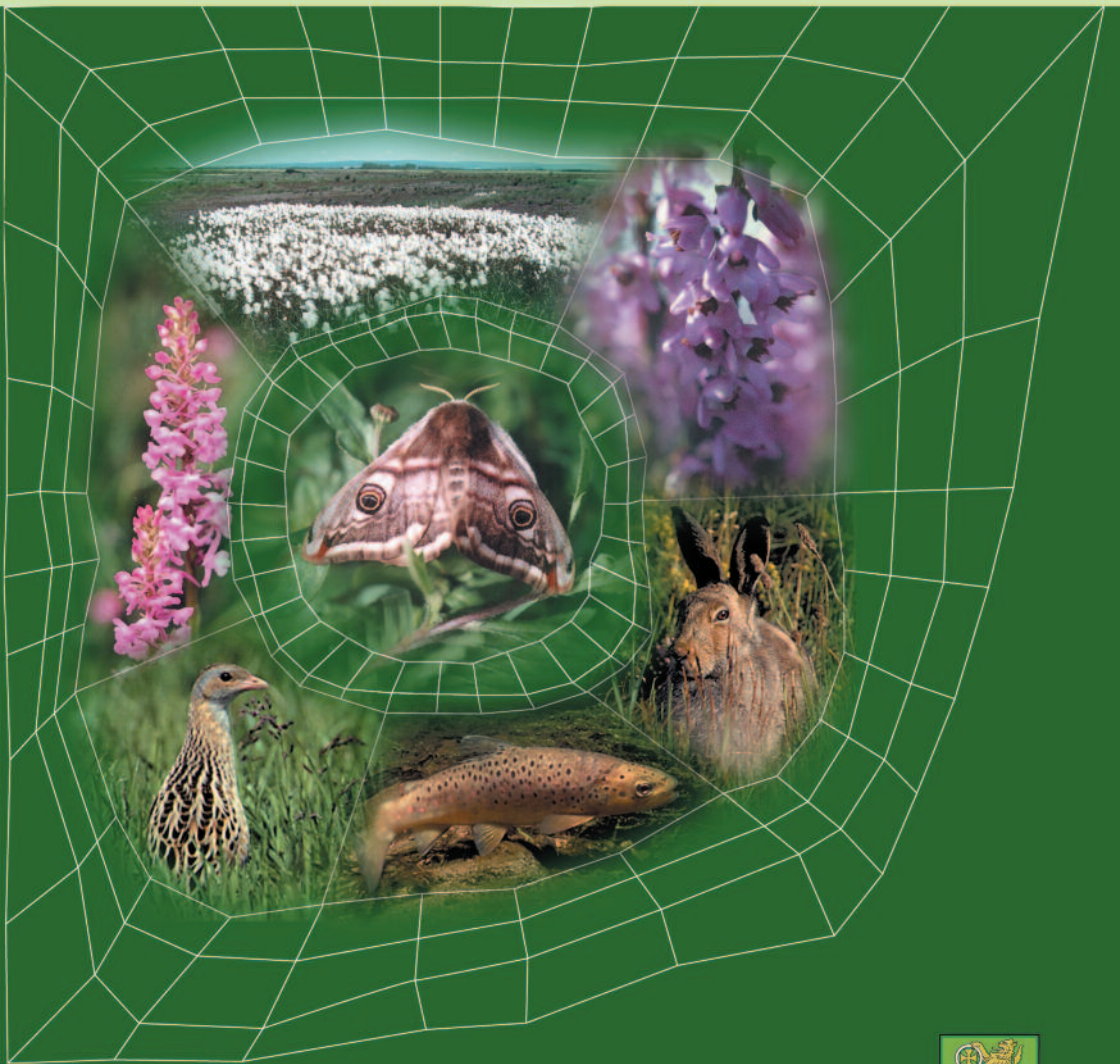


# Biodiversity Action Strategy for Offaly



Offaly County Council







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**Tullamore Declaration,  
June 2005**

