

A community-led approach to wetland & peatland conservation in Ireland

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a major shift in nature conservation policy at international and national levels, with the focus now on both conserving biodiversity and enhancing the benefits provided for people, through ecosystem services (Brooker et al, 2016). The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) was established in Ireland in 2013 as a national network for community groups involved in wetland and peatland conservation. Community-led initiatives can play a role in protecting peatlands and wetlands, involving citizens in direct conservation and raising awareness of these ecosystems as places of beauty and value. However, there is a lack of evidence to validate claims that community-led conservation can contribute to conservation objectives (Sutherland et al, 2004). This research aims to contribute to such an evidence base, through case study research with the CWF.

Management challenges in collaborative environmental governance include how to facilitate social tie formation, how to best engage actors who may not be interested, and how to create/maintain collaborative networks that are adaptable yet stable (Bodin, 2017).

The CWF brings together stakeholders from across sectors, with membership open to community groups and any organization involved in wetland/peatland conservation. Members include National Parks & Wildlife, Environmental Protection Agency, Bord na Móna, Coillte, Irish Ramsar Wetlands Committee, and NGOs.



Methods

This case study of 5 member groups within the CWF (See Fig. 3) will examine the collaborative governance structure and formation of the network, through stakeholder mapping and interviews. The project will also elicit cultural ecosystem services associated with the case study sites, examining community benefits derived from wetlands and peatlands, using an online survey, deliberative workshops, and participatory creative practices such as community mapping.

Vision, Mission, Values of the CWF



Key actions of the CWF Strategic Plan 2017

"Asking whether community-based conservation works is the wrong question. Rather, it is more important to learn about the conditions under which it does or does not work." (Berkes, 2004)



Case study sites

"The literature suggests that institution building at the community level may take on the order of 10 years for simple, local-level institutions" (Berkes, 2004)

| SITE/LOCATION | DESIGNATION | COMMUNITY GROUP | FORMATION AND STRUCTURE | MEMBERS | ESTABLISHED |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---------|-------------|
| CABRAGH WETLANDS | Not designated (pNHA) | Cabragh Wetlands Trust | Trust/charity | 150 | 1993 |
| CLARA BOG | SAC / NHA Nature Reserve Ramsar Site | Clara Development Association | Community group (not exclusively focused on the bog) | 40 | 1998 |
| ABBEYLEIX BOG | Not designated (pNHA) | Abbeyleix Bog Project | Community Group (Limited Company, Not for Profit) | 50-60 | 2000 (2009) |
| SCOHAHOY BOG | NHA / SAC | Cloughjordan Community Development | Registered charity | 42 | 2006 |
| GIRLEY BOG | NHA / SAC | Girley Bog Meitheal | Community group | 23 | 2014 |

