

**Social
Democrats**

Biodiversity: Protecting our fauna and natural habitat

Greener and Fairer

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The Urgent Biodiversity Challenge

Biodiversity loss is one of the biggest challenges that Ireland faces. This is not a crisis that has just come upon us, but has been years in the making. For far too long, we have relied on the false narrative that Ireland as a green country, is also an environmentally friendly one.

In 2019, The Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service (IPBES) published its global assessment on the state of the world's biodiversity and ecosystem services. The report shows that **nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history**. Ireland is not immune from that grave assessment. **One in every five of the species assessed in Ireland is threatened with extinction** and the conservation status of one third of our protected habitats dis-improved between 2007 and 2013.

We must meet this challenge head on. The outcomes of not doing so will be quite catastrophic. But all is not lost. Nature, our environment and our wildlife are robust, as long as they are given the time and support to recover.

The Dail declaration in 2019 of a Climate and Biodiversity Crisis was very welcome. It must now be followed by action. There must also be the acknowledgement that the **climate crisis and biodiversity loss are intrinsically linked** and that both must be addressed in tandem. And since the Dáil declaration, while there has been much Governmental talk about climate change, there has been little focus on the equally important issue of biodiversity. In fact, **biodiversity improvements and nature-based solutions need to be a key tool to tackle climate change**.

Farmers are guardians of much of our land in Ireland and often have connections going back centuries to that land. We need to work with farmers and farm families to ensure that our biodiversity is restored. Combined with political will to act, we can reverse the decline in our biodiversity.

Our Natural habitat

Ireland is the most deforested country in Europe, and one of the most deforested in the world. While reforestation is ongoing, most is with non-native sitka spruce plantations used for commercial forestry. These forests are poor habitats for wildlife (and less effective carbon sinks), and our **focus should be on preserving and expanding our natural biome of primarily deciduous forest.**

In 2018, according to the Department of Agriculture, only 28% of our forest was broad-leaved, and only 27% of new planting was broad-leaved in that year. With modern knowledge of ecology, this is simply unacceptable.

We propose that **a percentage of agricultural land be gradually 'rewilded' back to natural forest.** Partly owing to our high degree of deforestation, Ireland has a huge amount of pastoral land and produces twice as much food as we need for our population.

While it is important to remain food secure and a strong food exporter, there is a significant minority of farms which have low productivity and are not profitable, and there is a large amount of farmland lying idle.

We propose a scheme in which the **State would work closely with farmers and offer to buy the farmland of some of these unprofitable farms at attractive rates, with the aim of planting native forest.**

Ultimately, the goal would be to connect these areas together and **vastly increase the size of our National Parks.** This would be a long-term and ambitious project, but it would provide vital habitat for our native species, and for potential reintroductions of extirpated species.

Our Fauna

We are undergoing unprecedented insect loss, nationally and globally, with habitat loss and pesticide use suspected as the main culprits. Recent research from elsewhere in Europe suggests a staggering **75% decline in insect numbers in the past 26 years, with an annual decline of 2.5%.** Recent research in

Ireland has shown that our butterfly and bumblebee populations are declining at rates greater than the global averages. This immense loss **threatens the total collapse of the food chain** if the trend continues, so we must do everything in our power to halt or reverse it.

If we wish **Ireland to be a country where nature thrives once again**, we must also continue to fund conservation for our vulnerable and endangered larger animal species, on land and in water, and, where suitable habitat exists, endeavour to reintroduce species which have become extinct on the island due to human activity.

To address these problems, the Social Democrats propose:

- A **voluntary purchase scheme for unprofitable farmland**, to be converted into protected native woodland.
- Incentives for the practice of **agroforestry**, for example silvopasture (grazing livestock amongst woodland).
- Incentives for the **planting of native trees on private land**, and for sustainable felling and harvesting practices (reducing clear-cutting).
- A **doubling of the area of protected nature reserve** by 2040.
- The promotion, and expansion, of **wildlife corridors** across the country. This would recognise the potential of rivers, canals, and the road network as potential nature corridors.
- To require state bodies to first **examine upstream natural based solutions** when considering works required to deal with flood relief and protection.
- **Reintroduction of extirpated species** where research has established feasibility. This would include a compensation scheme for any agricultural losses, and harsh penalties for illegal killing of reintroduced animals.
- Significant state funding for the **conservation of endangered and vulnerable native species**.
- Fund Councils and Inland Fisheries to **map and remediate barriers to fish migration** within their riverine systems.
- National legislation to significantly **reduce or eliminate the non-agricultural use of pesticides and herbicides outdoors**, and continued review of agricultural practices relating to pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers.
- State funding for the **monitoring and eradication of invasive species**.
- Require Councils **map areas of local environmental importance**, in consultation and cooperation with the local community and include them in County Development Plans as areas to be protected.

- In urban areas, the government would work with local councils and An Bord Pleanála to **prioritise the planting of trees and flowers in existing and new developments, and on streets**. It is healthier for people (mentally and physically) and wildlife alike to have as much planting and green space as possible in urban and suburban areas.
- To fund Councils to undertake Trap, Neuter and Return programmes for feral cats.
- Encouraging local councils to create **native Woodland Walks and Wildflower Meadows** in existing and new parks.
- Making the creation of **wild picnic bench spots** in office developments and (where practical) the creation of **rooftop gardens** in offices and apartments a vital part of ABP urban planning regulation. This would reduce the prevalence of 'concrete deserts' and have amenity and quality of life benefits.
- Ensuring all local authorities and planning authorities have all **hedgerows assessed while making planning decisions** and that priority is given to maintaining and protecting existing hedgerows and trees. Where additional or replacement planting takes place native species should be used.
- To establish a **Wildlife Crime Unit** in an Garda Síochána to assist in the prevention and detection of wildlife crime.

Please see our other General Election policy and manifesto documents (forthcoming) on the environment and climate change.



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