ISBN 0 9535841 3 5

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Cover montage, layout and design by Bernard Kaye  
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Printed by Walsh Printers, Roscrea

## Foreword

In 2001, the Offaly Heritage Forum developed the Offaly Heritage Plan 2002 – 2006, co-ordinated by the heritage officer, Amanda Pedlow. This plan is now approaching its final year of implementation. During this period, the need for a distinct Biodiversity Plan has evolved. In 2004, the first Offaly Natural Heritage seminar was held with over 50 people attending the morning seminar and afternoon field trip. Following this, Offaly County Council, through the Offaly Heritage Forum, has been working with the School of Biological and Environmental Science at UCD and an Advisory Panel to develop this Biodiversity Action Strategy which was adopted by Offaly County Council at the June 2005 County Council Meeting. This Strategy sets out what needs to be done to be able to draw up an informed Biodiversity Plan for the coming years. We are especially pleased that not only has this Strategy been adopted but that its implementation has already begun with the holding of the first ‘Exploring the Wild’ summer school held for primary school teachers this July and the development of the first EcoNode in Knockbarron woods. We look forward to the benefits that the continuation of this Strategy will bring to the county in the years to come. For updates and information please see [www.offaly.ie/offalyheritage](http://www.offaly.ie/offalyheritage).



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## Introduction: the haemorrhage of biodiversity on earth

We are surrounded and enmeshed by biological diversity on a scale that is really beyond our comprehension. The best estimates of scientists put the number of species of living things on earth today at somewhere between 3 and 100 million, of which fewer than 2 million have actually been identified, described and given proper scientific names. Equally incomprehensible is the sheer abundance of life. It has been calculated that the number of arthropods<sup>1</sup> alone in every square kilometre of land may be as high as 10 billion.

At the present time our earth is suffering a haemorrhaging of this biological diversity on a scale never before experienced in the history of the planet. We might be losing as many as 300,000 species a year – nobody knows what the real figure is – the vast majority of which are unknown and unnamed. The main cause of this decline is the destruction of natural habitats. It is a rate of loss that is comparable with the mass extinctions brought about by natural causes at several times in the geological past.

It was the growing concern over this appalling loss that led to the Convention on Biological Diversity drawn up at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Ireland became a signatory to the Convention in 1996, thereby undertaking the obligation to halt the loss of biological diversity and work to regain lost biodiversity in Ireland: and further afield, beyond our shores, to do what we can to address the global loss. Allied to this, the EU has now set itself the target of halting habitat loss by 2010. Ireland produced its National Biodiversity Plan in 2002, and as part of that Plan each local area is now required to draft its own Biodiversity Action Plan, guidelines for the preparation of which have been drawn up by the Heritage Council.

**‘... The preparation and implementation of effective national biodiversity strategies, plans or programmes requires a highly participatory process, especially involving the people and economic sectors most affected’ (UNEP).**

It is our hope that the Biodiversity Action Strategy adopted after careful deliberation by County Offaly will be of interest to local communities elsewhere, both in Ireland and in other countries, and may provide a template which can be adapted to other local areas in the light of their differing circumstances.

The work will have a ‘bifocal approach,’ with parallel emphasis on *data assembly and research* on the one hand, and the *promotion of awareness and the development of access* on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Phylum of invertebrate animals which have a segmented body, an external skeleton and jointed limbs, e.g. insects, spiders and crustaceans.



## Why is it so important?

There are many reasons why the haemorrhaging of biodiversity from the earth is so serious. There are economic reasons that have to do with its practical importance in our lives, such as regulation of climate and rainfall. There is the fact that as yet undiscovered species are a treasure chest from which medicine, farming and human welfare generally may benefit in all sorts of ways when their genetic potential is tapped by means of the incredibly sophisticated tools increasingly available to us. There is the increased understanding that science derives from the study of new species concerning the intricate workings of the living world. But over and above all of this there is the sheer wonder of it, the awesome complexity and diversity that indeed is the deepest reason most of the people who study these creatures do so in the first place.

