



Bountiful bogs a valuable resource

sees new hope for
Ireland's bogland

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SONGS and tunes have been composed about the bog and now they are making films about it. People have happy memories of sunny days labouring in the peatlands to keep the home fires burning, but it was hard work when conducted in the old-fashioned way.

Turf harvesting was a slow, back-breaking chore and the most memorable part was being involved in meitheals groups of neighbours that came together to do certain jobs in rural areas. At least with a dozen or so other people there would be a certain amount of craic and conversation on the turf bank.

Few people now trek to the bog for turf. Many of those visiting in the early 21st century go to experience wild and isolated places, for fresh air and a sniff of scented heather. They also go to see unusual plants, plus hares, curlews or boglarks.

Not that long ago bogs were regarded as wastelands of poor farming value and fit only for tree-planting or, at best, land reclamation. At worst, they became illegal dumps.

Now, people look on bogs as valuable repositories of rare plants and wildlife. They are seen as places that ought to be conserved for nature, something that is happening in many parts of country with the involvement of local communities.

Bogs are very wet places, and little wonder for they consist of 90% water and 10% solid material. Peat is formed by layers of partially rotted plants which have built up slowly over thousands of years.

About 85% of Irish bogland has been lost due to peat-cutting, afforestation and reclamation for agriculture.

Many of the peatlands in Cork, Kerry, Galway, Waterford and Wicklow have been planted during the past 30 to 40 years. For that reason a conservation initiative by Coillte is to be welcomed.

Coillte has just launched a DVD, *Bringing The Bogs Back To LIFE*, to promote its EU-funded bog restoration projects across the country.

According to chief executive David Gunning, 15% of its estate is managed with nature conservation as the primary management objective. The main way to restore a damaged bog is to block any drains on its surface. This raises the watertable and helps the bog to start growing again.

A blanket bog restoration project, which has just finished, involved 20 sites in Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Clare, Kerry and

Laois. A raised bog project, which involves 14 sites, will finish at the end of September and includes Cavan, Galway, Roscommon, Meath, Longford, Westmeath, and Laois.

Coillte received funding to restore almost 600 hectares of raised bog habitat. The peatlands of the midlands are among the most important raised bog systems remaining in Europe, and it is estimated Ireland holds 50% of Europe's intact oceanic raised bogs.

All 14 sites are candidate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the EU Habitats Directive and provide habitat for a range of rare plant and animal species.

Blanket bogs started developing in Ireland around 7,000 years ago. However, it is thought they only became widespread around 4,000 years ago when the climate became much wetter and cooler.

Though peat has probably been cut for fuel for thousands of years, it is only in the last century that vast areas have been lost. Today only 18% of the original area of blanket bog and 8% of the original area of raised bog remains of conservation interest.

Raised bogs are found in lowland areas, such as river valleys, lake-basins and between drumlins.

The surface is a mixture of pools, raised mossy hummocks and flatter lawns, and is colonised by plants and animals adapted to the acidic conditions. There are

much deeper amounts of peat in raised bogs, up to 12 metres.

Irish bogs are among the richest in Europe for plant and animal life, with numerous species of moss, lichen, spider and insect, as well as larger animal species — otter, red grouse and merlin.

▶ ONLINE

▶ Copies of the DVD are free from Coillte, or via the website, www.coillte.ie. Also see, www.raisedbogrestoration.ie



For these army workers, turf cutting was a slow, back-breaking chore in 1944. Coillte has launched a conservation programme to highlight the importance of blanket bogs.

