



# How do we really feel about biodiversity loss?

*Noreen McLoughlin looks at Irish attitudes towards biodiversity and biodiversity loss*

Above: The unique species-rich vegetation of the Burren supports a bewildering variety of insects, some of which are found nowhere else in Ireland.

The European Union is committed to the protection of 'biological diversity', i.e. the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; including diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.

A recent Flash Eurobarometer survey on 'Attitudes towards biodiversity' asked EU citizens to clarify how familiar they were with the term *biodiversity* and with the concept of *biodiversity loss*. This survey gave some interesting insights into Irish attitudes towards biodiversity and it may offer some guidelines to Irish authorities on how to proceed with the implementation of policies and practices affecting biodiversity.

Ireland has a wealth of biodiversity – from peatlands to calcareous grasslands, machair, old woodlands, rivers, lakes, hedgerows, sand dunes and seas and all the animals and plants that depend on these habitats for survival. All these habitats surround us and go towards making up the biodiversity of this small island. Yet a recent survey commissioned by the EU Directorate General Environment (November 2007), conducted on over 25,000 randomly selected EU citizens, has revealed that the majority of Irish people have little awareness of biodiversity, what it means and what they can do to prevent its decline.

Here are some startling statistics – from the 1,000 Irish citizens surveyed:

- 51% have never heard of 'biodiversity';
- 26% have heard of it, but do not know what it means;
- 45% do not know what biodiversity 'loss' is;
- 73% do not feel well informed about biodiversity loss;
- 20% feel that biodiversity loss is not a serious problem in Ireland;
- 27% say they make no effort to halt biodiversity loss, mainly because they don't know what to do; and
- 94% have never heard of the Natura 2000 network.

These figures generally fall well below the EU average. For instance, 89% of Austrians and 84% of Germans have heard of the term biodiversity and the majority of these also know what it means. On average, 35% of EU citizens have heard of and understand the meaning of 'biodiversity'. However, 30% of EU citizens have heard of 'biodiversity' without knowing its meaning, which is similar to the findings from Irish participants.

After the term 'biodiversity' was explained to participants of the survey, the majority of people were able to define the meaning of biodiversity loss in their own words.

Participants in Bulgaria and Latvia were the most capable of defining what biodiversity loss meant while respondents in Ireland were the least capable, out of the 27 EU countries surveyed – 45% of Irish participants still could not explain the concept of biodiversity loss, compared to just 6% of participants from Bulgaria and Latvia. Of the Irish respondents that were able to formulate a response to this, the majority of them stated that the loss of biodiversity meant that animals and plants will disappear. This was the most popular answer from all the participants of this survey.

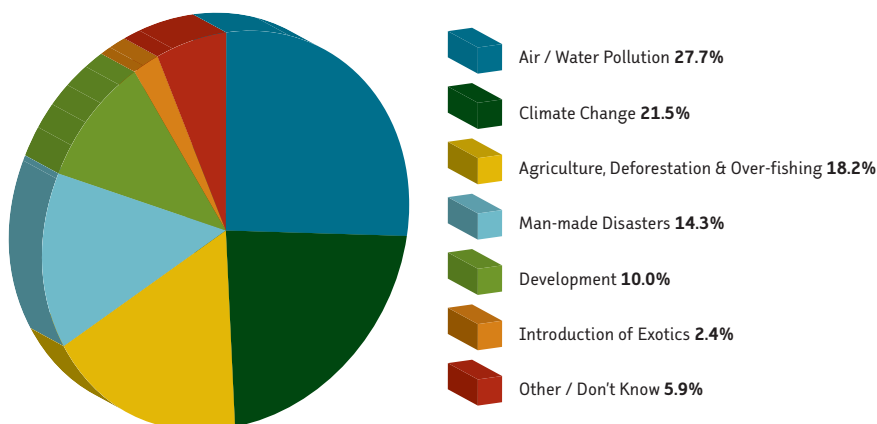
*51% of Irish respondents had never heard of 'biodiversity'*

The above figures are a reflection of how informed Irish people are on the issues of biodiversity and biodiversity loss and so it should come as no surprise that almost three-quarters of Irish respondents do not feel well informed about biodiversity. This was one of the poorest levels amongst participants of this survey. Respondents from Austria and Germany were most likely to feel well informed while only respondents in Italy and Latvia fared worse than the Irish respondents.