There is also a profound ethical imperative to care for the diversity of life: first of all because in a very real sense it is seen by people of Faith as the primary revelation, through which God has expressed himself for unimaginable epochs of time before our species appeared on the evolutionary scene; and secondly, because we are its custodians and its kin.

## The decline of biodiversity in Offaly

The diminution in nature's diversity we have experienced here in Offaly pales in comparison with the losses experienced by those areas of the world where most of earth's biological diversity is concentrated. Tropical rain forests are disappearing at the rate of perhaps 150,000 km<sup>2</sup> a year, which is around 2% of the standing cover. At that rate it would all be gone within a century.

Fifty or sixty years ago species-diverse grassland was widespread in Offaly, and many of the county's bogs were relatively undisturbed. Corncrakes abounded in the meadows, and nightjars still nested in the pine and willow scrub along the fringes of some of the bogs. The genetically unique Offaly brown trout, the croneen, made their way upstream to their spawning grounds in the headwaters of the Camcor in Slieve Bloom in prodigious numbers no longer seen.

**The decline in the natural diversity of our home place is more important for our lives than the loss of rainforest or the rich habitats of the tropical seas in the special sense that this is the only part of the world where we experience contact with nature and nature's values.**

Although a small number of species have been lost from the county in the last 50 to 100 years, they are all to be found elsewhere still. They are not extinct. But they are lost to the experience of life's diversity by Offaly people in their everyday lives. And not just rare species and not *particularly* rare species: wild things, plants and animals, which were common fifty years ago are common no more. It is increasingly the case that people, younger people especially, are unaware of any sense of loss on this account, because it was never part of their personal experience. The decline in the natural diversity of our home place is more important for our lives than the loss of rainforest or the rich habitats of the tropical seas in the special sense that *this is the only part of the world where we experience contact with nature and nature's values.*

## We don't know what we are losing

We know a great deal about birds, mammals and flowering plants in Offaly: the species we have and their distribution, and what their status is in the county. But there are enormous gaps in our knowledge of invertebrates, which account for the overwhelmingly greater part of biodiversity, and of non-flowering plants, fungi and lichens (to say nothing of bacteria). We cannot have a Biodiversity Action Plan if we don't know what species are here, what their habitats are, what the status of these habitats and therefore of the species that inhabit them is.

One of the first tasks of the Offaly Biodiversity Strategy therefore will be to ascertain what we do know and to identify the gaps in our knowledge, so that we can plan in an informed way for the future of biodiversity in the county.





## A permanent structure: the Advisory Panel

If the Offaly Biodiversity Strategy is to be placed on a firm foundation, it needs to be supported and driven by a permanent structure that will carry the challenge of meeting its aims into the future in a sustained way.

The first pillar of this permanent structure is the establishment by Offaly County Council of a permanent advisory group of professional environmental people from Offaly. Each member of this group is somebody who identifies with the county as their home place, and brings to the strategy the sort of commitment and concern that are essential to its success. Each occupies a key role in his/her professional capacity within an organization whose resources and expertise are an essential ingredient in the process.<sup>2</sup>

Each member of this group is somebody who identifies with the county as their home place, and brings to the strategy the sort of commitment and concern that are essential to its success.

The members of the Advisory Panel will provide Offaly County Council with whatever data and assistance pertaining to the natural diversity of County Offaly they and their organisations can provide. They will also keep an eye on key legislative and other relevant drivers, such as the Water Framework Directive and other legislation pertaining to biodiversity. The Panel will function as a sub-group within the Offaly Heritage Forum.

