

The Irish agri-environment: How turlough users and non-users view converging EU agendas of Natura 2000 and CAP

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Received 17 August 2005; received in revised form 10 February 2006; accepted 11 April 2006

Abstract

Managing marginal farmland with high nature value can be a strong source of conflict between farmers and conservationists. In the West of Ireland, marginal farmland is at the heart of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) designation and turloughs are an example of marginal grazing land with the status of EU Natura 2000 Priority Habitat. A turlough can be thought of as the aboveground floodplain of an underground stream in karstified bedrock. It floods in winter but usually dries out in summer to allow the growth and grazing of wet grassland communities. Whereas most conservationists agree that summer grazing of turloughs is required to maintain a favourable conservation status, they often forget that this grazing depends on farmers' willingness to graze turloughs, which depends in turn on a host of other, mostly policy-driven, factors. Hence, conserving the turlough habitat (aim of Natura 2000) throws up the question of the viability of the farming systems in which turlough grazing is embedded (aim of reformed CAP). To study this conflict, an approach based on Q-methodology was applied. Semi-structured interviews of turlough experts (both users and non-users) as well as spokespersons of various interest groups and research bodies yielded a large set of statements relating to turlough management, farming, nature, designation, and broader agri-environmental policy issues. Selected statements were submitted to former interviewees for rating from complete disagreement to complete agreement as well as to farmers of 12 different turloughs with SAC-status. Principal components analysis of these ratings leads to a typology of stakeholders according to the way they respond to the implementation of Natura 2000, to the changing agenda of CAP, and how this influences turlough management. The results show that farmers' and conservationists' perspectives are less opposed than expected and that this opposition is better described as mutual ignorance of each other's expertise. This calls for a better communication strategy to turn conflict into compromise. We suggest three pathways to do this: making better use of the local farmers' press, fostering users' input by the close collaboration with an agriculturalist and an ecologist on a farm-to-farm basis and a marketing approach that values agricultural produce from marginal land for its intrinsic qualities.

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Keywords: Republic of Ireland; Q-methodology; Turloughs; Agri-environmental policy; High Nature Value farming; Marginal land; REPS; Natura 2000; Conservation

Introduction

Turloughs and marginal farmland

Turloughs are vegetation-covered basins that are flooded by karst groundwater with sufficient frequency and

duration to produce soils and/or ecological communities characteristic of wetlands. They are one of the main karstic features of the Carboniferous limestone landscape in the West of Ireland, along with swallow holes, sinking streams, sparse or intermittent streams, limestone pavement, dry valleys, caves and large springs (Drew and Daly, 1993). Turloughs occur in the western third of Ireland from Donegal to Limerick, with the greatest concentration in counties Mayo and Galway. The general pattern is to flood in winter and dry out in summer, but there may be other

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sporadic rises in response to high rainfall. Their main land use is summer grazing, mainly by cattle now but historically by sheep and horses as well. Land tenure can be commonage, private ownership or a combination of both. Ecologically, turloughs vary widely between and within sites (Coxon, 1987a, b; Goodwillie and Reynolds, 2003). Grazing regimes and stocking rates vary widely as well, even within the same turlough basin (Ní Bhriain et al., 2002, 2003; Moran, 2005).

Today's turloughs are remnants of a vast complex of turloughs and other wetlands that have been drained during successive waves of state- and EU-funded arterial drainage works under the aegis of agricultural land reclamation (Baldock and Hermans, 1984). Now, they are listed as a Priority Habitat in Annex I of the 1992 European Union Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) mainly because of their hydro-geological uniqueness. There are many EU habitat types that are both Priority Habitat and marginal grazing land. In Ireland, these include turlough, machair (Atlantic dune grassland), orchid-rich grassland and limestone pavement. Low-intensity grazing and/or haymaking are key to the conservation of their fauna and flora (Baldock et al., 1994; Bignal and McCracken, 1996; Bignal, 1998; Ostermann, 1998; Muller, 2002). The CAP-driven polarisation, away from low-intensity agriculture and toward either high-intensity agriculture or land abandonment, means that the appropriate management needed to “maintain a favourable conservation status” of remaining “high nature value farmland” (mostly marginal farmland) results from rural practices that are least likely to be continued for production purposes (Bignal and McCracken, 1996). Hence the production versus conservation conflict.

