

# HOW WE TREAT OUR LANDSCAPE

## **THE EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION PRESENTATION TO CORK LANDSCAPE CONFERENCE JUNE 16<sup>th</sup> 2005**

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*25 five years of involvement in environmental and landscape matters, the last 9 of these as Chief Executive of the Heritage Council has given Michael Starrett plenty of food for thought as to how we treat our landscapes.*

*For the last three years as President of the Europarc Federation, Europe's largest NGO promoting the environmental, social and economic benefits to be derived from protected landscape systems( including national parks, and landscape parks in suburban and peri-urban areas) has given him an opportunity to see how the benefits of such systems could be applied in Ireland*

*Despite all the current controversies ranging over infra-structural developments( and the implications for landscape of our current economic growth) he argues that Ireland still has a tremendous opportunity to take a huge leap forward in linking the protection of our precious heritage, (including landscape) to social and economic development, bringing benefits to Ireland as whole. His experience shows that in no European country do they rely purely on the provisions of the planning acts to co-ordinate development and management of their natural and cultural landscapes. Whether for rural or peri-urban landscapes specific legislation and support structures exist almost universally.*

*The coming in to force of the European Landscape Convention should give further momentum to our activities to manage and develop our landscapes.*

### *Introduction*

The Heritage Council in many of its activities has been to the fore in promoting Irish action on the specific and general measures contained in the European Landscape Convention. These have included a policy proposal to government in 2002, promotion of awareness of landscape as part of our natural heritage and working with primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education to secure the place of landscape in the curriculum. Council's policy proposal, and its promotion of landscape characterisation in particular, was seen to have application in both the urban and rural landscapes. Some progress has of course been made in terms of changes to the planning acts since 2000 particularly as they relate to urban and suburban environments. Local authorities are however having to deal with increasing pressure due to population growth and economic development. As regards dealing with

landscape issues the tools at their disposal are very blunt and currently less than effective.

Of course the single biggest weakness in achieving the future of our landscapes in Ireland at present is lack of specific and effective legislative provision for protecting the Irish landscape, a landscape which is dynamic and requires an integrated approach and specific structures to secure its integrity for future generations. From my experience this weakness is particularly evident in the suburban, peri-urban and rural environments.

The last three years as the first Irishman to head up a Federation which has membership in 38 European countries and is the “voice of Europe’s protected landscapes” has given me a real opportunity to look at practical solutions that are in operation across Europe, and how legislation might be developed in Ireland.

### *Taking Landscapes Seriously*

The first issue to note is how seriously the matter of protected landscapes is to most citizens of Europe. The European Landscape Convention underlines this point. I highlight this because elected representatives and the “establishment” within countries tend to reflect issues of concern to citizens. On that basis, the fact that during my period as President, the presence of EUROPARC “in town” has resulted in meetings with a variety of First Ministers, Ministers and politicians, (to say nothing of meetings with Royalty in the case of Norway ) means that people take their national parks, their regional parks, their protected landscapes, their nature reserves very, very seriously. As a result so do politicians

All of the countries visited have of course well established legislative provision to guide their endeavours as well as strategies, policies and structures for their implementation. **In this regard it is clear to say we are totally out of step with the rest of Europe.**

Very significantly these provisions are increasingly not only confined to a few protected areas but provide links to the wider countryside, to the landscape as a whole.

This is where Ireland can grasp a new opportunity to build on the existing situation. At present our national parks are based on state acquisition/ownership of some of our finest landscapes. They have a special place in our psyche. Everything that they have achieved has been a tribute to a committed group of professionals in the National Parks and Wildlife service.

The achievements have also been in the absence of any legislation to back them up. More importantly (from a long term perspective) the Parks are not yet seen in a wider economic and social context, acknowledging their contribution to the well-being of the country as a whole. This is completely at odds with all our European neighbours who have steadily embraced the connection between landscape conservation, quality of life and rural/economic development. Travel through the countryside and protected landscapes in

France, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary or indeed anywhere in Europe and the message is clear.

