



## THE WOODLAND LEAGUE

Report: Woodland League (WLL) Public Meeting.  
Friday, 4th March, 2005.  
Glenstal Abbey, Glenstal, Murroe, Co. Limerick.

Attended by:

Brendan Kelly (Liaison Officer of The WLL)  
Andrew St. Ledger (PRO of The WLL)  
Ciarán Hughes (Secretary of The WLL/People Against Pesticides)  
Bob Wilson (Centre for Environmental Living and Training – CELT)  
Bryan Wheatley (Woodland Owner)  
Brother Anthony Keane (Glenstal Abbey Forester)  
John Baker (from Grassroots Network, attended in a personal capacity)  
Gráinne McHugh (An tIonad Glas, attended in a personal capacity)  
Cormac O'Snodaigh (Woodland Worker)  
Jim Martin (Centre for Environmental Living and Training – CELT)  
Martin Collins (Woodland League/Derrybrien Development Society Ltd.)  
John Haughton (Cáirde na Coille/Forest Friends Ireland)

Meeting started at 8:15pm

### **Introduction**

It was agreed that Brendan Kelly would chair the meeting.

The meeting started with Brendan Kelly thanking every body for attending, and reading out the list of apologies for those that could not attend.

These were:

Ted Cook (WLL/Macroom District Environmental Alliance)  
Ralf Lottes (European Environmental Citizens Organisation for Standardisation)  
Hannah Scrase (Forest Stewardship Council UK/Woodland Trust UK)  
Pádraic Dwyer (Irish Farmers Association Galway)

Aengus O'Snodaigh (Sinn Féin TD)

Andrew St. Ledger introduced the Woodland League, and described the aims and principals of this organisation (this can be found in the document Introduction to the Woodland League – Sustainable Forestry/Aims and Principles).

### **Ballyclough Wood**

Andrew St. Ledger elaborated on the reasons why Ted Cook was not present at the meeting, describing in detail the problems Ted Cook is having with Ballyclough Wood. Ballyclough was the only old growth wood in the area. It was to be surveyed as the most important epi-centre of SACs in the Limerick region. It was the single most important genetic reservoir of seed stock to serve the whole area's biodiversity.

As the community awakens to the importance and relevance of replanting native woodlands, they will realise that they have lost an extremely valuable resource. Unfortunately, this has been happening far too regularly and must stop (another example: with the landslides in Derrybrien, three SACs were lost).

Ballyclough consisted of 70 acres of Wild Cherry, Oak, Birch, Ash and Hazel, and was home to the Red Squirrel and numerous Bat species (Bat's are supposed to be the most protected species in Europe). It is well known international fact that stability in life is conferred by natural native woodlands, via the management of water, soil, air, etc. Ballyclough was bull-dozed and all of its timber (i.e. the evidence) was burned on site. No local people were even given the chance to use it as fire wood. The timber was burning for a full month from February the 5th (it is interesting to note that the Limerick region has the highest level of asthma sufferers in the country, and the smoke from the fires can only have aggravated that).

The EPA were alerted about the smog from the illegal fires, but stated that they did not have the personnel to investigate. The heritage officer, the environment officer, the forest service inspector, the wild-life ranger and finally the Garda Síochána were all notified of the impending devastation, some up to 10 months prior to the burning.

There was no felling license and no burning license issued, and it would appear that the environment (namely the native woodlands) has no value to the state, despite the 1946 Forestry Act which states that "any tree over 10 years, not near a homestead, is protected by law", and not to mention the Wildlife Act 1976, the Rio Agreement 1992, Helsinki 1998, Kyoto and Lisbon!

Following from Rio, in 1993 the convention on biological diversity (and our state is a signatory) concluded that there is no more valuable habitat for sustaining biodiversity than native woodlands. They are the lynchpin for sustainable development.

At present there is no Garda Environmental Law education. There is no brief in a single environmental provision. It is very difficult for a member of the public to invoke a Section 4 from the 1946 Forest Act to prevent illegal felling. Since 1922, environmental protection is the poor cousin of the Irish cultural interest, and it is getting poorer.

As a result of this piece from Ted Cook, and from further discussion at the meeting about what happened in Ballyclough, the Woodland League agreed to call attention to what happened at Ballyclough and the broader issues it signifies, through the media. The Woodland League agreed to contact the Minister for Justice as to why there is blatant disregard for environmental law at local, national and international level.

### **State of Forestry in Ireland**

The current crisis in Irish forestry was discussed, whereby the Irish Forestry Board (i.e. Coillte) is out of control. They sell the state forest estate, which is owned by the Irish people, to create profits (required in their mandate) that are unobtainable from their current forestry operation, which is not economically sustainable.

It was noted that under the 1988 Forestry Act, around 1.5m acres of state land were transferred by the state to a company called Coillte Teoranta, subject to trust and equities. It was also noted that Coillte were given this land under the provisions that they make money from the forestry, and that their profits increase each year. This is an incredibly unhealthy situation for forestry. In the early 1970s the state forests were given to the people of Ireland, possibly as an EEC stipulation prior to Ireland joining the EEC (now EU). Coillte can now sell land that does not belong to them for development.

The 1988 legislation that gave Coillte a purely economic mandate (and no environmental or social commitments) and the 1946 Forestry Act are flawed, as they preceded the commitments made by the state in the Rio, Helsinki, Lisbon and Kyoto conventions. The primacy of profit and timber as an exclusive goal for forestry is archaic regarding the present situation on protection of the environment (Global warming is a reality, not a myth). The primacy of international law is being ignored by Coillte, and thus the state.

