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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**GROUP OF SPECIALISTS –EUROPEAN DIPLOMA OF PROTECTED AREAS
26 MARCH 2013, STRASBOURG
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**APPRAISAL REPORT
THE BURREN REGION
IRELAND**

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I. Introduction

The Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht presented in 2012 an application of the “Burren Region” for the European Diploma of Protected Areas. The group of Specialists recognised, in February 2012, the interest of Burren Region and requested an on-the-spot evaluation.

This evaluation took place from 12–14 June 2012. The visit was perfectly organised and accompanied by Mr Andrew Bleasdale and Mr John Cross, co-ordinators of National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht. The undersigned was also accompanied by Mr Eladio Fernandez-Galiano, Head of the Biological Diversity Unit of the Council of Europe.

Most of the core areas of The Burren Region was visited by car and on foot during the three days visit. Special locations were visited: Coole Park, office of National Parks and Wildlife Service in Carron (the Heart of The Burren), the Visitor Information Point of The Burren National Park in Corofin, The Burren perfumery and Floral Centre, the Carron Turlough, the Poul nabrone megalithic tomb and the Micheal Cusack Centre. Meetings of The Burren Charter Group and the Project Steering Group in Carron were also attended.

Many people were met during the course of the visit: Mr Brendan Dunford (project manager of Burren Farming for Conservation Programme), Ms Sharon Parr (BFCP), Mr Richard Morrison (Chair of Burren Charter Management Committee), Ms Emma Glanville, Ms Enda Mooney and Mr Brian Nelson (regional staff of National Parks and Wildlife Service), Ms Brigid Barry and Ms Aine Bird (Burrenbeo Trust), Ms Carol Gleeson, (Burren Connect Project), Mr Noel Dinneny and Mr Peter Cleary (Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine), Mr Michael Davoren (Burren IFA), Ms Catherine Keena, Mr Martin Feerick and Mr Sean Regan (Teagasc) and Ms Congella McGuire (Clare County Council).

The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to Mr Andy Bleasdale for the good organisation of the visit and to all persons met in The Burren Region for their knowledge of the situation and their availability. The excellent presentations of their activities by several persons was especially appreciated. Many thanks also to the people met on the way for their frank presentation of the situation and their interest of The Burren region.

This report gives a short description of The Burren Region. More detailed specific information is available on the websites of the organisations involved with The Burren Region (such as www.npws.ie, www.burrennationalpark.ie, www.burrenconnect.ie, www.burrenbeo.com, www.burrenlife.com, www.burrengeotruster.ie).

II. Characteristics, natural and cultural values

The Burren Region is a rare and remarkable place in northwest County Clare in Ireland, where geology, ecology, archaeology, agriculture, history, food and music are deeply rooted in the landscape and culture of the region. It is a landscape of hills, valleys, plateaus, cliffs, beaches, turloughs, lakes, streams, depressions and caves.

The Burren Region is defined by the presence of exposed limestone which extends over an area of approximately 72.000ha. The Burren Region is widely recognised as one of the largest karst landscapes in Europe. The limestones are the oldest rocks visible on the surface of The Burren and made up mostly of calcium carbonate (lime). They are over 340 million years old and shaped by six thousand years of human activity. This visibly fossil rich limestone is up to 800m thick in places and is arranged in distinctive tiers or bands that are separated by lines of weakness in the limestone, or some cases by thin layers of shale. Through the action of glaciers, and the solutional effects of rainfall,

The Burren 's limestone has been, and continuous to be, sculpted over time into a rich array of unusual forms. These include enclosed depressions known as poljes and dolines, disappearing lakes called turloughs, and innumerable network of caves. The Burren Region is thought to have the most extensive cave system in Europe, with over 90 km of navigable caves.

The Burren Region is an excellent example of a glaciated karst landscape displaying all the classic features such as bare pavements, cave systems, turloughs, dry valleys, sinkholes, dolines, poljes and micro-solutional features such as karren. The Burren Region is enclosed roughly within the circle made by the small villages Ballyvaughen, Kinvara, Tubber, Corofin, Kilfenora and Lisdoonvarna. It is bounded by the Atlantic and Galway Bay on the west and north, respectively.