Irish farmers under converging EU agendas

Key to Ireland's recent economic boom was its accession to the EU in 1973. Although the Celtic tiger phenomenon has caused significant damage, Ireland is still among the cleanest and most preserved environments EU-wide (Environmental Protection Agency, 2004; European Environment Agency, 2005). Many habitats and species lost elsewhere in the EU are still present and even common in Ireland. Schouten (1994) therefore calls Ireland the “green treasury of Europe”. The paradox is that countries and regions which contain the most important remaining natural and semi-natural habitats often show the “weakest will” to conserve them (Schouten, 1994). It was the same impetus of the EU that forced Ireland to introduce legislation to prevent further species and habitats decline (Hickie, 1996), especially through the implementation of Natura 2000. But across the EU, establishing and managing the Natura 2000 network following the Council Directive 92/43/EEC (the Habitats Directive) meets three kinds of problems at a local level.

On the one hand, designation of up to 15% of the areas of EU member states as Special Areas of Conservation

(SAC) without prior consultation with landowners has generated widespread controversy (Charbonneau, 1997; Krott, 2000; Hiedanpää, 2002; Weber and Christophersen, 2002). The reason is that Natura 2000 carries a strong top-down “conservation” imprint with less regard for its social acceptance and feasibility at a local level, although much of the land designated is to be managed by farmers. In Ireland, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) is responsible for the implementation of both national and EU nature conservation policy. The designation of SACs has met vigorous and much reported opposition from landowners and in particular the Irish Farmers Association (IFA), the largest farmers' organisation in the country (details covered in back issues of the Irish Farmers Journal, retrievable at www.farmersjournal.ie).

On the other hand, there is an embarrassing lack of knowledge about how to honour the obligation to “maintain the favourable conservation status” of the SACs. In Ireland, lack of baseline data means that most SAC management does not go beyond broad guidelines that correspond to the definition of low-intensity agriculture. Controversy arises when these are in conflict with farming realities. For example, on turloughs designated as SAC the NPWS recommends a general upper limit of 1.5 livestock units per ha for a 4–5 month season (National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1998) which should cater for the widespread assumption that turlough stocking rates have increased beyond their grazing capacity. However, a survey of 45 turlough farms found that management has changed little since Ireland's accession to the EU in 1973 (Moran et al., unpublished) and that calculating turlough stocking rates is tricky, as fields usually include both turlough and non-turlough land. A detailed study of grazing regimes within one particular SAC turlough (Skealaghan, County Mayo), yielded stocking rates on such fields ranging from 0.2 to 2.2 livestock units per ha for a 4–5 month season (Visser, unpublished data).

The third problem is that EU farming is in decline and farmers themselves are “a species under threat” (Bignal and McCracken, 1996; Bignal, 1998). Ireland too is characterised by a steady decline of farm numbers and a growing importance of off-farm income (Kinsella et al., 2000; Binfield and Hennessy, 2001). Agri-environmental schemes are widely seen as the solution to keep farmers farming. The agri-environment was first introduced in the CAP with the MacSharry reforms of 1992. Regulation 2078/92 was a turning point after three decades of commodity production-linked support policy, because for the first time agri-environmental services were publicly rewarded. Since 1992 the agri-environment has continuously gained importance through successive CAP-reforms (Falconer and Ward, 2000; Beard and Swinbank, 2001; Lowe et al., 2002). Agenda 2000's main feature was the Rural Development Regulation (1257/99), hailed as the “second pillar” of the new CAP. The Rural Development Regulation incorporated agri-environmental payments amongst other existing CAP-measures and introduced

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