

## 2. History of Forestry in Ireland

Historically, Ireland was a naturally wooded country of mixed broadleaf woods and Scots pine, and was as such for many thousands of years since the last great ice-age. Over time, woodland cover declined. By 1900, tree cover was reduced to only 1%, composed of semi-natural woodland and broadleaf plantations established in the 19th century. The remainder of the landscape was extensively managed agricultural land with some peatland, wetland, semi-natural grassland, and an extensive hedgerow network. Many natural and semi-natural areas have since been lost to land reclamation, drainage, peat extraction, inappropriate development and afforestation. As a result, Ireland's natural and semi-natural areas, including semi-natural woodlands, are now reduced to small, fragmented habitats. This places significant importance and conservation value on all such habitats.

The economy of Ireland under the Gaelic Order was that of the forests. This great resource was the provider of raw materials, medicine, weapons, tools, charcoal, food (in the form of berries, nuts, fungi, fruit, wild animals, etc.) as well as the basis for spirituality and wisdom. No other country has as many placenames connected to the forest. As many as 40,000 still exist, however hopelessly out of context because of deforestation or foreign exotic plantations nearby. The Indigenous peoples of Ireland placed a great emphasis on the importance of native trees and forests in all aspects of their lives.

There are also many family names associated with native trees (McIvor is Sons of Yew, McCarthy is Sons of Rowan, McColl is Sons of Hazel amongst many others). The original Gaelic Alphabet for the old Irish language, Ogham, came from the native trees of Ireland.

In the last few centuries, there has been a massive deforestation of Irish land. What has been replaced has been by and large replaced with foreign exotic near-monoculture conifer plantations.

More recently, beginning with employment measures in the 1950s and 1960s; non-native conifers have been planted on agriculturally marginal lands. In 1993, European Union funding was made available *"to contribute to forms of countryside management more compatible with environmental balance"* [1]. However, grants provided under Ireland's forestry policy encouraged the planting of conifers, which were considered to offer the fastest economic returns.

In the 1980s, Ireland's Industrial Development Authority gave generous grants to multinational timber processors to locate in Ireland further supporting the pursuit of these softwood timbering based forestry policies. [2]

While choosing to dedicate its forestry efforts toward non-native softwoods, Ireland has abandoned its fast-growing short-rotation native species such as alder (known as 'Irish mahogany'), and birch. The State Forestry Board's (Coillte Teoranta – owner of the vast majority of State forestry) forest estate consisted of just 5.2% native trees in 2003. 94.8% of Coillte's forest estate consisted of exotic species in 2003. In 2003,

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Coillte also owned 92,000ha (227,000 acres) of unforested areas [3]. Government grants and incentives continue to encourage farmers and industry to plant conifers.

Private land owners that wish to plant their land have to have their land inspected prior to grants being granted. They must then follow the orders of the inspectors, otherwise their grant is withdrawn [4, 5]. Inevitably, the inspectors order the planting of conifers, even though at times it is clearly evident that hardwoods in the area grow faster than conifers [Example: Doolough Case Study].

Ireland's forestry policy focuses principally on short-term revenues for sawn timber products. Impacts on biodiversity, water quality and global climate change, which are intimately bound up with forestry, have largely been left outside the scope of forest policy [6]. Because of Ireland's high rainfall and mountainous terrain, the preparation of the ground and the activities of tree-planting and harvesting results in erosion and acidification, with profound ecological damage. Large-scale planting of non-native conifers on heather moorlands and mountains, almost all without appropriate environmental assessments, contributed to a judgement of the European Court of Justice against Ireland in 1999, for failing to apply the European Union Environmental Impact Assessment Directive. [7].

### 2.1 References

1. Council Regulation (EEC) N° 2080/92 (See DVD Appendices).
2. Parliamentary Debate, 15<sup>th</sup> September 1977 (See DVD Appendices).
3. Coillte Teoranta, "*Social and Environmental Report*", 2003 (See DVD Appendices).
4. Forest Service, "*NDP Planting Related Grants*", <http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/index.jsp?file=forestry/pages/ndp.xml>.
5. Teagasc, "*How to Establish a Farm Forest Enterprise*", <http://www.teagasc.ie/advisory/forestry/farmforestenterprise.htm>.
6. Forestry Act 1988, Sec 12(3) (See DVD Appendices).
7. Shirley Clerkin (An Taisce), "*Current Needs For Policy To Incorporate Biodiversity Considerations*", ESAI Biodiversity Conference, Nov 2000 (See DVD Appendices).