

**PRIDE OF PLACE
COOPERATION IRELAND
CARE OF THE ENVIRONMENT NOMINATION 2008
CABRAGH WETLANDS TRUST
HOLYCROSS,
THURLES,
CO. TIPPERARY
*Conservation
Recreation
Education*
Website: www.cabraghwetlands.ie**

- **1. The Site:**

- The Cabragh Wetlands cover over 200 acres along the Suir Valley between Thurles and Holycross. Local naturalists have long recognized the importance of the wetlands for flowers, insects, mammals and birds, both permanent native species and migrant visitors overwintering from the north or summer visitors from the tropics.
- When the Irish Sugar Company ceased operations in about 1990, fears grew that the settling ponds from the factory would be filled in and that the wider wetlands could be drained, and possibly “developed” as landfill or grazing.
- Realising that an environmental catastrophe could be about to happen locally, several keen individuals and groups (including Thurles and Holycross Gun Clubs) came together to form a protest group, which later became the Cabragh Wetlands Trust, a community based, not-for-profit organization. The settling ponds were lost, but perhaps in order to assuage the increasing agitation, the Sugar Co. decided to sell to the Trust and 15 acres were purchased roughly in the centre of the wider wetlands.
- Since 1992 the Trust has purchased another 30 acres and has undertaken a programme to provide the infrastructure required to secure the long-term viability of the Trust. This includes:
 - a Visitor Centre with office, tea-room, toilets and lecture room
 - picnic areas and a carpark
 - two hides, one of two stories with wheelchair lift and equipment store
 - raised walkways through the reedbeds with signboards
 - two ponds, one with jetties for pond-dipping
 - fencing, a raised screening bank and loafing island for the natural lake and an access track to the second hide and ringfort
 - planting of native trees and shrubs
 - display and educational materials inside the Visitor Centre

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- **2. Research Background:**

- To ensure the practical basis and intellectual integrity of the Cabragh project, the Trust has from the start commissioned a series of reports by acknowledged experts in their field, thus ensuring that we move forward in a responsible and viable manner. These reports cover both the flora and fauna of the wetlands and the practicality of managing the site, running a Centre and undertaking educational and recreational activities. Reports include:
- 1990. T. Griffin. Cabragh Wetlands and its Bird Life
- 1993/4 G. D'Arcy. Proposals for Development of the Cabragh Wetlands
- - 1994 J.P. O'Conner and K.G.M. Bond. Article: *Limnephilus pati* rediscovered and *L. tauricus* new to Ireland
- - 1994 Dr. J.P. O'Conner. Report on the Entomological fauna of Cabragh Wetlands
- - 1994 Roger Goodwillie and Associates. Report on the Vegetation and Fauna of Cabragh Wetlands
- - 1994 R.P.S. Cairns Environmental Consultants. Environmental Report for Cabragh Wetlands (geology, archaeology, entomology)
- 2004/6 M. Maunsell (Tipperary Institute, Thurles). Reports on the Educational Opportunities for the Cabragh Wetlands Trust and on the Development of the Visitor Centre
- - 2006 Mieke Muyllaert and Associates. Cabragh Wetlands Management Plan
- - 2007 S. Fleischer. National Biodiversity Centre, Waterford. List of Water Beetle Species found at Cabragh Wetlands
- - 2008 Lorraine Grainger. Cabragh Wetlands Business Plan, 2008.
- - 2007-13 The Munster Ringing Group (Birdwatch Ireland) uses the Wetlands as one of its core ringing network sites for a seven year systematic investigation into the status of bird populations. Annual updates are published.

