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Have a good hard think about the Western Blanket Bogs

1970 was European Conservation Year, and about that time all the components of our environment were examined and sifted to find candidates for that apparently indefinable if not undefined process. Mostly they were considered in terms of specific associations: historical, ecological, scientific, even cultural.

One feature that may have got less than its fair share of attention is our landscape, considered purely as a visual entity. This landscape has certain notable aspects, but one of its most unusual features, one possibly unique in the world, is the appearance of the vast open stretches of rolling low-level peatland which constitute the blanket bog regions of the west.

We may be in danger of being biased against these areas by a buried folk-memory which associates them with misery and starvation, arising out of historical events stretching from the plantations (of people, not trees) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the great famine of 1846-48. This may explain some of the "wet desert" strictures which are often heard.

As a tourist country we must be conscious of what we can offer which is not available elsewhere. There are many parts of the world where the traveller can drive for miles through uniform pine forests, or rolling farmland. But he will not easily find the like of our western blanket bog areas.

Going deeper, one can argue that bogs as such, are as much a part of our national culture as are our unique traditions of music, literature and language. This concept has been put somewhat crudely in the adage that, while it is easy to take the man out of the bog it is more difficult to get the bog out of the man.

For these reasons, we need to be quite clear about what we are doing before we change too many of those areas by the establishment of blocks of forest, any one of which may visually affect many square miles of landscape. We need to be sure not alone that it is what we want, but also what our children and grandchildren will want.

Because, once there, those plantations can never be obliterated.