

Turloughs: Producing food, nature, or both?

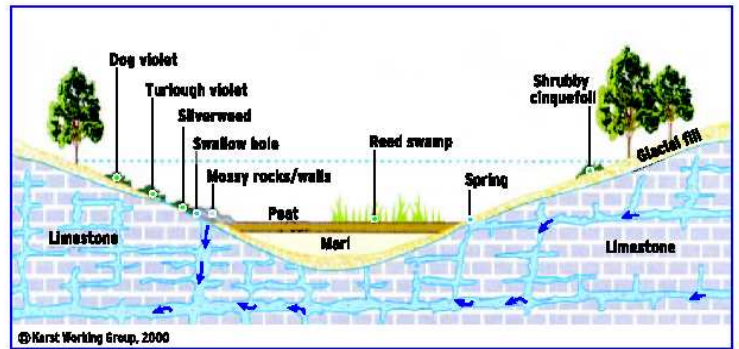


Figure 1 (karstic wetland)

Picture abundant rain falling on a gigantic Emmental cheese floating in the ocean and imagine what happens with that rain: The water enters through surface hollows, travels to where hollows link and forms passages. If the passages are large and downhill, the rain drains towards the sea straight away.

Over time, the hollows will get larger and larger because the water will have a dissolving effect. If there is a lot of rain and/or passages get clogged, water will build up. As all passages become saturated, pressure will build up and water may rise above ground again, into the hollows.

In winter (more rain) it will be dotted with shallow lakes but in summer (less rain) these lakes will have drained underground again.

Emmental cheese conveys well what we know (and don't know) about the fate of rainfall on turlough country. This is a band of karst limestone extending from Mayo through Galway to Clare, dotted with extremely variable wetlands that are also connected underground.

These connections are very difficult and expensive to study and are therefore poorly understood. Karst is an indication of limestone that was originally solid but has been eroded by acid rain over time. This erosion process gives rise to a landscape where most rainwater is quickly drained away through increasingly porous bedrock and becomes groundwater.

A considerable part of this groundwater goes straight to the ocean without ever resurfacing. Hence a strange dryness of many karst landscapes is evident despite abundant rainfall.

Our most famous karst highland displaying all this is The Burren. But because it's a highland, The Burren does not feature all ecological variations of turloughs. The best examples are located in the karst lowlands east and north of The Burren where groundwater is more likely to re-surface. This is real turlough country.



• Skealaghan turlough, Co Mayo (Photo: James Morgan)

By Dr Marjolein Visser

MARGINAL land — farmers want to farm it and conservationists want to 'protect' it. This brings controversy, not least because both parties ignore each other's expertise. The only solution is better communication. This is the main message from a case study on turloughs completed recently at NUI Galway.

Many types of marginal farmland in Ireland have risen to the status of EU Natura 2000 Priority Habitat. Turloughs acquired this status mainly because of their uniqueness as a karstic wetland (see Fig 1). A turlough is flooded in winter but dry in summer. Conservationists agree that summer grazing is key to 'maintaining a favourable conservation status' of turloughs. And that's where farming comes in.

Conservation versus production thinking

An average 'turlough farm' includes only 15% of turlough land. This means that farmers graze their turlough area as part of a broader grazing plan, which depends in turn on CAP and Natura 2000. But we know that these policies are mostly driven by non-farmers.

To describe perspectives on turlough grazing it is tempting to oppose turlough users (farmers) and non-users (non-farmers) among all people having a stake in turlough management (fig 2). This opposition became the starting point for interviewing a range of turlough stakeholders. The main observation is that non-farmers and farmers are in agreement more than they think. Both groups daily appreciate nature and agree that Ireland's environment is a farmed environment. Neither group wants scrub invasion

and they both agree that farming is key to preserving Ireland's nature.

Communication problem

The communication gap becomes apparent on issues of policy and designation of SACs. Farmers express a strong feeling of losing control over the land to 'outsiders in offices'. Uncertainty also exists over the fate of farming under CAP reform and frustration is evident about mounting paperwork. Non-farmers disagreed with those feelings.

Clearly, better communication is the only remedy. Communication would also help get rid of some persistent misconceptions. The idea that Irish nature thrives where there is no farming is still widespread among farmers. And non-farmers still fear agricultural intensification more than decline. Another perceived difference is

that farmers have a better opinion on turlough grazing than non-farmers. This difference points again to a communication gap but now in the opposite sense: non-farmers lack information about farming realities that go along with turlough grazing. Farmers still know best how to use marginal land, but this knowledge is getting lost.

Pathways to improve communication

Overall, it appears that misunderstanding each other's expertise better explains the difference between users and non-users than 'opposition'. One pathway to remedy this misunderstanding would be to use the farming press, as most interviewees are regular readers. Another pathway is the input of ecologists at local level; for example, at the planning stage of a REPS-contract. A third pathway is to pay higher prices for animals reared on marginal land.

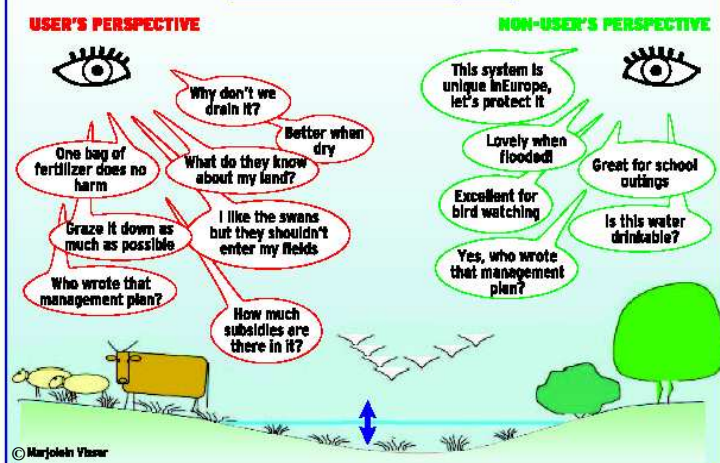
True, this approach would need research on how to best farm marginal land; to deliver quality produce and innovative marketing (better money for better quality food). But it might deliver more durable results than a purely conservationist approach.

Further information: www.eco-innovation.net

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Issues at stake in turlough use



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