This region is also an excellent example of the ongoing creative utilization of natural resources by an agricultural society over six thousand years, and reflects the combined works of nature and of man.

The Burren Region is ecologically very rich, containing over 70% of Ireland's native flora, including unusual combinations of Arctic, Alpine and Mediterranean species. Many of the flowers are growing in narrow fissures on the limestone terraces. In The Burren 24 of the 28 native orchid species (such as bee, fly, butterfly and birdnest orchid) can be found. During the field trips different orchid species were found. Unfortunately the best known flower of The Burren, the blue Spring gentian (*Gentiana verna*), was not flowering anymore due the early warm spring period this year.

The fauna of The Burren is equally rich: over 100 species of breeding birds, all but two of Ireland's thirty-five native butterfly species, all of native bats species and over 70 species of land snail are found in The Burren. The mammals most commonly in The Burren would be the fox, hare and feral goat. Less common is the pine marten. The core area contains two mammals listed on Annex II of the Habitat Directive (otter and lesser horseshoe bat).

The Burren is also very rich with historical and archaeological sites. It contains over 2,700 recorded archaeological monuments dated back over 6,000 years to the Neolithic Period and has been described as "one vast memorial to bygone cultures". There are more than 90 megalithic tombs in the area. During the fieldtrips the iconic 5,500 year old Poulmabrone portal tomb was visited.

III. Protection

As a geographical region The Burren has no single protection mechanism. However, a significant part of The Burren has been selected for designation under the European Habitat Directive as "Special Area of Conservation (SAC)" and forms part of the Natura 2000 network. The three main terrestrial SAC's which form 100% of the core area extend to 30,462 ha, which in itself represents 42 % of the wider Burren region. These SAC's are: the Blackhead-Poulsallagh Complex, the Moneen Mountain and the East Burren Complex.

These sites are exemplary in terms of the scale, quality and condition of priority Annex I habitats (as defined under the EU Habitats Directive) present. Within the core area of The Burren there are sixteen Annex I habitats, five of them are listed as "priority" habitats. These habitats include limestone pavement, orchid-rich limestone grassland, turloughs, petrifying springs, and calcareous fens. A large number of other habitats are found in the core area including lowland dry grassland, hazal scrub, alpine and subalpine heaths, juniper scrub, hard water lakes, lowland hay meadows, semi-natural woodland and improved agricultural grassland.

Draft Conservation Management Plans have been developed for the three SAC's. Under the SAC destination, certain activities have been restricted and a list of "Notifiable Actions" have been prepared for each of the habitats present. The primary management objective for each of Burren SAC's is to maintain and where possible enhance the ecological value of the priority habitats present, such as orchid-rich grasslands, limestone pavements, Cladium fens, turloughs and petrifying springs.

Under cross compliance rules, farmers must make an annual declaration that they are in compliance with all relevant legislation, including the Habitat Directive.

The Burren contains a number of rare plants protected under the Flora Protection Order (1999). Several Irish Red Data book species of plant and animal are also found within this area.

Part of the core area of The Burren has been designated as a National Park in 1991. The Burren National Park is one of only six National Parks in the Republic of Ireland. The Burren National Park is located in the south eastern corner of The Burren and is approximately 1,500 hectares in size. The Park is a Category II Protected Area as defined by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The National Park was purchased by the Government for nature conservation and public access. It contains examples of all the major habitats within The Burren; limestone pavements, calcareous grassland, hazel scrub, ash/hazal woodland, turloughs, lakes, petrifying springs, cliff and fen. The Burren National Park will be managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in cooperation with the farmers concerned.

The established network of specific sites of geological interest (geosites) of The Burren has been recognised by the award of membership of the UNESCO-supported Global and European Geoparks Network in 2011.

Since 1992 the importance of The Burren as a Cultural landscape has been recognised through its listing on Ireland's tentative list of World Heritage Sites as an outstanding example of human interaction with the environment. It has yet to be put forward for nomination to the full list. If The Burren is nominated successfully in future this could also help encourage sustainable tourism development in the region.