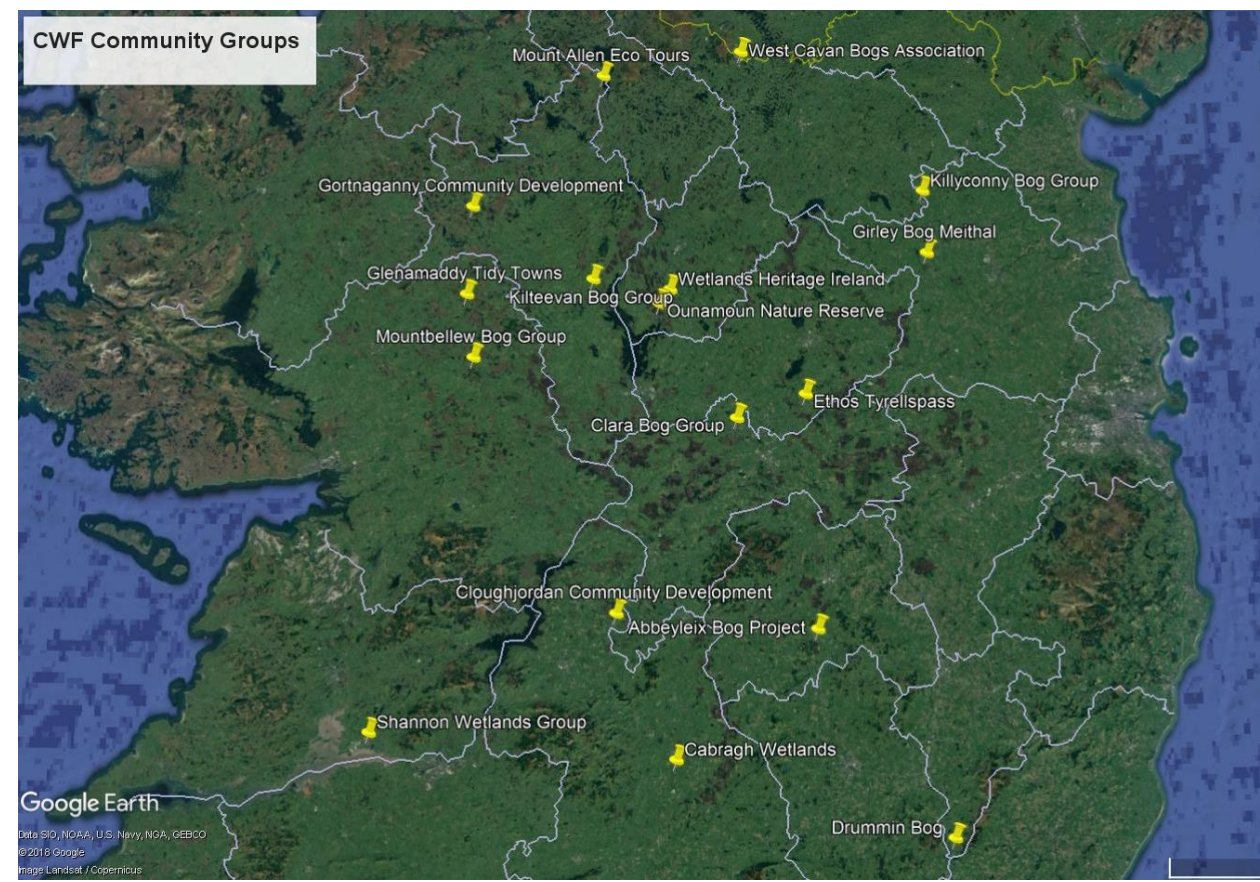
Cultural ecosystem services of wetlands

"Cultural ecosystem services inspire "deep attachment" in communities becoming entry points for public engagement with environmental matters" (Chan et al, 2011).



Case study description

The CWF has grown to a membership of 17 groups in the past five years. The main objective of the network is to provide a platform to support communities involved in wetland conservation based on the principles of community development (See Fig. 1). The CWF network facilitates sharing of knowledge and best practice in the areas of conservation, recreation, and education, as well as providing mentoring and funding advice. These activities are guided by the group's Strategic Plan (See Fig. 2). A bi-monthly meeting is held where all stakeholders are invited to participate. These meetings are hosted by community group members, followed by a field trip to the associated wetland or peatland site.



Collaborative governance

There is an urgent need to engage citizens and work with multiple stakeholders to solve the complex environmental and societal problems we currently face (Reed, 2008). The governance of peatlands is highly contested in Ireland, and the Irish state faced significant resistance to implementing the EU Habitats directive from turf cutters who had a traditional right to cut turf on designated bogs. The participatory governance processes set up by the Irish State were not considered effective in taking account of the interests of turf cutting communities. The framing of these debates is "critical in determining whether deliberative processes can meet their participative ideals or continue to reinforce established power relations" (O'Riordan, Mahon, and McDonagh, 2015).

Framing of conservation

There are multiple ways of framing human-environment relationships in conservation. Recent framings describe a shift to a shared human-nature environment, as expressed in social-ecological systems approaches. This "people and nature" framing "emphasizes the importance of cultural structures and institutions for developing sustainable, resilient interactions between human societies and the natural environment" (Mace, 2014).

Literature cited

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