- **3. The Aims of the Trust:**
- The watchwords of the Trust can be summarized as ***Cre:***
- **Conservation Recreation Education**
- Our mission statement confirms the commitment of the Cabragh Wetlands Trust to:
- **conservation of unique habitats and ecosystems**
- **maintain biodiversity**
- **protection of the integrity of the wider wetland site**
- **provision of a forum to enhance public understanding of environmental issues**
- **support all levels of education through field studies and research**
- **maintenance of natural and cultural heritage**
- **public lectures and courses**
- **community involvement and recreation**
- **cooperation with relevant local, national and international authorities**
- **encourage local tourism**

- **4. Recognition of the Trust's Work:**

- The work of the Trust has been recognized by awards from:
 - - AIB Better Ireland Award (1997)
 - the Henry Ford Foundation (1998)
 - ESB Community Award (1999)
 - Pride of Place/Cooperation Ireland nomination (2008)
- The Trust gratefully acknowledges the support it has received from:
 - North Tipperary County Council
 - The Heritage Council
 - Tipperary LEADER
 - FAS
 - Shannon Development
 - Tipperary Enterprise
 - Thurles Lions
- In addition many other local benefactors have given generous donations and support over the years. They cannot all be mentioned here, but they range from substantial cheques from (eg) Coolmore Stud and Mid-Tipp Hillwalkers, computer, powerpoint and IT equipment from Lisheen Mine, and donations on Flag Days and at Church Gate collections by thousands of well-wishers.
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- Building work was largely carried out by volunteer labour, both from members and others in the community who gave time and expertise to get the project up and running.
- This work all indicates how the Cabragh Wetlands Trust is increasingly recognized as a core local community institution.
- While membership and fundraising has been focused on Thurles, Holycross and Ballycahill, the Trust has made efforts to branch out into Tipperary as a whole, with spread-the-message Flag Days in Cashel, Clonmel, Nenagh , Roscrea and Templemore.

- **5. The Structure of the Trust:**

- The Trust currently has about 120 members, of whom about 20 are reliably active on a day-by-day basis. A committee and officers are elected at the AGM, and regular meetings are held on the first Tuesday of each month.
- There are no paid employees of the Trust, which is totally reliant on volunteers to run all its programmes and events, which inevitably limits our ability to open daily and run as a full-time educational/visitor centre.
- Elected officials include:
 - Chairman Tom Grace
 - Vice Chairman Sean Donnelly
 - Treasurer John Ryan
 - Secretary Adam Tozer
 - PRO/Manager Michael Long
- Committee members have watching briefs over:
 - wildlife
 - land and buildings maintenance
 - education
 - research
 - publicity
 - fundraising
 - membership
- A formal Constitution has been drafted and will be discussed over the coming winter, with a view to adoption at the 2009 AGM (May)
- Communication with members is via newsletters, plus recently established website and weekly articles in the Tipperary Star. The website received commendation in the Irish Times recently, and there has been positive feedback about the Star articles, which focus on wildlife at the wetlands, upcoming events and wider environmental issues. We try to make people think and question the culture and lifestyle of the materialistic modern world.

- **7. Conservation - Our Rarer Species:**

- Conservation is **the** core objective of the Trust. The local naturalists who started the Trust recognized that something special was here, and research has revealed just what an exceptional site this is. To highlight some rareities:
- **Caddis Flies** – Our rarest treasures. *Limnephalus pati* was thought to be extinct in Ireland, having not been recorded since the 1890's. *Limnephalus tauricus* had never been recorded in Ireland (indeed, not west of Turkey). Both were found in the exceptionally pure water of the Cabragh Wetlands and specimens are now preserved in the Natural History Museum in Dublin.
- The *pipistrelle bat* and *barn owl* can both be seen flying at night. *Kingfisher*
- roost by the ponds and nest along the stream. 14 pure white *egrets* overwintered on site and rare *garganey duck* stopped on the lake in spring and early summer. We hope they may become permanent residents.
- The *summer snowflake* is now very rare in Ireland, but thrives at Cabragh; one professional environmentalist thought it perhaps the best site in the country for this threatened flower. The rare *heath spotted orchid* is here.
- The wetlands are a haven for rare mammals, like the *stoat* and *otter*, whose slots and spraints are to be seen across the site. *Hen-harrier* roost in the reedbeds and the rarer *marsh-harrier* is an occasional visitor.
- All 18 species of bee in Ireland are in trouble, none more so than the *red-tailed bumblebee* and the *buff-tailed bumblebee*. Both are in the wetlands.
- The *brimstone butterfly* depends entirely on the *buckthorn tree* for its survival, and the *orange-tip butterfly* loves the abundance of *lady's smock*.
- In the ponds and streams the rare *ten-spined stickleback* can be found, plus an extraordinary range of *water beetles*. The 2007 National Biodiversity Centre's report on water beetles, found a greater number of species at Cabragh than at any other site in Ireland.
- A *Bewick's swan* ringed at Cabragh was tracked to Siberia. *Lapwing* and *heron* are here in numbers; the autumn display of *starlings* is unmissable.