IV. Agriculture in The Burren

Farming activity in The Burren is thought to have begun almost 6,000 years ago. Ever since then, farmers and their livestock have been one of the main forces in shaping this landscape. Indeed, the bare limestone hills, evocative monuments and bright flora of The Burren are closely linked to the activities of these farmers of The Burren Region. The enormous influence of the farming community in the region, through their farming techniques they have managed the land in such a way as to preserve the unusual flora and habitats that remain today.

The Burren's farming traditions are unique. The Burren's famous flora is, in a sense, a by-product of farming activity, in particular the age-old system of winter grazing. Grazing animals spend the winter on The Burren hills grazing back the rank grasses and scrub that would otherwise dwarf the special Burren flowers. They complete this important task at a time when these flowers, orchids and gentians, are safely dormant for the winter.

Today about 1,000 farm families live in The Burren. Most of these families have an off-farm income and the majority of them specialize in suckle beef production. Other farm sectors – dairying, sheep, tillage – and now only practiced by a few specialised farmers, as compared with the mixed farming system of old.

The majority of the Burren is in private ownership of the farmers. So, the farmers with their enormous store of knowledge are very important partners for the authorities to safeguard The Burren region. The Burren IFA is the main representative body for the farmers of The Burren. The Burren IFA group was established in 1995 as a local branch for the national organisation in order to represent the unique interests of Burren farmers at a national level. The group was involved in the negotiation of The Burren REPS agreement in 1995, and continues to play a leading role in the development of agriculture in The Burren region.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht developed The BurrenLIFE project. The objective of this project was to develop a new model for sustainable agriculture in The Burren in order to conserve the habitats of the region designated under the Habitats Directive. The BurrenLIFE project was “Best of the Best“ LIFE Nature Award 2011 and has been presented as a Flagship project by the European Commission on the theme of “Financing Natura 2000”. The BurrenLIFE project was the first major farming for conservation project in Ireland. This project was a close partnership between the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Teagasc (Agriculture and Food Development Authority) and The Burren IFA (The Irish Farmers association).

Information based on five years of applied research, which took place on 20 monitor farms across The Burren, was collected and published in five best practice guides focussed on farming for conservation in The Burren, the agriculture heritage of The Burren, sustainable grazing of Burren winterages, feeding cattle on Burren winterages, and controlling scrub on Burren winterages and other areas. The project was 75% funded by the EU LIFE Nature Fund. It is anticipated that this programme will expend in The Burren in the years ahead until 2014 and thereafter through the next RDP cycle (2014-2020).

More details on the very successful results of The BurrenLIFE project are found on the website www.burrenlife.com.

To ensure a sustainable agricultural management of high value farmland in The Burren, The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP) was developed in 2010. This programme was based on the findings of The Burren LIFE project.

The BFCP is a 3-year agri-environment scheme for Burren farmers. It aims to deliver improvements in the condition of habitats and monuments, and in water quality. Rainwater harvesters, solar pumps, special animal feedstuffs, traditional Burren gates, one page farm plans and payments for biodiversity are just some of the innovations which have been introduced under The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme. Participation in the BFCP take only place in close consultation with the BFCP Trained Advisors.

Now the successful BFCP is in its third year of operation. The development and implementation of the BFCP is discussed in The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme Steering Group. In this Steering Group the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, NPWS, Burren-IFA, BFCP-team and Teagasc are participating. During the visited meeting of this Steering Group we noticed a fruitful cooperation between these organisations.

Payments of the BFCP are based on work done and results achieved under three complementary measures: (1) Production of species rich grassland, (2) Farm enhancement works and (3) Protection of SAC's. Till now many farmers elected to remove hazal and blackthorn scrub (c 50 ha in total), improving animal access and protecting rare, orchid-rich grasslands, repairing 19.400 m of run-down stone walls, improving water supplies and vehicular access. In year 2 of the BFCP 908 fields (7.178ha) are well managed. Farmers receive an average annual payment of around € 6-7.000,- to help improve the condition of their habitats, but for every three euros spent, farmers invest an additional one euro of their own. The maximum amount that will be payable to any farmer under the BFCP is € 15,000 per annum.