**In Ireland we sorely need legislative provision, with fully resourced strategies and policies, not just to provide for and recognise what exists but also to provide for that wider contribution.** The advantage of this is that you get a dedicated structure working towards an agreed objective. It moves landscape management and development beyond the “just another job” to be carried out by either central or local government as part of the planning process. Both are key partners in the work but they delegate the responsibility to a particular legislatively provided structure. A development such as this can also serve to strengthen links between urban and rural landscapes and their communities.

The benefits include both the environmental benefits and the social and economic benefits which we can derive from such systems for the wider countryside. Europe is full of good examples and I am glad to say that the EUROPARC Federation has played its part in developing them, nationally and internationally

#### *Leading by Example*

Take the example of our near neighbours the French. They have recently undertaken a root and branch review of their long established national park legislation. The outcome is a new approach to the future of the Parks. This recognises a much greater roll for economic and social issues in their future management, giving local communities a stronger voice in truly sustainable development. In essence the change brings the work of the national Parks in to line with major objectives for the French Regional Parks many of which lie adjacent to large urban populations. These areas have evolved and pioneered a system of community involvement through the preparation of a 10 year (renewable) charter which is a model to the rest of us as we seek standards and a model for effective rural development. Of course in France and all other European countries legislation exists which requires political commitment to the process. Without the same in Ireland we will always rely on solely professional commitment to an ideal. It is also totally impractical to say we can rely on the vagaries of the planning acts to sort this out.

#### *Beyond the Boundaries*

A major use of new legislation focused on landscape and its development is to support trans-boundary/frontier co-operation. Whether it be France and Italy or Germany and the Czech Republic or Austria, Slovenia and Hungary the EUROPARC federation has been to the fore in promoting quality standards and certification. Political and professional and community support has followed.

Nature of course recognises no political boundaries and we have on our own door step in Ireland a tremendous opportunity to promote a bit of trans-boundary co-operation and bring benefits to rural areas on both sides of the border. Take the natural fjord landscape with the Mourne Mountains on one side and the Cooley peninsula on the other. Place both areas in the context of

wider rural development through the protection and management of landscapes and surely it is not too hard to see how economic development and co-operation can follow. There is no threat to anyone in any of this as long as the objectives are clear and a determined effort is made to move away from protection only through state acquisition.

Any new legislation must avoid such pitfalls.

#### *The virtue of tourism*

And so to Ireland's tourist industry, predicated as it is on marketing of this green and pleasant land. EUROPARC has developed and implemented a very successful charter for sustainable tourism within protected area systems. It has of course positive application beyond the boundaries of the Parks in to the wider countryside. Spain, Italy, France, Germany the UK and now countries in the east of Europe have all derived measurable economic and environmental benefits. Protected landscapes also act as ideal mechanisms within which to acquire EU support through for example its Leader Plus programmes.

Of course all these countries have systems which allow them to benefit. We don't. Our national Parks and other protected areas are still seen as "islands", to all intents and purposes cut off from the rest of the countryside in the minds of politicians and the community at large. The recently published management plans for Killarney and Wicklow national parks are a step in the right direction but without new thinking these islands of protection will have real difficulty in looking beyond the narrow constraint of lines on maps

#### *Leading Locally*

It is interesting to note that in the absence of effective and meaningful legislative provision for landscape protection organisations such as local authorities and local communities are taking the initiative through the development plan process. Waterford in the Comeragh Mountains, the Wicklow Uplands Council, Offaly's Boora Parklands to name but a few. Our own national parks and wildlife service has also established more broadly based boards to contribute to the management and development of the existing Parks. However I feel it is fair to say that all of these initiatives, in the absence of legislative backing and national commitment to their success, are very clearly struggling to be as effective as they should.

We all deserve better. In the light of ongoing debate and polarisation of views on a range of heritage and landscape issues surely the time is right to grasp the opportunity for dialogue and focus which has been presented.

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