- **8. Conservation - Cabragh's Uniqueness:**
- Such rareities have flourished here for many reasons, including:
 - a. Water purity. The wetlands get their pure water from four main sources:
 - - the limestone-rich stream from Killough hill
 - - natural springs within the site
 - - winter floods from the Suir wash back up the feeder streams and flood the area
 - - rain
 - b. Untouched land. There has been human habitation of the wetlands for at least 1500 years, with one **ringfort** on the Trust's land, one other on the wetland site, and several on the raised ground west of the wetlands in the bend of the Suir. The key has been that man has lived **with** the wetlands, and has not tried to change its natural rhythms and cycles. Man is not here to tame and control nature. In 1326 Thomas Stapleton, Lord of Fertiana, gave permission to the monks of Holycross Abbey to cross the wetlands, and the monks carved a barn owl into the wall of the old Abbey. There has been a **sympiosis** between man and the wetlands that the Trust is trying to preserve into the future.
- The Trust has concluded that the best way to conserve the site is by establishing its role as an educational centre and community recreational base.
- Mieke Muyllaert's 2006 Management Plan identified **ten** or more **distinct habitats** within the wetland area, and these provide the basis for field study and supporting the school curriculum at both primary and secondary levels,
- and the Trust is developing a closer working relationship with the Tipperary Institute and other Third level institutions. There is no other Field Study Centre in Tipperary, so there is huge potential for playing a significant role in this area.
- Educational and recreational usage of the wetlands is basically confined to a 15 acre strip across the centre of the site, leaving the bulk of the wetlands untouched for nature.

• **9. The Future Conservation of Cabragh Wetlands:**

- The Cabragh Wetlands are now recognized as a vital stepping stone for wildlife, where species can establish viable permanent colonies, take shelter during migration, and (like the egrets) 'test the waters' as they try to expand their range.
- In an era of unprecedented threat from human social and economic activity, and with the uncertainty of climate change leaving everyone unsure of the future, safe havens like Cabragh could not be more important.
- The Cabragh Wetlands are now a Proposed National Heritage Area, and a Candidate Special Area of Conservation within the Lower Suir Special Area of Conservation. The Trust is also well aware of the potential for visitors if the Rock of Cashel (10 miles away) is confirmed as a World Heritage Site. Holycross Abbey brings a considerable influx of tourists into the immediate area, and we hope to tap into this source.
- The wetlands now come under the auspices of the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Department for Agriculture and Food, and they are required to monitor changes we might consider to the site, such as ensuring that only native species are planted here, and that any construction work is completed according to the strictest environmental standards and according to the terms of the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (Reps).
- We are fortunate to work closely with (and have as a member of the Trust) Mieke Muyliaert, a registered Chartered Environmentalist. She has been very generous with her time and we expect her to give us hard advice to ensure we fulfil our legal obligations and manage the land along sound ecological principles.
- We are continuing to seek funding to employ at least one full time site manager, who will be expected to run courses with schools and the community that will cement the permanence of the Wetlands Centre in the wider Tipperary context, and work towards making the Wetlands Trust a viable financial operation.

