience of the Project and to meet the parties involved.

Belonging to the European-wide network of EIP-Agri projects totalling several thousand, SUAS has hosted several groups visiting Ireland as part of research programmes. Conversely, study visits were also organised for hill-farmers participating in SUAS, with 22 recently joining the project team on a full two-day itinerary to county Antrim, where they visited a number of farmland settings and impressive conservation projects.

Undoubtedly, the Project's many achievements can be largely attributed to project manager, Declan Byrne - who joined from Teagasc; ecologist Faith Wilson, the host of experts that contributed to the Operational Group's role and of course Wicklow Uplands Council, whose perseverance and determination to develop and deliver this multi-stranded project ensured it would happen.

Instrumental to achieving the Project's



Bracken 'Bruising' activities taking place on Glencap Commons next to the Great Sugar Loaf this summer.



An Roinn Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara  
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine



Ireland's European Structural and Investment Funds Programmes 2014-2020  
Co-funded by the Irish Government and the European Union



extensive scope, was the great level of support and guidance received from NPWS, the Department of Agriculture and many other stakeholders. However, at the centre of the success, are the farmers, who fully embraced the opportunity with enthusiasm, commitment and a heart-felt desire to achieve meaningful and long-term impact to the lands they farm.

### Future Steps

The hosting of a conference event at the end of November, represents the beginning of the final stages of the project with the desire to share, discuss and explore the topics within the public domain.

The SUAS Project has offered a framework of how agri-environmental schemes can be successfully implemented to achieve shared conservation goals, create income for the farming community and foster better relationships between the multi-stakeholders essential to delivering meaningful and systemic change to the uplands.

Although the future of the formal framework established through the SUAS Project is at present unknown, its outcomes may in time influence policy adoption at regional and national levels, and perhaps within EU structures too.

Its true legacy however, will be felt on the hills, where farmers who once worked independently, have now experienced the benefit of working collaboratively and productively with others, and in partnership with nature to ensure our great natural assets are appropriately and sustainably managed for future generations.

**Pat Dunne,**  
Project Lead of the SUAS  
Operational Group

*Videos of the presentations and panel discussion at the recent SUAS Project Conference are available to view on the Wicklow Uplands Council website. The Final Report and supporting documentation will be published in due course.*

Ireland's European Innovation Partnership (EIP) projects are funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food, and the Marine (DAFM) under the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

## Peatland Restoration Initiative

Perhaps one of the most important collaborative partnerships to emerge from the SUAS Project, has been with the National Parks and Wildlife Service who have responsibility for both the management of Wicklow Mountains National Park, and oversight of the Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) lands that surround it.

Working in close cooperation, they have in recent years, identified a number of sites within, and adjoining, the 23,000 hectares of Ireland's largest national park, where areas of extensive bare peat on mountainside slopes and ridges have little hope of recovery without planned intervention measures.

In an effort to restore the natural vegetation and prevent further loss of peat to these fragile ecosystems, an innovative peatland restoration initiative has been underway over the last two years. The first large-scale project of its type to be trialled in Ireland, it has two key strands; to regenerate vegetation made up mostly of heather and mosses, and to restore blanket bogs overall water retention capacity, by damming gullies formed over previous decades through extensive natural erosion and human activities.

### Habitat Restoration

Inspired by techniques pioneered in the UK by conservation organisations such as the 'Moors for the Future', the multi-staged process of habitat restoration began with the sustainable harvesting of heather cuttings or 'brash' as its also referred to, by conservation rangers from the NPWS on SAC land during the autumn months of 2021.

Acting as a seed source, and with the rough cuttings also offering protection from the harsh elements of the winter ahead, the material has over the last 6 months, been spread out over the designated areas of bare peat by the various teams on each site.

A nursery crop of specially formulated grasses, along with fertiliser, has also been added to assist with both soil stability and the germination of the heather seed. The grasses will die out naturally once the fertiliser depletes and the heather has prospered and the mosses have recolonised.

With the task now completed, these areas have been fenced off to protect against grazing animals, joining several other exclusion areas recently installed on several locations



Minister Malcolm Noonan along with Brian Dunne of the SUAS Project and Hugh McLindon and Ann Fitzpatrick, Conservation Rangers with NPWS standing in an eroded gully during a site visit to Barnacullian over the summer.



to monitor grazing impact and to encourage vegetation growth within. Signage explaining the initiative in detail has also been erected, should any roaming hiker be curious about the new additions to the landscape.



Construction of wooden dams to restore water table levels on Granamore Commonage.

## Restoring Water Retention

Naturally created over millennia, the peat soils commonly found on the open mountains of county Wicklow, are in essence a giant reservoir that provides important fresh water sources that serve the needs of counties Dublin and Wicklow. Capturing and naturally filtering rainfall, the organic matter moderates the release of water year-round to upland streams and the headwaters for rivers such as the Liffey, Vartry, Kings, Dodder, Dargle and the Avoca.

Damaged and degraded mountaintops are susceptible to water runoff, effortlessly causing the erosion of soft peat and creating underlying instability to blanket bogs, which ultimately affects the ecological quality of these invaluable water sources downstream.

Through an elaborate work programme, collectively, hundreds of dams (made from untreated timber), have now been constructed to reduce the water runoff and the further loss of peat, by ensuring

the water table is restored to more naturally occurring levels. This re-wetting of the habitat allows mosses - particularly sphagnum species - to recolonise naturally in the coming years, which in turn reinvigorates the carbon sequestration process and ensures overall soil stability.

One of the unique characteristics of this collective restoration initiative, is the logistics being resourced and deployed to enable work to commence on the high altitude and remote sites. To achieve this, all of the material required was airlifted by helicopter, as part of a complex multi-day operation in the spring. A total cargo payload of over 50 tonnes, that included 200 'builders bags' of heather cuttings, grass seed, over 2kms of fencing and enough timber to build up to a 1,000 dams, was distributed to the various mountainside depots with over 100 lifts.

