

DID YOU KNOW?

- Ireland's marine and terrestrial environment supports a wide variety of species and habitats many of which are of international importance
- Throughout Europe and in Ireland, certain farmland breeding bird populations suffered massive rates of decline in the 1970s and 1980s. The Corn Bunting, for example, is now extinct as a breeding species in Ireland
- Ireland has international and legal obligations related to the protection of biodiversity. These include a commitment to halt biodiversity loss by 2020
- Not all of Ireland's species are known, with new species being discovered or those thought to be extinct rediscovered on a yearly basis

BIODIVERSITY - WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

'Biodiversity' is a term used to describe the variety of life. It includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems. Biodiversity protects and nurtures people through providing an array of ecosystem services. These include provisioning services such as food, fuel and medicines, supporting services such as pollination and primary production; regulating services such as prevention of flooding and coastal erosion, climate regulation and pest regulation; and cultural services such as recreation.



BIODIVERSITY IN IRELAND

Due to Ireland's geographic isolation and recent geological history it has a lower diversity of non-marine flora and fauna than is found on continental Europe. Nevertheless, Ireland's aquatic systems and wetlands support internationally significant populations of birds, fish and invertebrates. Ireland's marine environment is particularly biodiverse and is among Europe's richest for cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises). It supports large seabird breeding colonies, a great range of invertebrate species, and its cold-water coral communities are of particular note, supporting a diverse array of associated fauna. In addition, Ireland has a significant number of internationally important habitats including limestone pavements, machair, turloughs and active peatlands.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Across the world, species are currently being lost up to 1,000 times faster than the natural rate and this is primarily as a result of human activities. It is estimated that in the EU only 17% of habitats and species protected under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) are in a favourable state. Recent evidence shows that Ireland's biodiversity capital is dwindling rapidly.

The majority of Ireland's habitats listed under the Habitats Directive are reported to be of poor or bad conservation status. Only 7% of habitats listed under the Habitats Directive are considered to have favourable status and only 39% of listed species are in a favourable state. These include bats, seals, certain cetaceans and plants. Other species, particularly of wetland and freshwater environment, are reported to be of poor or bad conservation status, including a number of species of fish (e.g. Atlantic salmon), molluscs (e.g. freshwater pearl mussel) and the natterjack toad.

Many species are doing well in conservation terms, but there are a significant number of habitats and species that are not. The National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency co-ordinate red lists in Ireland. Red lists identify those in most need of conservation interventions. Recent red lists indicate that more than a third of Irish bee species and non-marine mollusc species are threatened. In addition, over 15% of Irish water beetle species, butterfly species dragonflies and damselfies are threatened.

Ireland is committed to halt biodiversity loss by
2020

ONLY **7%**

of listed habitats have favourable status

ONLY **39%**

of listed species are in a favourable state



www.epa.ie/irelandsenvironment/

THREATS TO BIODIVERSITY

The main issues that Ireland's habitats and species face are direct habitat damage. This can be caused by wetland drainage/reclamation and infrastructural development; water pollution particularly from nutrients and silt; unsustainable exploitation such as over-fishing and peat extraction; invasive alien species and recreational pressures. Indirect pressures such as population growth and climate change is likely to bring additional pressures on a number of species and habitats in Ireland.

It is expected that climate change will alter Ireland's habitats and the distribution of many species into the future. Many distributional changes have already become evident. Birds are indicating some of these changes. A recent Bird Atlas for Ireland and Britain has shown that some phenomenal shifts have occurred in the distribution of breeding sub-Saharan migrants such as Swift and Swallow over the past 40 years; declines in south-eastern Britain and increases in Ireland and Scotland imply that a north-western shift in their breeding distribution has taken place. Furthermore, the predicted increases in sea-levels will affect coastal habitats and associated biodiversity.



WHAT ARE WE DOING TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEMS?

LEGAL PROTECTION (EU & NATIONAL)

At EU Level the Habitats Directive and Birds Directive create a comprehensive scheme of protection for wild species and habitats. While designation of protected areas in Ireland in recent years has advanced substantially, the European Commission still considers Ireland's list of designated sites as incomplete. The most important pieces of national legislation on nature conservation are the Wildlife Act 1976, the Wildlife (Amendment) Acts, 2000-2010 and the EU (Natural Habitats) Regulations, 1997-2011. Under the Wildlife Acts nearly all bird species and some 60 other animal species are afforded protected status, as are some 90 plant species.

BIODIVERSITY PLANNING

In 2011, the EU adopted its 2020 Biodiversity Strategy following recognition that the EU had missed its 2010 target of halting biodiversity loss. The EU strategy has six main targets which focus on: full implementation of EU nature legislation, better protection for ecosystems and more use of green infrastructure; more sustainable agriculture and forestry; more sustainable fisheries; tighter controls of invasive alien species; and a greater contribution to averting global biodiversity loss. **The National Biodiversity Plan 2011-2016** is the main tool by which Ireland seeks to meet its commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity and the EU Biodiversity Strategy.

IMPROVING OUR KNOWLEDGE BASE

In order for Ireland to assess its contribution to preventing biodiversity loss, it is important that there is adequate knowledge of national biodiversity. Knowledge of the species occurring in Ireland has improved in recent years. Major surveys were carried out on terrestrial and marine habitats and research is being carried out on many protected species and habitats. The National Platform for Biodiversity Research, which is co-funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), was re-established in 2009 to define national biodiversity research needs, to assist in the dissemination of biodiversity research in Ireland, and to improve the exchange of information between researchers and policy makers. Several large-scale biodiversity research projects were undertaken in recent years to inform biodiversity policy, including the EPA-funded Biochange project, which addressed the main drivers of biodiversity loss and made recommendations to improve biodiversity governance.

PUBLIC AWARENESS

The **National Biodiversity Plan 2011-2016** aims at developing a suite of biodiversity indicators which would help to inform the public and policy makers on the state and trends in biodiversity, pressures on biodiversity and the effectiveness of key policy measures. Globally, the unprecedented and continuing loss of biodiversity is one of the greatest challenges facing humanity.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Ireland's biodiversity is under threat from habitat loss, pollution and the laying of poisons. You can make a difference by not laying poisons which are harmful to our wildlife and the environment. Since consumption of resources is a root cause of biodiversity loss, you can consume less and be more mindful about what you consume by purchasing products that do not harm the environment.

FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about Ireland's Biodiversity, check out the EPA Biodiversity Action Plan accessible at www.epa.ie/downloads, the National Parks and Wildlife Service www.npws.ie, the National Biodiversity Data Centre www.nbdc.ie or Birdwatch Ireland www.birdwatchireland.ie