

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



Case Studies on
High Nature Value Farming in Ireland
North Connemara and the Aran Islands

**Field Trip to North Connemara,
July 2010**

*This is a summary of the report prepared for the Heritage Council on the same topic
(Smith, Bligh, Delaney, Egan, O'Donovan, O'Donoghue and O'Hora, in press).*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional extensive farming practises have helped to create the Irish landscape, as we know it today. The relationship between farming, our landscape and our natural heritage, and our cultural traditions and practises, is one of mutual inter-dependence. Our landscape is the product of centuries, and indeed millennia, of interaction of the natural environment, (especially climate and geology) with human land use, particularly farming. Much of the natural and cultural heritage that we encounter in Ireland today is influenced by, or has evolved, in response to these interactions, such as our flower-rich grasslands, and our networks of stone walls. Maintaining that heritage relies on maintaining the more traditional extensive type of farming that influenced its development. This type of farming is often referred to as “high nature value farming”, and the farmers’ role in this dynamic is critical.

– Early purple orchid in calcareous grassland, Inis Mór (*E. Delaney*)



– HNV farming landscape in north Connemara showing improved pasture in foreground with semi-natural commonage habitats in background (*E. Delaney*)





– Inis Meáin, showing land types available in a ceathrú, including winterage grassland (foreground), improved lowland grassland (middle ground) and coastal habitats (background) (*E. Delaney*)

Three Types of High Nature Value farmland

- Type I: Farms with a high proportion of semi-natural habitats used for extensive livestock grazing, e.g. Connemara, Aran Islands
- Type II: Farms with smaller areas of semi-natural habitat occurring in mosaic with more intensive agriculture.
- Type III: Intensively managed farmland with little semi-natural habitat that nevertheless supports species of conservation concern e.g. protected bird species

Threats to traditional, or high nature value, farming

In recent decades, this more traditional style of extensive farming has been increasingly replaced with more commercial, intensive farming, and this has had a significant impact on our wildlife and our landscape, both in Ireland and across Europe. In some parts of the country, however, where the potential for intensification is limited and farming is economically marginal, other changes are taking place: some farms are being abandoned, and on many others, it appears that farming practises are changing.

There are complex socio-economic reasons behind this dynamic. For instance, many of the people currently working the land in these areas are older, and there appears to be fewer young people moving into farming, partly because of the low economic returns. Many farmers work part-time jobs to supplement their farm income, which leaves less time and energy for labour-intensive traditional practises. The impact of the recession on this dynamic is yet to be fully revealed. These changing practises then have a knock-on impact on the nature found on a farmland, and the maintenance of cultural practises and farm features. If this trend continues, these culturally significant landscapes will change irrevocably. This has already been seen in the Burren, where the encroachment of hazel scrub increased when farming practices changed in this way. This is currently being addressed through the Burren's Farming for Conservation Programme.

Heritage Council Case Studies on High Nature Value Farming in Ireland - Focusing on North Connemara and the Aran Islands

EU Member States have pledged to identify, support and maintain high nature value farming. Ireland, however, has been slow to respond to this in a targeted way.

While many areas of high nature value farmland are already designated for protection under various European Directives and national legislation, there has been increasing recognition in recent years that these designations alone will not be enough to stop the loss of biodiversity in Europe and that much of our high nature value farmland may occur outside these designated areas. There is also increasing recognition that the measures in place to support farming and encourage environmentally friendly farming, such as Least Favoured Area payments and agri-environment schemes (such as the Rural Environment Protection Scheme), are not necessarily fulfilling the commitment referred to above. This has serious implications, not just for our national heritage but also for the viability of many rural communities.

In response to concerns about this, and observation of change already occurring to the landscapes in north Connemara and the Aran Islands, the Heritage Council commissioned the preparation of case studies on High Nature Value Farming in the Aran Islands and north Connemara, with support from the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. Both of these areas are culturally iconic landscape; are, in large part, designated because of their nature value; have a wealth of archaeological and cultural heritage resources, and are characterised by extensive livestock farming. However, they have dissimilar farming practices due to differing landscape, geology, soil, and natural habitats.

The Heritage Council aims to use these case studies to improve understanding of the relationships between our natural and cultural heritage and the associated farming practices. Critically, they will also be used to develop policy recommendations for the conservation of High Nature Value Farming and farmland in the study areas and in Ireland as a whole, and as a stepping stone in efforts to deliver concrete changes on the ground that will benefit not only our national heritage, but the farming and rural communities who play a critical role in its stewardship.