- **10. EDUCATION:**

- **Primary Schools:** The Trust has run, on a totally voluntary basis, an extensive programme for the last two years. There have been 34 school visits, bringing a total of 716 children out of the classroom to spend a few hours out in the real world. Popular activities include:
 - pond-dipping and searching for the creepy crawlies to be found
 - investigating a range of habitats, including hedgerow, water meadow, reed-beds, stream and woodland.
 - the Trust has developed a number of work sheets
 - indoor displays of paintings and photographs, maps, stuffed animals and display cases of beetles and butterflies provide wet-weather options
 - discussions. “Are we part of nature?”
 - a DVD is in preparation and we have powerpoint facilities
 - Schools are charged €50 per visit.
- **Summer Camp:** A key Trust member has been running weekly summer camps for primary age children at the Wetlands for several years. Activities like the above are extended, plus map-reading/orienteering and visits to other key Heritage sites like Derrynaflan, Cashel and Thurles. Up to 60 children take part. One dad said that he preferred the Wetland camps “because the children are learning things that are really important”.
- **Teacher Training:** A number of training sessions have been held with local teachers, to try to help them to gain the confidence and expertise to bring their own pupils out for field studies. If we do not get a full-time employee at the Centre, it will be hard to maintain, let alone extend, our educational programmes, so teacher-confidence is all-important.
- **Secondary Schools:** We have established a good relationship with at least three local Secondary Schools, and offer voluntary support to teachers who want to bring pupils out. The range of habitats available provides excellent support for the secondary science curriculum, and there have been a number of good Young Scientist Projects based on research at the Wetlands. In addition, we have worked with Transition Year pupils, some of

- whom have come out to help with office work, cataloguing and art work. The paintings in the main hide were by Ursuline girls, and we plan to offer that wall space to schools on a rotational basis for them to add something both useful and artistic to the Centre.
- We are mindful that today's teenagers will be the people we hope to take over the running of the Trust in 30-40 years. The right seeds must be sown.
- **THIRD LEVEL:** This is an area that is of great importance. We have been in touch with a number of third level institutions to encourage **research** by both under- and post-graduates, with relatively little success so far. The Cabragh Wetlands are virgin territory in terms of research, so almost any work is going to be genuinely original. This is an area to be developed, with huge scope for new work (and immensely useful and important for the Trust) in hydrology, geology, biology, botany, zoology, entomology, history, environmental studies chemistry, and so on.
- We have a good working relationship with the **Tipperary Institute**, who have regularly brought out students on their Sustainable Development course, and who have provided us with expertise and some equipment. We hope that the TI will provide a source of finance in return for the chance to use the wetlands, not least art, design and computer students. A new Environmental Science course is starting at the TI this September, and we expect them to make regular and routine use of the Centre.
- **ADULT:** We work closely with **Colaiste Eile** contributing to the vocational module "Living Things in their Environment". In a week-long course in the Centre, the students studied climate change, sustainable energy, the Green Flag campaign, waste and recycling, and did lab work testing water from the wetlands at the Tipperary Institute. The focus is on environmental awareness, with a view to Colaiste Eile becoming an eco-college with long-term links to Cabragh.
- **FAS and VEC:** Talks have been held with the head of the North Tipp VEC, who visited the Centre for two hours, and is looking at ways in which they might help us, and vice-versa. Certainly we can provide facilities and expertise for some of their courses, and the same applies to FAS, who maintained an office at Cabragh for several years until we needed the space

- for our own activities. FAS have held training events at the Centre. We hope to gain accreditation from HETAC to offer appropriate courses.
- **Public Education:** We have developed a programme of *winter talks* over the last three years, some given by members, others by outside guests, who have generously given their time and expertise free of charge. These talks are open to the public and are free. Audiences have varied from 10 to 60. The following (incomplete) list gives a sample of what we have provided:
 - (*=Trust member)
 - Willie Hayes on the Restoration of Holycross Abbey
 - Barry Murphy on Thatching and Traditional Building Techniques
 - Alex Copeland (Birdwatch Ireland) on Ringing and the Birds of the Cabragh Wetlands
 - Jimmy Duggan* on Heritage and Landscape of Tipperary
 - Tom Gallagher*/Michael Long* on Unfolding Evolution and Indigenous Wisdom
 - Joe Bourke* on Why Ecology Matters
 - Jim Ryan* on Bees
 - Adam Tozer* on Iceland, and on Nature and World War One
 - Ann Lloyd*/Marlene Harney* on Flowers and their Pollinators
 - Miriam McGilliss on Genesis Farm (2 visitors came from Cork)
 - 3 Presentation Girls on their Young Scientist Project on the Wetlands
 - Mieke Muyliaert* on Management of the Wetlands
 - Siobahn Geraghty (N. Tipp. CC Heritage Officer) on 'Graveyards: Full of Life'
 - Prof Tom Collins (Maynooth) on 'The Environment as Classroom'
 - Michael Long* led us on 'A Cosmic Walk'
 - - Father Sean McDonagh held a Book Launch at the Centre for his latest work on the global impact of climate change
 - - Al Gore's Film 'An Inconvenient Truth' was shown, with a discussion on climate change, providing a forum for people to raise concerns and offer insights
 - - local photographer George Willoughby showed a draft wetlands DVD
 - Open **public workshops** have been held on:
 - composting, hedgelaying, birdboxes and introductory bird watching
 - Birdwatch Ireland have held two training courses for bird ringers at the Centre, with participants from all over Ireland and the UK.