The BFCP management team is based in Carron (An old schoolhouse). The main role is to ensure the effective delivery of the BFCP and to support participating farmers and their advisors. Most of the 12 trained farm advisors are also based in, or close to, the area. This stimulates good relationship with the farmers. Two training workshops for the BFCP participants will take place very year, delivered by the BFCP project team.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service have directly responsibility for managing the designated (core) area in The Burren. Two full time park rangers have responsibility for on-site management. These rangers report to the District Conservation Officer and he in return to the regional manager. The work of the rangers is supplemented on a seasonal basis by the employment of 2-4 General Operatives who undertake conservation activities in The Burren National Park and Slieve Carron Nature Reserve. Additional budgets are available annually to contractors for the removal of scrubs for example, also for the provision of signage and information.

The NPWS also finances the operation of The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme. The funding for the BFCP comes from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and is annually funding for the period 2010-2013 inclusive. Today over 143 farmers are participating, availing of an annual budget of € 1m and implementing best practices on 13.256 ha of The Burren, almost half of all designated EU Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) land in The Burren region.

As a result, BFCP farmers have been very enthusiastic about the programme. It is anticipated that this number will grow in the coming years. During the farm visits we noticed good results of the measures taken by the BFCP farmers. The administration of the farm plans, control of the measures and payments was carried out in a very practical and efficient way.

It is clear that The Burren region depends on the presence of a thriving community to continue to manage it and to sustain important traditions such as winter grazing. The local community have a huge bank of knowledge and experience in this regard and are the key resource for conservation. Today, the rural communities in The Burren are dying out and the age profile is increasing all the time. The loss of rural communities can seriously undermine the future capacity to manage the landscape. Continuing funding of sustainable farming will be important. The farmers are the key to hold The Burren. Funding of farmers through The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme will support the farming family model by recognising the value of farming in preserving biodiversity.

V. Sustainable tourism in The Burren

Several hundred thousand visitors visit The Burren every year. Many of these visitors are attracted primarily by the region's pristine natural environment and rich heritage. Many of the visitors engage in outdoor activities such as hill walking, caving, rock climbing, cycling etc. The small villages are heavily dependent of tourism, as are many rural households, particularly those who are involved in the provision of accommodation.

So, a significant tourism industry has developed. However as an industry tourism in The Burren remains very seasonal (May-August) and short-stay. The Burren has a relatively limited infrastructure (roads, accommodation) which will be difficult to develop. Possible development will be carefully planned. During the visit no possible negative impacts by tourism were heard or seen.

Most businesses in The Burren are tourism related and are increasingly capitalising on The Burren's growing reputation as a heritage landscape. Such business include tour guides, information centres, heritage attractions (caves, forts, monuments), accommodation and food provision. Guided tours are widely available in The Burren with 4-5 full time tour guides in this area.

By growing interest in nature and the countryside for recreation and tourism The Burren Ecotourism Network (BEN) was launched on 3rd March 2011. The Burren Ecotourism Network currently comprises 18 independently-certified tourism providers in The Burren. Its aim is to promote The Burren as a premier international ecotourism destination. Tourism businesses involved in the network are committed to local produce, conservation and the community, as well as continuing high levels of sustainability. The network is offering visitors opportunities to engage with the protected landscape of The Burren in a manner which is sustainable both in terms of the environment as well as the community. Accommodation, food, farming, outdoor activities, culture and heritage are all part of the network, which has woven together all the elements that make the area attractive to visitors

looking for authentic tourism experiences. An application on eco tourism in The Burren was developed. The European Commission informed the Claire County Council on 2 May 2012 that the proposal LIFE 11 ENV/IE/922 "Burren tourism for conservation" is on the list of projects that will be proposed for life+ co-financing by the European Commission to Life+ Committee on 14 June 2012.