Methodology for the Case Studies

As well as the undertaking of extensive background research on the heritage of the two case study areas, North Connemara and the Aran Islands, and agricultural and environmental policy, one of the most critical aspects of the project's focus was to involve the farmers themselves. Public consultation meetings were held in both case study areas at the beginning of the project; then further interviews were held with individual farmers to gather more detailed information on their farm enterprises, how farming practises are changing, the challenges they face in continuing to farm and in maintaining the landscape, and what they consider the solutions to be, and their opinions on whether designations and REPS are addressing these challenges. Field surveys of the natural and cultural heritage on their farms were also carried out and assessed.



– Small scale vegetable cultivation on Inis Mór, a declining farm enterprise in Ireland (C. O'Brien)

The Aran Islands

The Aran Islands are a prime example of a traditional agricultural landscape. Past and present farming have combined to create and maintain the present mosaic of habitats, characterised by the network of drystone walls and rocky, wildflower-rich fields.

From the surveys and interviews undertaken, it appears that farming practices on the Aran Islands are less diverse than they once were, and mainly confined to raising beef cattle for finishing on the mainland, and potato and vegetable growing for home use.

“Farmers on the island are not in it to make money, but for the love of farming and to keep going what has been done on the island for years.”



–View towards Dún Chonchuir, Inis Meáin over stone wall network (*E. Delaney*)

A number of traditional farm practises associated with high nature value farming were considered to be in decline (such as potato and vegetable growing, stone wall building) or in danger of being lost (such as working Connemara ponies, rye production, using seaweed). This then can affect the nature to be found on the farmland, for instance, the practice of growing rye for thatching, which has encouraged the presence of rare plant species, is in decline, and so the associated rare plant species may be at risk.

All the farms surveyed were active farms and on these, scrub encroachment was not severe overall, although a number of stone walls were being encroached. However, many of the access boreens are becoming overgrown, and it was clear to the survey team that encroachment was an issue on other un-surveyed, potentially abandoned, farms, particularly on Inis Mór.

– Inis Mór landscape in April 2009 (*E. Delaney*)



A sample farm on Inis Oírr, the Aran Islands:

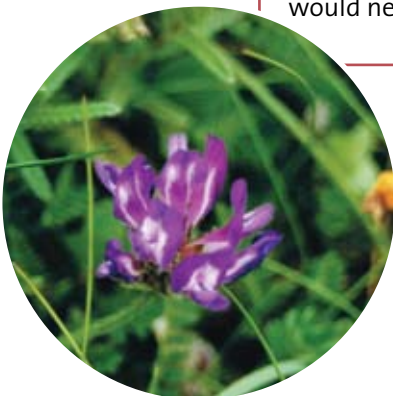
a beef farm of suckler cows and cattle, 7.3ha over 12 separate plots of land comprising 5.2ha of summer grazing and 2ha of winterage in the form of limestone pavement and semi-natural calcareous grassland.

The farmer was in REPS 3 at the time of survey, and the whole farm is designated. The farmer used to keep Shorthorn but now keeps Belgian Blue and Angus. Potatoes and vegetables are grown and seaweed is collected and spread on the vegetable ridges each year. Livestock graze the grassland areas in the summer and autumn and then return to the winterage lands. The farmer rears calves to be sold off each May/June at around 14 months of age; cattle are sold to cattle dealers who select stock from the farm, there are no actual cattle sales. The farmer makes less than an acre of hay.

The old field systems have been retained and the drystone walls are intact, being maintained on a regular basis. Some bramble and bracken occur along the walls but encroachment on this farm is minimal overall. As the farm is overlying natural limestone, there are no man-made field drainage systems present. However, two groundwater springs are present that have been dug out in the past and lined with stones to provide drinking water for livestock.

The farmer felt that the main challenges to farming on the Aran Islands are the level of bureaucracy and the associated paperwork, as well as the prices received for cattle. He indicated that the small farmer has as much paperwork to deal with as a big farmer. However, he did not anticipate significant changes to farming on the islands in the coming years, even if support is reduced or closed. People will continue to keep cattle and continue to farm the land. 'Farmers on the island are not in it to make money, but for the love of farming and to keep going what has been done on the island for years.' He also noted that farming is becoming a part-time occupation for more farmers, so it may be necessary to consider alternative farm enterprises. He himself is a part-time farmer and it is more of a hobby than an occupation for him at the moment. While he has not changed his own farming practices over the past ten years, he noted that there are fewer types of farming on the island than previously.

The landscape of the Aran Islands, and to farm within that landscape, is very important to this farmer. He considered it very important to maintain the walls and that the control of briars and scrub might be a key challenge in maintaining the landscape. Selling the farm would never be considered.



