

EDITORIAL

Conserving our Peatlands

Recently, a specialised group (the National Peatland Conservation Committee) was established under the auspices of An Taisce to highlight the urgent necessity for peatland conservation. The total area of peatland in Ireland is 1.34 million hectares, 16.2% of the island. A higher proportion of the land area of Ireland is covered by peatland than any other country in the world with the exception of Finland. Obviously our bogs are important to us. Generations of Irishmen have harvested peat for fuel, many of us burn turf in our homes, the work of Bord na Móna in the industrial exploitation of peatland is known all over the world. We think of bogs in terms of exploitation, traditionally for fuel but in latter years also for agriculture and for forestry. If we think of conservation at all it is to dismiss it as being unnecessary.

In fact our virgin peatlands are disappearing fast. The controversy over Pollardstown Fen is well known, but not many are aware of the threat to our Raised Bogs which occur in the midlands. Of the original 311,000 ha of Raised Bogs, 65,000 ha is classified as unmodified, but much of this is unsuitable for conservation. Large areas have been dried out by drainage and have lost their characteristic flora. Only a handful of true representatives of this important bog type remain. The situation with Blanket Bog is less critical as almost 75% of the total area remains unmodified to date. The greatest danger here is of fragmentation particularly by forestry plantations. Even a small plantation is an intrusion which interferes with the Blanket Bog landscape.

Foresters are in a unique position with regard to our peatlands. They have a long tradition as conservationists. The forest, even the intensively managed plantation, is much closer to a natural ecosystem than a field of potatoes or barley. In the Republic, the Minister for Fisheries and Forestry has responsibility for nature conservation and wildlife. Officers of the Forest and Wildlife Service are actively involved in the preservation of our native forest flora and in the protection of natural habitats for wildlife. Other officers of the same service are responsible for the development of virgin peatlands for forestry. The economic benefits of this exploitation are obvious. No one is suggesting that peatland afforestation should be halted or even significantly curtailed. The National Peatland Conservation Committee suggest that a representative series of sites, amounting to only a small percentage of our peatland area be preserved for the future for scientific, educational and aesthetic purposes.