- **11. Recreation:**
- The overlap between education and recreation is not always clear, but here is a flavour of what we have tried to provide at the Wetlands Centre over the last three years.
- About 50 **Scouts** from Holycross enjoyed an evening on the site
- **Cabragh Resources** routinely bring out friends who are disabled or dependent, and greatly enjoy the peaceful atmosphere
- **Thurles Active Retirement Group** have been out often, enjoying a presentation from our PRO and a cup of tea
- **Ceoltas** use the Centre monthly, offering the chance for local talent to gather and enjoy music, dance, song and story-telling. This helps preserve our **cultural heritage**
- **The Summer Camp** offers a week of activities to about 60 children
- **Mid-Tipp Hillwalkers** held a reception here and gave €2000 for educational equipment
- The Tipperary branch of **Birdwatch Ireland** holds events here, including **Dawn Chorus** meetings
- **Crafts** are a main part of our annual Open Day/Sale of Work, with local painters, wood and stone carvers, a spinner and knitter, photographers, a basket weaver and furniture makers on display
- The **N. Tipp Arts Officer** has given us an **Arts Grant** of €550 to run two craft courses during Heritage Week this year, one a stone carving workshop for adults, and the other a clay modeling workshop for children 5-12. The courses will be run by local Holycross artists
- We always have an **Open Day** during **Heritage Week**, with **guided walks** and tea as a minimum offering to the public
- our **Sale of Work/Open Day** attracts several hundred visitors for a family day out, brings together all sorts of local help for plant and cake sales, auction, teas, bric-a-brac, etc. It is a good revenue earner, but more importantly creates a great sense of community involvement and mutual support and brings in many of our 'fringe' members, who are not active throughout the year, but are invaluable on this day.
- **Eanna Ni Lamhna** has been three times to lead walks, which have brought in many families and children
- Residents at the Holycross **Sue Ryder home** often come out.

- **12: Cooperation**

- In addition to the many groups mentioned already, it is important to mention the following groups with whom we have developed close working relationships:
- the **Traveller Community** who keep their horses on the Wetlands, grazing according to an agreed pattern and timescale, and providing valuable help in stopping the undergrowth getting too thick and choking the growth of more desirable species, and creating nest sites for (eg) **skylarks**. N.Tipp CC have held several of their routine meetings with the Traveller Community at the Wetlands centre. At a time when their traditions and skills in breeding, handling and driving horses are coming under pressure because of lack of grazing facilities, it is of considerable benefit in maintaining this part of their culture
- local industry. **Lisheen Mine** have provided us with computer and powerpoint equipment, invaluable assistance in setting up our website (allocating staff time to help us), and not least use of their laboratory to test our water when a fungus appeared on small fish in the pond
- **N. Tipp Library Service** have donated a substantial number of their no longer needed bird books, which provide us with both a genuine research library and new options for school visits, not least opening up the prospect of winter school visits being more viable. We have hope that they will provide books on plants, mammals, insects and other topics as they sort through their stock. The local Bookshop (**The Bookworm**) gave us bookcases and held an exhibition here in Heritage Week 2006
- The relationship between the Trust and the local **Gun Clubs** remains strong, though there is no shooting on our site. This highlights the importance of Gun Clubs as conservationists.
- We are voting members of **CAVA** (North Tipperary Community and Voluntary Association), are networking with other local tourist attractions and support local tourist publications.