– Purple milk-vetch, a rare species found in Ireland only on Inis Mór and Inis Meáin (*G Smith*)

North Connemara

The dramatically beautiful landscape of north Connemara is also the product of the interaction between landscape, farming, and the natural environment. North Connemara farms are typically composed of an area of lowland grassland which supports farming in the upland areas. Without the use of improved and semi-improved pastures, extensive grazing of commonages would not be viable. Lowland grasslands are used for cattle and sheep grazing, with hill sheep usually pastured in commonage for part of the year.

In the recent past, Common Agricultural Policy subsidies led to drastic overstocking of commonages with severe impacts on the ecology of the upland landscape. Mandatory destocking is an attempt to reverse these impacts. As with the Aran Islands, there has been a trend towards simplification of farming practices in north Connemara, and many traditional practises are no longer employed or are waning. There is now little tillage or hay-making in the area; vegetable cultivation is in decline as is stonewall building and use of traditional breeds.

Modern Connemara farmers tend to be quite knowledgeable about the monuments present on their lands, probably due to the Irish-language tradition of oral history.

– North Connemara landscape (*E. Delaney*)



A sample farm in north Connemara:

- a hill sheep farm including commonage lands; 20 ha of improved grassland and rough grazing and approx. 200 ha of upland commonage.

Flock numbers are approximately 200 Blackface Mountain ewes with a number of Blackface Mountain rams. There is a Connemara pony and foal, and hens are kept on the farm. A vegetable plot is kept and contains a selection of vegetables including potatoes, carrots, onions, lettuce, peas, rhubarb, and several herbs.

All of the commonage (upland blanket bog, wet heath and dry heath) and some of the other land is designated for its nature value

The farming system consists of sheep being on the commonage from November until March, when they are housed until lambing in mid April. They return to the commonage in May, but may be brought down to finish, depending on the availability of grass. No winter fodder is produced, and hay, sheep ration, and straw is bought in. There is a high degree of self-sufficiency on this farm, including lamb (slaughtered at the factory), potatoes, vegetables, and herbs from the garden and chickens, eggs and ducks also produced on the farm.

According to the farmer, the main challenges facing farmers in Connemara include the administration of Agri-Environmental Schemes and in particular the destocking of the commonages. He indicated the greatest loss of traditional farming practices in recent generations is the lack of self-sufficiency on farms in Connemara. There was a strong tradition of farms with a high level of self-sufficiency on many farms with people having their own produce including milk, beef, lamb, poultry, potatoes, and vegetables. This level has dropped significantly. He also noted that fishing has died out in the area. The farmer indicated that it may not be possible for farmers to increase their levels of self-sufficiency as the necessary skills have been lost. Farmers will need to co-operate locally to capture and share these skills.

– Former species-rich grassland becoming invaded by bracken and scrub and in need of management, Aran Islands (C. O'Brien)



THE CHALLENGES

Farmers in both case study areas were conscious and proud of their natural and cultural landscapes. The landscapes of north Connemara and the Aran Islands were very important to them, and they felt fortunate to be a part of them. Farmers were conscious of their role in maintaining the landscape, including habitats, stone walls and traditional buildings, and traditional agricultural practices. They recognised the need for the preservation and maintenance of the landscape, but highlighted several challenges that they consider they face in trying to continue to farm. While many of the farmers indicated that they would keep farming, it appears much less certain that future generations will follow them. In addition, while they may continue to farm, the way in which they do so is likely to continue to change (such as grazing regimes used), thus influencing the landscape, even though farming itself continues to some degree. Due to farm consolidation, the average farm is becoming increasingly larger and more fragmented. This in turn leads to reduced levels of agricultural management and the threat of partial or complete land abandonment, with negative implications for the cultural landscape and biodiversity.

The difficulty of earning a living

High Nature Value farming is labour-intensive and economically marginal. Farmers' incomes depend on external supports, such as direct payments, REPS, and other schemes. Other challenges are connected to changes in the agricultural economy. Decreases in the price of farm produce and limited markets for many traditional products were cited as problematic. Off-farm income sources were an important part of most farm households in the case study areas. These factors indicate that high nature value farming is not currently self-sustaining.



– Derelict cottage thatched with rye on Aran Islands. (E. Delaney)

“Where farmers no longer use the commonage, the vegetation on these areas is becoming overgrown with gorse, bracken, or rough grass.”