The Advisory Panel has begun the task of assembling all extant data on biodiversity in Offaly, so as to be in a position to advise on the state of knowledge of the various taxonomic groups<sup>3</sup> in the county. This will enable them to comment on the conservation status of the different groups, and to advise on what action needs to be taken to ensure favourable conservation status. The Panel will provide Offaly County Council with the information that is needed to set out a research agenda, and to identify what actions may need to be undertaken with regard to conservation and enhancement.

The Council will publish a summary of what we know about the county's natural diversity in a first *State of the Wild in Offaly Report*, targeted at the community in general. It would be our intention to review this report at intervals of perhaps ten years. What we are about here is not something that will be completed in five years. It is the beginning of a process that will continue as long as there are people in Offaly, and our thinking and planning have to be geared to that timescale.

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### <sup>2</sup> The Advisory Panel

Donal Daly – Geological Survey of Ireland  
Tom Egan – Bord na Móna  
John Feehan – UCD  
Richard Jack – Coillte

John Lucey – Environmental Protection Agency  
Áine O'Connor – National Parks and Wildlife Service  
Amanda Pedlow – Heritage Office, Offaly County Council  
Donal Wynne – Bord na Móna

<sup>3</sup> Biologically classified groups.



## Democratisation of the process

The involvement of the broader community is seen as a key element in the proper implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity. This will require on the one hand the effective dissemination of the ecological and cultural values inherent in biodiversity; but on the other hand it needs to genuinely involve people and their lives at every stage of the process. We need to move forward to a care-for-nature policy that involves, empowers and enriches community.

The panel of experts set up by the United Nations Environment Programme in support of the Convention recognised that ‘... the preparation and implementation of effective national biodiversity strategies, plans or programmes requires a highly participatory process, especially involving the people and economic sectors most affected.’ Without this we cannot hope for a strategy that will achieve the consensus which is necessary to make the changes in society and the national life that are required if there is to be adequate implementation of the Directive on the ground.

**We need as a community to be able to say: this enhances my world, enriches my life; makes my everyday world a better place to live in, with the same kind of reason and sincerity as we would say a better health service or transport system makes my world a richer place to live in.**

Our Biodiversity Action Strategy therefore needs to be accompanied by *democratisation of the values that inhere in biodiversity*. We need as a community to reach the point of being able to say: this enhances my world, enriches my life; makes my everyday world a better place to live in, with the same kind of reason and sincerity as we would say a better health service or transport system makes my world a richer place to live in. It makes our county a richer place to grow up in, to work in, to share life in. Our lives would be poorer without the places that harbour the county’s remaining biological diversity. This promotion of awareness and development of access may be seen as a second pillar of the permanent structure that is needed to fulfil the challenge of meeting its aims into the future in a sustained way.

In the process of enhancing local awareness and appreciation, the schools of the county are absolutely critical, and Offaly County Council will work to build biodiversity into the work of schools in a deep and focused way in the years ahead. To this end, an *Annual Summer School* will be held as part of the Department of Education’s summer course programme for Teachers, with the support of Offaly County Council. This will attempt to provide teachers with some of the training, experience and resources necessary to appreciate and understand biodiversity themselves, and to share that appreciation and understanding with their students. Each year’s Summer School will consolidate and extend the work of previous years.



## The Econet concept and poster campaign

In order to inform people about the Strategy upon which Offaly County Council has embarked we need more than an announcement. We need a campaign that will *engage* people, that will capture the popular imagination.

To this end we are adopting and adapting an approach that is currently being promoted by the European Centre for Nature Conservation. This is the concept of the **EcoNet**, the acronym for ‘ecological network.’ This can be envisaged as *a web of wild places*, made up of a core of special or larger wild places which have really high nature value (like SACs, NHAs, rivers, nature reserves, bogs), fringed where possible by a protective rim (for example, riparian margins), and all linked by narrower ribbons and threads of places (such as hedgerows) where nature is still diverse, that bind the whole into a network which meshes the world of nature around everyday human life in the county, and brings it to our doors, even into our towns and villages.