- We take very seriously our relationship with our **neighbours** and other owners of land within the wetlands. We used the 2006 Management Plan as a means of raising a discussion with them about our plans for the future, held a social evening and got Mieke Muyliaert to talk.
- We were visited for a day by 2 representatives of the **National Parks and Wildlife Service**, and got good feedback about what we were doing. We are encouraged by the fact that they do not seem to want to interfere too much!
- We recognize our relative inexperience and know that in some areas we are off-the-pace. Members have made visits to other similar centres to see how they operate, to tap their knowledge and experience. These visits include **Kilfenora**, The **Peatland Centre** and the **Irish Seed Savers**.
- We have a close relationship with the thriving **Thurles Farmers Market**, which was largely started on the initiative of two of our members. We support their organic and fair trade priorities.
- We have found the local radio station **Tipp FM** generous and have featured in a number of programmes - excellent publicity.
- The **Tipperary Star** has been generous in allowing us space, and we now have a weekly article of 250-450 words, which will normally be on a species currently at the Wetlands, an upcoming event, or on a wider issue connected to the environment, climate change, etc.
- A **Spirituality Group** met regularly last winter, considering such issues as man's place in nature, the history of the planet, sacredness and nature. There is much more to do.
- **Foroige** have been to the Wetlands for activity days, and **the Irish Countrywomen's Association** had a walk and an evening reception.
- We have an active **education committee** of members, primary and secondary teachers, that have produced worksheets and educational ideas and projects. This group brings more women into active involvement with the Trust.

- **13: Future Plans**

- Over the next few years our plans include the following, but always bearing in mind that conservation is our core objective:
- we want to build up our facilities for the disabled and put the
- Wetlands Centre on their 'tourist route'
- we want to set up more **project areas** for children and adults outside,
- such as bug-houses, compost displays, raised vegetable beds, etc
- we plan to look into ways of making the Centre an **eco-friendly**, non-
- carbon powered building.
- **Tipperary Institute** have raised the possibility of building us a better
- second hide, drafting plans to make the Centre an environmentally
- friendly building, and preparing second-level courses that they will
- run until such time as we are able to take them over
- a major **funding bid** has been prepared to buy more land, extend the Visitor Centre and employ permanent staff
- the bid will also involve putting up a **permanent exhibition** in the Centre, so that visitors have something to see
- indoors. **Procter and Gamble (Nenagh)** Community Relations Team have been approached with a view to
- sponsorship of indoor displays
- the **constitution** must be finalized
- we hope to extend the tea-room, and have a **shop**
- the **education programme** needs to be extended, with more worksheets to cover both a wider range of habitats
- and to be more suitable for a wider range of different aged students. We hope to offer more in the way of History
- and a component for second and third levels on ideas and philosophy
- in the longer term, we hope it may be possible to extend the **walkways** to provide a longer walk of about 2-3 miles
- around the site, ideally linking with a Thurles-Holycross riverside walk
- continue the programme of **talks**. Planned for the next winter are an anniversary lecture on Darwin and
- Darwinism, and a talk by an active member of a European environmental youth movement
- get ourselves into key books and publications, both for tourists and for those interested in studying wildlife
- erect road signs in the area to help visitors to find us
- establish a viable programme of activities for youth members.

- **14: Conclusion**

- The Trust has come a long way in the last 16 years. The site looks to be secure for posterity, and according to the Deeds of Purchase it is forever dedicated to the protection of nature and wildlife. There is now perhaps something of a directional switch away from building and site development, with more of an emphasis on education, research and tourism, while remembering that these are means to secure long-term conservation.
- This directional switch should ensure that the wider community is brought into more contact with the wetlands and the Wetland Trust through educational and recreational programmes. We anticipate that this will bring the next generation into the Trust and help ensure its long-term health. It should also bring in more women.
- The publicity and prestige that recognition from Pride of Place/Cooperation Ireland would generate, would certainly help to secure funding and thus the future of this voluntary community group.