One of the biggest problems with forestry in Ireland is the absolute lack of any form of dispute resolution procedure. It was questioned whether Agenda 21 or the Aarhus Convention were ever going to be implemented for forestry. Ballyclough is a prime example of this. Also, in February 2001, Coillte asked for submissions regarding the development of wind farms on 17 different sites. To make a submission on this would have cost £2,000, which ruled out most NGOs, community groups and individuals (source: Forest Network Newsletter 12, Feb. 2001, available at the Friends of the Irish Environment website).

Concerns were expressed that Irish Forest Estate is being sold to foreign entities, and that this should be stopped. Given commitments on Carbon Credits, it is likely that state forestry may be sold to foreign entities so that they can use the Irish forestry to count as their Carbon Credits.

### **State of FSC in Ireland**

The FSC principles (from which Coillte are certified) are derived from the Rio Convention 1992 (Local Agenda 21). These principles cannot exist alongside Coillte's purely economic mandate, as it is incompatible. The state uses FSC in its

Sustainable Forest Management (Helsinki '98) commitments and in its Kyoto commitments. This is impossible as there is no provision for Sustainable Forest Management in Coillte's remit.

When FSC was first recognised in Ireland (in 1996 with Tom Roche as contact person) it was seen as a possibility to change forestry in Ireland. However, the FSC process in Ireland is floundering at the moment. Providing Coillte certification (when they clearly do not deserve it) is doing more harm than good, and thus FSC is damaging the environment. It was noted that the only noticeable improvements since Coillte obtained FSC certification was that there was some reduction in the use of pesticides – issues such as species mix, fertilizer usage, water quality, sale of land, workers' rights, etc. have never been addressed.

There is currently no recognised contact person for the FSC process in Ireland – where do you go if you want to contact FSC regarding atrocities that are occurring in FSC certified forests in Ireland? Brendan Kelly offered to become interim contact person for FSC when Caroline Murphy resigned (until a more suitable candidate was found), but was rejected by FSC international because they were unwilling to recognise a contact person in Ireland.

The Woodland League have received communications from FSC International stating that there is no recognised/accredited FSC National Initiative for Ireland since Caroline Murphy resigned as contact person in early 2004. This suits Coillte, because it means they can go abroad for FSC certification (i.e. to the SGS and Soil Association), and no right minded Irish person would give them certification.

Coillte's commitments to sustainable forestry via FSC were seriously called into question. It was generally agreed that Coillte are using FSC for their economic gain, while ignoring the social and environmental commitments required by FSC. (Coillte have reduced their pesticide usage rate since obtaining FSC certification, but other than that have done nothing meaningful). It was also noted that the NGOs on the Steering Committee of IFCI are failing to keep their groups informed of what is happening on the process. The WLL have received word that An Taisce and VOICE (from members of these organisations), and possibly others, are failing to inform their members of what is going on in the process. Under FSC rules, this is required of them.

It was agreed that the Woodland League and its supporters would continue to call for the suspension of Coillte's FSC certificate, via the petition (<http://www.petitiononline.com/rfpji>) and lobbying of politicians. The FSC principles clearly state that any forest operator seeking this valuable EcoLabel "shall respect all applicable laws of the country in which they occur, and international treaties and agreements to which the country is a signatory, and comply with all FSC Principles and Criteria" (Principle #1). European Commission has decided that Coillte are a public/state entity – this does not translate to Irish Law, where Coillte are still considered a private entity.

It was suggested that Brussels be targeted in the WLL campaign as well.

### **Woodland League to become an FSC National Initiative**

It was proposed that the Woodland League should either become an FSC National

Initiative, or instigate another group to become one, to give an alternative to (what was generally agreed as) the current farcical process. This was agreed as a good step, though there were several serious concerns about this.

The Woodland League has never received any funding. To start a national initiative, funding is required. Concerns were expressed as to how the WLL could get funding, and who they could take money from (i.e. so as not to become compromised). It was expressed as an idea that money could be taken from anybody, as long as it was publicly known where the money was coming from (e.g. the accounts could be published on a website), though serious reservations were still expressed about taking money from certain groups (e.g. Coillte, Forest Service). It was agreed that the WLL would try to source suitable funding opportunities, perhaps from international funds. It was also agreed that the WLL would, as a principle, not take money from sources that would compromise their position.

It was reiterated that there is no FSC National Initiative or Contact Person for Ireland – i.e. IFCI are not recognised by FSC.

The first step would be to have an FSC contact person, as FSC do not differentiate between National Initiative and Contact Person. It was proposed that the Woodland League put Andrew St. Ledger forward to become contact person. Andrew St. Ledger refused, stating that the contact person needs to be somebody that understands every facet of the FSC process, and somebody that understands the concerns of the local communities. Andrew St. Ledger suggested that Brendan Kelly should be proposed, as he has all the traits necessary. It was unanimously agreed by all present that this would be the course of action. The WLL will investigate how this can be done, and will contact the Soil Association and FSC on this matter.

### **Other**

It was expressed that more should be done to educate people about the state of Irish forestry, and to have a move towards more community oriented native forestry. The WLL will attempt to do this through the establishment of projects, such as community nurseries, etc. (as outlined in the document Introduction to the Woodland League – Sustainable Forestry/Aims and Principles).

**Meeting ended 10:55 pm**