## THREATS, GLOBAL OR LOCAL

When it came to identifying the biggest threats to biodiversity, the most popular answers EU-wide were water and air pollution, man-made disasters and climate change. As can be seen from the chart, Irish respondents followed this trend by citing pollution as the biggest threat, followed by climate change and over-exploitation of our resources, such as intensification of agriculture, deforestation and over-fishing. Man-made disasters such as oil spills, industrial accidents, land use change and development and the introduction of exotic plants and animals were deemed less important.

### Irish Opinions on Reasons for Biodiversity Loss



**Figure 1.** Irish opinions on the causes of biodiversity loss, from the Eurobarometer survey 'Attitudes of Europeans towards the issue of biodiversity'.

The Garden Tiger moth, *Arctia caja*, is found in a wide variety of habitats in Ireland but is now less abundant than in the past.



*Most Irish respondents considered biodiversity loss at a global level to be a more serious problem than biodiversity loss at a national level*

Most Irish respondents also considered biodiversity loss at a global level to be a more serious problem than biodiversity loss at a national level and this was the trend seen amongst respondents of all countries. While 69% of the Irish feel that global biodiversity loss is a very serious problem, only 28% think that it is a very serious problem in Ireland. While almost half of Irish respondents feel that biodiversity loss in Ireland is a fairly serious problem, a significant percentage (20%) still feel that it is not a serious problem. This figure was well above the EU average of 8%.

The survey also looked at opinions on why it is important to halt the loss of biodiversity. Overall, respondents identified a number of reasons it is important to halt biodiversity loss. The most popular reason was that we have a moral obligation as stewards of nature, followed closely by the opinion that nature and biodiversity is important for the overall wellbeing and quality of life for humanity. The proportions of Irish respondents agreeing with these two reasons were very similar, with slightly more people agreeing with the latter statement.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

Despite an apparent lack of knowledge amongst Irish citizens on biodiversity, we fared above average when it came to describing personal efforts to help preserve biodiversity. Over 70% stated that they are making efforts to halt biodiversity loss, while over 20% stated that they are making no effort as they do not know what to do. Portugal, Slovenia and Luxembourg were the most committed to the conservation of biodiversity whilst respondents from Germany, Poland and Lithuania were the least likely to say that they were making an effort.

The majority of EU citizens (80%) are unaware of the Natura 2000 network - an EU-wide network of nature protection areas (i.e. Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas) established under the 1992 Habitats Directive and the 1979 Birds Directive with the aim of ensuring the long-term protection of Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats. 94% of Irish respondents have never heard of this network while only 1.4% of Irish respondents have heard of this network and know what it means.

It's now 16 years since the Convention on Biological Diversity was agreed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This convention, which was ratified in Ireland in 1996, highlighted the serious issue of biodiversity loss at global, national and local levels. This has led to a series of ambitious commitments to action by governments worldwide and the aim is to achieve these targets by 2010. At a global level, the main target is to achieve a significant reduction in the current rate of biodiversity loss, whereas the EU member states have agreed to a programme of measures to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

Recently in Ireland, there have been significant and

The common spotted orchid, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*. Our slow-growing wild orchids have very delicate life cycles and cannot tolerate soil disturbance.



very welcome steps taken in an effort to achieve the 2010 target. The implementation of the National Biodiversity Plan and the development of Local Biodiversity Action Plans will help to translate Irish and international policies and legislation into effective local action on the ground. In addition, they should also help raise public awareness of and involvement in the conservation of biodiversity.

From the results of the Eurobarometer survey on attitudes of Europeans towards the issue of biodiversity, raising public awareness on biodiversity and biodiversity loss in Ireland is essential if real progress is to be made towards achieving the 2010 target. Irish people do seem to care about the loss of biodiversity, but it seems that there is a definite deficiency in imparting information on what biodiversity is and what they can do to halt its loss.

Biodiversity and nature campaigns that actively encourage people to get involved usually do well in Ireland. There was a huge national response to the Irish Peatland Conservation Council's 2003 Frog Survey and annual campaigns run by BirdWatch Ireland and Bat Conservation Ireland also get a good response. In addition, the 2007 Irish

Squirrel Survey received a significant number of records from the public. These surveys indicate that when informed and encouraged, Irish people do have an interest in and will get involved in biodiversity projects. Perhaps this is something the policy makers of Ireland should take greater heed of, as we race towards the 2010 target to halt the loss of biodiversity. The infrastructure is already there in the form of local newspapers and radio stations. These resources would tap into a huge audience, which when properly informed is both willing and able to do its part to halt the loss of biodiversity in Ireland.

*By Noreen McLoughlin, Ecological Consultant*

*For the full text of the November 2007 Gallup survey on opinions on biodiversity in the EU, go to [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/flash/fl\\_219\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_219_en.pdf).*