– Benchoona over Lough Fee, Connemara. Upland areas such as this support dry and wet heath, upland acid grassland and upland blanket bog. (E. Delaney)



Farm enterprises, therefore, have had to simplify, as less time is spent actually farming. Small scale tillage, for example, is waning and there has been a resulting decrease in habitats and species associated with hay meadows or cereal tillage. The lack of local butchers and abattoirs, possibly due to the cost of compliance with strict food safety regulations, is also considered a limiting factor.

The farmers considered the level of administration (regulation, inspections etc) involved in agriculture to be too high and it was perceived that regulations were implemented with insufficient consultation or flexibility. Many stated that they do not fully understand the objectives of many of the restrictions and feel they are unfairly bearing the costs of providing public goods. It was felt by farmers surveyed that farmers are now 'farming the grants' and are less interested in farming the land itself.

An ageing farming population

A number of farmers felt there is not enough of an incentive for young farmers, especially with the suspension of REPS in 2009 and the prospect of lower payments from a new agri-environmental scheme launched in 2010. In general, poor incomes and dissatisfaction with the current state of farming is leading to an ageing and shrinking population of largely part-time farmers. However, most of the current generation of farmers, however, indicated that farming is very important to them and that they would continue farming the land.

"The main challenges to farming on the Aran Islands are the level of bureaucracy and the associated paperwork."



– Wintering cattle on Aran Islands (*E. Delaney*)

There is a scarcity of young farmers in some areas and major concerns that young people are not taking up farming.

THE WAY FORWARD

The consideration of these findings generated several recommendations that can be considered by Government Departments, various State agencies, and the farmers themselves.

Communication and better relationships

Improve the understanding and communication between local farmers and state bodies on agricultural and environmental policies that will affect how they farm. Farmers' willing participation and sense of ownership of policy measures that impact their farming practices is vital to the effective implementation of those policies. It is important that farmers are involved in developing policy measures, including agri-environmental scheme design and commonage destocking, in order to better meet both the conservation or policy objectives, and those of the farmers.

Identifying High Nature Value farmland

Without adequate information it will not be possible to support High Nature Value farming and associated biodiversity in Ireland. There is a pressing need to identify High Nature Value farmland on a national scale. There is also a need for clear definitions, especially with regard to areas where semi-natural habitats exist in mosaic with more intensive agriculture.

Agri-Environmental Schemes

These are schemes that are designed to encourage farmers to protect and enhance the environment on their farmland by paying them to provide 'public goods and ecosystem services', including maintenance of natural and cultural heritage. Each EU Member State is required to have one within their Rural Development Programme.

Once High Nature Value farmland has been identified, it is recommended that a scheme should be developed to enhance its conservation. This could be either a specific Agri-Environmental Scheme or a focused element of a wider scheme. Scheme requirements should be simple and flexible and focus on conservation results rather than strict management methods or prescriptions. The scheme will also need to be tailored for areas with differing farming systems and habitats/species. The involvement of farmers in designing such a scheme is critical.

The farmers indicated they would not farm anywhere else, that they would not like to see the landscape changed, and that it was important to preserve and maintain the landscape.

– Extensive farm landscape in north Connemara (*E. Delaney*)



Research

There is a need for further research on some conservation issues that are not yet fully understood. In particular, the current understanding of sustainable grazing levels in the uplands of Connemara and elsewhere is inadequate, particularly regarding changes following destocking. There is also a need for research on the conservation and management of the rare 'arable weed flora' of the Aran Islands.

Marketing

Pro-active marketing of produce from High Nature Value farmland is needed to make farming in these areas financially viable. The recommended strategies include:

- The use of conservation-grade branding, reflecting the biodiversity benefits and food quality of these farming systems. Such benefits must be verifiable and clear to the consumer.
- Advertising campaigns to raise consumer awareness of conservation-grade produce,
- The formation of producer groups to ensure consistent supply of quality produce,
- The establishment of local butchers – State aid will be required to achieve compliance with food safety regulations.

Farm practices

Traditional farming skills are in danger of being lost. Research and support is required to assess the natural and cultural heritage significance of these skills and to establish training programmes to preserve them. There is also a need to investigate the potential of diversifying farm enterprises as a means of providing economic benefits to farmers. Diversification may also add value to conservation-grade brands and increase biodiversity. Specific recommendations included supporting the use of rye for thatching on the Aran Islands.

Management

There is a need to develop an understanding and framework for managing deer populations in Connemara, for controlling scrub along roads and boreens on the Aran Islands, and for controlling invasive plant species (giant rhubarb, rhododendron) in Connemara.

Tourism

Types of tourism that have the potential to support High Nature Value farmland should be encouraged. There is a need to explore ways in which the farmers who maintain the landscape can benefit directly from the tourists and tour operators who enjoy that landscape.

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