Given the scale and logistical challenges that have required careful management, the multi-stakeholder approach has been vital to the successful implementation of the laborious restoration work. Through the SUAS Project, and with the support of local NPWS conservation rangers, the hill-farmers of Granamore, Carrigeenduff and Ballynultagh (Mullaghcleevaun East Top), who are actively participating in the Project, have undertaken restoration actions across their sites. The largest area subject to habitat restoration is on the Barnacullian site, within the Wicklow Mountains National Park, and is being managed and carried out by NPWS conservation rangers, with voluntary assistance from Mountaineering Ireland and the environmental community group, ReWild Wicklow.

In July, Minister for Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan, visited the Wicklow Mountains National Park to view and experience first-hand, the work being undertaken on the ridge of Barnacullian. Meeting with key stakeholders, the minister observed several examples of damaged habitats, and viewed the substantial restoration actions to remedy the situation, that were firmly underway.

Generously spending much of

the afternoon on location, the visit created an ideal opportunity for everyone to openly discuss the many factors contributing to the decline in upland habitats, both locally and nationally, and to explore possible solutions to addressing them on a larger scale.

Perhaps the real success of this project - and indeed future initiatives focussed on Ireland's upland areas that have damaged and degraded habitats and water quality issues - is the demonstration of how a collaborative approach taken by diverse stakeholders can achieve the much-needed response to begin addressing some of the large and complex challenges facing the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands.

This includes state agencies such as the NPWS, NGOs such as Wicklow Uplands Council and the SUAS Project, and working closely with hill-farmers to create shared conservation goals to ensure our great natural assets, our uplands, are a thriving ecosystem and natural resource into the future.



Heather brush, timber, fencing, formulated grass seed and other items being transported by helicopter to sites where restoration work is currently taking place.

# Responsible Dog Control Campaign

In March, Wicklow Uplands Council joined Wicklow County Council, Wicklow IFA and the Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Committee to raise awareness about the vulnerability of sheep to dog attacks or incidents of sheep worrying during the lambing season.

The joint awareness campaign issued comprehensive guidelines on Responsible Dog Control Practices to protect sheep and wildlife, from the presence of dogs in farmland areas. Regrettably, this is an ongoing issue affecting farming communities throughout Ireland, with the increased use of the uplands for recreational use adding additional challenges.



## AGM and Summer Panel Meeting Held

Wicklow Uplands Council held its joint AGM and Panel Meeting in July, marking the first in-person public meeting since the Panel Meetings that took place in Hollywood in February 2020.

Hosted at the Glendalough Hotel, it was a memorable occasion to welcome colleagues, and new members and supporters, to collectively gather and discuss the many topics affecting those who live, work and enjoy recreational activities in the Wicklow and Dublin Uplands.

At the core of the organisation, is its collaborative and consensus approach to creating, participating and managing sustainable solutions to Ireland's largest, continuous upland region. Therefore, the Council is grateful for each of the contributions and suggestions received from the panel meetings and the floor.

A large thanks is also due to keynote speaker and special guest, Mr Brian Gleeson, CE of Wicklow County Council, who kindly gave a supportive and informative presentation to the assembled audience.

With an open membership policy, enquiries and information about joining Wicklow Uplands Council are available on our website or by contacting the office.

# Directors of Wicklow Uplands Council 2022/23

## Farmers and Property Owners Panel

<b>Denis Halpin</b> .....	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners Association
<b>Sean Malone</b> .....	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners Association
<b>Daniel P. Molloy</b> .....	Wicklow County IFA
<b>Tom Byrne</b> .....	Wicklow County IFA
<b>Joe Morrissey</b> .....	Wicklow County IFA
<b>Owen Brady</b> .....	Wicklow County IFA
<b>Donal Anderson</b> .....	Dublin IFA

## Environmental and Recreational Panel

<b>Máire O'Connor</b> .....	Mountaineering Ireland
<b>Russell Boland</b> .....	Individual Member
<b>John Flynn</b> .....	County Wicklow Game Conservation Council
<b>Bob Galvin</b> .....	Bray Coast Care

## Community Panel

<b>Garvan Hickey</b> .....	Individual Member
<b>Aideen Klauer</b> .....	Hollywood Community Forum (Secretary)
<b>Mary Kelly-Quinn</b> .....	Glendalough & District Development Association

## Economic and Tourism Panel

<b>Sean Byrne</b> .....	Lough Dan House B & B
<b>Eugene Stephens</b> .....	Ashford Self Catering Cottages
<b>Dairine Nuttall</b> .....	Wicklow Nordic Walking & Ireland Tour Guide
<b>Geoffrey Seymour</b> .....	Roundwood & District Community Council (Treasurer)

## CO Options

<b>Louis O'Byrne</b> .....	Individual Member (Chair)
<b>Declan O'Neill</b> .....	Wicklow County IFA
<b>Philip Maguire</b> .....	Dublin IFA (Vice Chair)
<b>Carmel Kealy</b> .....	MotorCycling Ireland
<b>Michael Keegan</b> .....	Individual Member
<b>Pat Dunne</b> .....	Wicklow County IFA
<b>Claire Chambers</b> .....	Roundwood & District Community Council
<b>Mary Catherine Murphy</b> .....	Wicklow Cheviot Sheep Owners Association

## Wicklow Uplands Council Team

<b>Brian Dunne</b> .....	Coordinator
<b>Máire Dewar</b> .....	Administration Officer
<b>Conor Hipwell</b> .....	Communications Officer

**The views and opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Wicklow Uplands Council.**

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