We will package the message of biodiversity within this image of the EcoNet, the Web of Wildness: a **WildWorldWeb** that weaves itself right through the county. We will work to convey something of the excitement of “surfing” that Net, and extend the challenge to bring it right down to the level of local community where it is most immediately and intimately experienced. Offaly County Council’s website will provide a platform for this exploration.

The concept is especially appropriate in a county to which peatlands contribute such a substantial part, because they are so web-like in nature, and at some later stage could be entwined with EcoNets developed in and around the extensive cutaway peatland complexes in other counties.

What we seek to convey with this campaign is the notion that our lives, the lives of all of us in Offaly, now and in the future can be enriched by experience of the wild places and things that make the world about us more diverse, more interesting, more beautiful, more inspiring.

We will use the Biodiversity Summer School to involve the schools in this venture, and through the schools aim to reach directly or indirectly into every home in the county. The county EcoNet will feature as the centerpiece of a large poster which is currently in preparation. At its centre will be the colourful EcoNet map of Offaly, accompanied by key promotional phrases and a small amount of other explanatory text. The poster will also feature a number of photographs and words of endorsement from a number of very well-known Offaly people, individuals who are highly regarded within the county, in different walks of life: sport, music, politics, the churches, science. This poster will be displayed prominently not only in every school and church in the county, but in every supermarket and pub, so that the message will reach the widest audience possible.

## Accessing the Web of Wildness

It is the direct experience of biodiversity on this local level that brings the greatest enrichment, and this is why it is so important to establish and make accessible the local places where wild things can be experienced and studied in the county.

In order to provide the essential access to the EcoNet, both physically and conceptually, a series of “Educational Hotspots” – ‘**EcoNodes**’ – will be established, special places developed in collaboration with local communities which people can visit to experience and explore biological (and geological) diversity, special places where they can feel the heartbeat of the Offaly biodiversity process. The first of these Special Places for Biodiversity Education are the woods at Knockbarron, north of Kinnitty, which is one of the most beautiful bluebell woods in Offaly; it also has what is perhaps the finest complex of undisturbed eskers in the country. Knockbarron belongs to Coillte, which is enthusiastically involved in the project. Further EcoNodes will be developed with the help of Bord na Móna and Coillte next year, and others in later years, so that ultimately there will be a constellation of these special entry points, developed in collaboration with local community groups and state agencies.



## Into the future ...

The framework outlined here constitutes the Biodiversity Strategy of Offaly County Council. The Strategy will be effected by means of a rolling succession of Action Plans prepared by the Offaly Heritage Forum with the assistance of the Advisory Panel. These plans will reflect the 'bifocal approach' discussed earlier, with parallel emphasis on data assembly and research on the one hand, and the promotion of awareness and the development of access on the other. These Action Plans will attempt wherever possible to harness the synergy provided through linkage to other initiatives that concern biodiversity. The County Council website ([www.offaly.ie/offalyheritage](http://www.offaly.ie/offalyheritage)) will serve as the Information Forum on the development of the Strategy over time.

**Biodiversity makes our county a richer place to grow up in, to work in, to share life in. Our lives would be poorer without the places that harbour the county's remaining biological diversity.**

The first Action Plan (2004-2005) is now well advanced. The main elements are listed below.

- Establishment of the Biodiversity Advisory Panel
- Preparation of the first *State of the Wild in Offaly* report
- Holding of the inaugural Biodiversity Summer School for teachers
- The awareness campaign: the Offaly WildWorldWeb poster
- Promotion of the EcoNet concept: establishment of the first EcoNode at Knockbarron
- Carry out County Hedgerow Survey
- Audit of Natural Heritage Studies

Next year will see the continuation of these initiatives and the development of the first Species Action Plans.

Offaly County Council

June 2005



[www.offaly.ie/offalyheritage](http://www.offaly.ie/offalyheritage)