

Invasive Species in Ireland

Biodiversity threats, challenges and actions

Not only do invasive species cost the economy of Ireland €260 million per annum but they have ‘a major impact on biodiversity¹’ and are one of main causes of biodiversity loss worldwide, posing ‘a significant threat to our native wildlife, and the functioning of our eco systems².’

Responding to this threat, West Wicklow Environmental Network hosted ‘Invasive Species in Ireland – Biodiversity threats, challenges and actions.’

On a boiling hot June evening in Valleymount, Co Wicklow over 30 people attended the WWEN event to learn about invasive species and what can be done about them.



Patrick Hunt, WWEN committee member and horticulturalist introduced the topic. He told the audience many of us are unaware of what is invasive. Common plants such as Cherry Laurel, beloved for hedging across the land, pretty Lady’s Mantle and Montbretia are all invasive. ‘I’m dealing with them in my own garden,’ Patrick said, and sadly ‘in Ireland, there are now more non-native plants than native.’

But not only are we seeing invasives in our gardens, they are a common sight in our towns and villages.

Cherry Laurel in Blessington Co Wicklow.

The first speaker was Paddy Donovan of Donovan Forestry Services. As well as general forestry services - in the last ‘ten to twelve years removal of invasive species has become a significant part’ of his business. He described a project on behalf of Wicklow Uplands Council to clear a pilot 30 hectare area of Wicklow mountainside of the invasive *Rhododendron Ponticum*.

¹ National Parks and Wildlife Service ‘Invasive species in Ireland’ report, https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/Stokes_et_al_2004_IAS_Ireland.pdf

² National Biodiversity Data Centre, www.invasives.ie



Paddy Donovan

What is clear from Paddy's talk is that an immense effort goes into removing this species which is taking hold in our uplands. Even before the invasive plant is dealt with, a full walkover of the site, survey, mapping, a plan for the proposed treatment, agreement from statutory agencies, a risk assessment and method statement are all carefully carried out.

Next begins a very labour intensive job, with trained qualified staff in full PPE using various methods to rid the land of this species. Spraying and painting on of specific chemicals is part of this process. Paddy stressed they avoid overuse of chemicals where possible.

Paddy says one of the key things with any site is to walk the land in both directions, to pick up smaller plants. Treated plants are marked with blue. After a number of weeks, the site will need to be revisited to find any missed plants.

Our next speaker, Eoghan Connaughton of the Gaelic Woodland Trust, spoke about a different approach to tackling invasive species. His group 'don't have certs, so don't use chainsaws, have no paid staff and no money.' But instead using exclusively voluntary labour, they work on large estates who allow them access, where he said the Trust takes a 'cultural stewardship' of the land.

The Gaelic Woodland Trust use a collaborative, voluntary 'Meitheal' approach, to remove primarily Cherry Laurel by bringing people together to pull younger Laurel plants out, and some light hand saws to cut. A key to the success of the 'Meitheal' is the fun and craic people have, often the day finishing with music and food.

Interestingly, Gaelic Woodland Trust don't do tree planting as they've found 'that natural regeneration works when you bring in the light'. Part of the philosophy of the Gaelic Woodland Trust is that volunteers 'become long term custodians' of the various sites with a core team revisiting many times.



Eoghan Connaughton



Lorna Kelly

The last speaker of the evening was Lorna Kelly, Co-ordinator for Wicklow Uplands Council. WUC incorporates the different interests and users of the uplands such as farmers and recreational users. Sometimes there can be conflicting issues but the goal is 'sustainable use of the uplands.'

Following the previously mentioned pilot project in Wicklow, WUC learnt how it is 'important to bring the landowner on board, so what you do is welcomed.' Herbicides are often needed and these have associated concerns. Demo days are powerful ways to develop trust with landowners, Lorna said.

Going forward, although professional expertise is often needed, communities can also get involved and WUC hopes to provide training opportunities.

Finally, our speakers mentioned the potential for developing other uses for invasive species, such as biofuel, edibles, and firewood. They also spoke about possible innovative approaches to dealing with invasive species that can be trialled.

However, despite such positive ideas, at a basic level **WWEN calls for Cherry Laurel and other invasive species such as Rhododendron Ponticum to be banned and no longer available from our garden centres.** This at least will stop *more* invasive plants being introduced when they do not need to be.

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Gaelic Woodland Trust - Website: <https://gaelicwoodlandproject.com>