THE IRISH ECONOMIC INTEREST IN INVESTING IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Ireland’s economic debt crisis hit a critical point in 2010 when it became the second EU Member State to receive EU financial aid. Since joining the European Union, Ireland has been a net recipient country of EU funds. However, its use of European funding has had no long-term impact on its financial stability. Ireland, being part of the EU for almost 40 years, is one of the oldest Member States. Having received almost (net) EUR 40 billion from the EU budget since 1973, Ireland’s position as a net recipient will change in 2013.

Ireland’s opportunity for economic prosperity will be linked to its investment priorities, especially within local economies and their environment. Recently, Ireland has insisted that exports of food production and energy will be its way out of the crisis. History has shown that unsustainable production in these two sectors will greatly hamper long term economic sustainability and environmental credibility.

The evident link between ecosystem services and their economic value has largely not been recognised in Ireland. The benefits of ecosystem services in Ireland are estimated at over EUR 2.6 billion/year. Investing in nature and biodiversity can provide a wide range of ecosystem services including clean water and air, climatic regulation, crop pollination, and natural hazards mitigation.

In investing in its environment, Ireland would be leveraging local economies. Furthermore, not investing will lead to further economic loss in the form of future costs incurred. The lack of policy action to halt the loss of biodiversity in Europe will, by 2050, cost the European society EUR 1.1 trillion per year.

FACTS

1. The terrestrial Natura 2000 network covers 13% of the total area of Ireland.
2. Ireland hosts at least 10% of the world’s total blanket bogs (a particular form of peatland).
3. Irish marine waters are amongst Europe’s richest for cetaceans. Ireland’s aquatic systems and wetlands support internationally significant populations of threatened species, such as the Atlantic salmon, white-clawed crayfish, freshwater pearl mussel, and marsh fritillary butterfly.
4. In the Burren National Park, the benefits derived from the protection of the orchid grasslands have been estimated to be EUR 12.9 million per year.

NATURA 2000 COVERAGE IN IRELAND

[Map showing Natura 2000 sites in Ireland, including Burren National Park, Dublin Port Road Tunnel, Dublin Bay, Sandymount Strand SPA, Tolka estuary SPA, Owenduff-Nephin Beg Complex, and Wetlands of Anne Valley.]
HOW EU SUBSIDIES ARE WASTED ON ENVIRONMENTALLY HARMFUL ACTIVITIES

In 2002, Ireland was held to be in breach by the EU of the Birds and Habitats Directives by failing to take sufficient steps to curb upland overgrazing of heather in the Owenduff-Nephin Beg complex (the largest Special Protections Areas (SPA) in Ireland). In 2007, the European Court of Justice ruled that the Irish Government had failed to fulfil its obligations under EU law in relation to the designation and classification of SPAs for wild birds and that it had failed to adequately protect some of Ireland’s most threatened bird species.9

On the east coast, in Dublin Bay, an internationally important wintering site for migratory waders including Oystercatcher and Redshank, small parts of the mudflats were excluded from the Sandymount Strand and Tink Estuaries SPA, as these areas had already been earmarked for development – the expansion of Dublin Port and building of the Dublin Port road tunnel. The Irish Government failed to comply with basic wildlife legislation, and failed to support important ecosystems, which deliver economic value to society, and instead destroyed them without any regard to the environmental impact.

HOW EU FUNDS CAN BE INVESTED INTO FUTURE BENEFITS

An integrated approach has been developed in the wetlands of Anne Valley with the support of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) in 2005. The purpose was to develop a natural approach to wastewater treatment instead of constructing a traditional technology-based facility. This approach has not only been much more cost-effective but has also delivered multiple environmental services, such as water purification, fresh water, climate regulation and carbon sequestration, flood control, recreational opportunities, soil formation and nutrient cycling, and biodiversity enhancement while at the same time stimulating local farming businesses and increasing aesthetic value of the area. Costs were EUR 715,000 for the project, half of what an equivalent traditional facility was estimated to cost, at EUR 1,530,000. In addition EUR 220,000 was spent on new tourism facilities which created further economic value (impossible with a traditional plant).10

EU LIFE Nature Programme has also funded a project where farmers, scientists and conservationists worked proactively together for sustainable farming in the Burren. Innovative ideas such as the development of new grazing and feeding systems were launched to improve habitat health without further compromising the financial viability of the farming system. The success of this project led to a pioneering ‘Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP)’ funded through the Irish Rural Development Programme. Massively oversubscribed, the BFCP continued to work with 120 Burren farmers managing 12,887 hectares within Natura 2000.11

EU policy

1 Increase the total budget of the EU’s environmental fund “LIFE” from 0.23% to 1% of the total EU Budget (circa 1.5 billion EUR per year);
2 Balance the two pillars of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and ensure 50% of its total budget delivers towards the Rural Development Programme;
3 Ensure the EU Budget delivers 20% of climate action, especially through climate mitigation under cohesion policy,
4 Establish a tracking system that documents specific positive and negative effects of EU funds for climate and biodiversity.

National planning & programming

1 Establish clear earmarking of EU funds for the financing of the Natura 2000 network, based on national or regional priority action frameworks;
2 Ensure sufficient funding is available for well targeted and well designed agri-environment schemes and other environmental measures under rural development;
3 Finance Green Infrastructure and projects on energy efficiency under regional development;
4 Involve all relevant actors, including environmental NGOs, during national planning and implementation of European funds (including partnership contracts).

BIRDLIFE RECOMMENDATIONS – HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

> The EU Budget should redirect funds towards rewarding the delivery of public goods. EU funds can be used to support local products and handicrafts that are linked to Irish cultural heritage and natural landscape.
> EU investment should be adequately channeled to energy efficiency and improved water management.
> Sustainable tourism, that respects the natural environment promotes traditional activities, including traditional products, increases productivity and all together preserves the environment and landscape.
> Ireland should ensure that EU money is being spent in a quality way that leads Europe to a sustainable economy that benefits Irish society.