In The Burren region the day visitor centres are located very close to special monuments and landscape and wildlife sites. The Visitor Information Point of The Burren National Park, where three staff provided information and guided walks for visitors on a seasonal basis, has been located in the centre of Corofin. It was opened in May 2012. At our visit we could notice that the Visitor Information Centre provides an attractive educational and interactive experience for the visitor, using a blend of modern technology and interpretative panels on the geology, fauna, flora and management of The Burren.

The Burrenbeo Trust (Ireland's first landscape charity) contributes to improved visitor management and enhanced visitor experience in The Burren, through the provision of stimulating, high quality, globally accessible information. In doing so, Burrenbeo promotes The Burren as a haven for Eco-tourism, supporting 'Living by Heritage' a business ecology that doesn't 'green wash' but does offer authentic experiences for the visitor while also protecting the very resource that brings visitors here in the first place. Burrenbeo also promotes local and global education and awareness with regard to The Burren. Educational programmes are developed. It also formed The Burrenbeo Conservation Volunteers actively working towards sustainable management of The Burren by addressing key conservation issues and needs.

Several local stakeholders and community groups, particularly those interested in the sustainable development of tourism, are working together in The Burren Connect Project. This project is focussed on environmental protection and sustainable visitor management in The Burren region of County Clare. The Project is supported by Clare County Council, Shannon Development, Geological Survey of Ireland, National Parks and Wildlife Services, National Monuments Services, Failte Ireland, BurrenBeo Trust and The Burren Connect Advisory Committee. They invite discussion about their activities through public meetings and provide information about Burren related issues on the website, in the local media and through information points.

VI. Cooperation in The Burren

During the visit it was clear the local community is very proud on this area. The local people are the best hostess of this area. It struck me that the local community and Burren based organisations are very willing to cooperate with each other and to share their knowledge and experiences to conserve the special character of their unique area.

To strengthening the cooperation between the national and local authorities concerned and The Burren based organisations the initiative for a long term vision for The Burren was recently taken by Burrenbeo (2011). The idea behind this Burren Community Charter is to safeguard The Burren, its people and heritage while supporting the local economy and enhancing the community life of its residents and to bring as many people as possible together, who live and/or work on The Burren and find out what is their vision for the future of The Burren, and how they see themselves involved in developing that vision. This Charter is a living, evolving agreement by the people and for the people of The Burren. Today the draft text is forwarded to the communities of The Burren for their comments, following the final Charter will be prepared for signature, launch and circulation. The next stage will be development of themed action plans for the Charter which will contain time frames, budgets, roles and responsibilities. It is hoped that the charter will help all existing organisations and communities to work together in a pro-active, integrated manner, as well as setting out future work priorities for all involved.

VII. Conclusions, conditions and recommendations

Summarized, I can conclude:

The Burren Region is the largest limestone landscape in Europe with a very rich biodiversity and with unique archaeological, geological, historical and cultural values, enough legal regulations conserving the natural and cultural values of The Burren are recognized; the farming community has successfully farmed The Burren's rocky hills for many generations; a blue print for sustainable farming in The Burren has been developed;

- Development and implementation of The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme is very successful;
- Effective coordination, administration and facilitation by the Irish authorities;
- Positive relationships have been developed with The Burren communities and Burren based organisations;
- Provision of high quality visitor's information (websites, leaflets, brochures, information panels etc.);
- Strong involvement of The Burren communities to safeguard The Burren, its people and heritage;
- Increasing interest of eco tourism.

Based on the document provided, the field visits and the meetings with a wide range of stakeholders, I strongly recommend the group of experts to support the application of The Burren Region for the European Diploma with some conditions and recommendations.

Conditions:

1. The Irish authorities have to provide sufficient budget in order to maintain the administration of The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme in future.
2. Prevent possible negative environmental damage from the surrounding areas of The Burren Region.

Recommendations:

1. Encourage more farmers in participating in The Burren Farming for Conservation Programme;
2. Provide next steps in the second phase of EU funding of The Burrenlife project;
3. Stimulate the further development of The Burren Community Charter;
4. Stimulate further development of eco tourism and practice in The Burren;
5. Not authorize mass tourism in The Burren not in accordance with the sustainable development principles;
6. Encourage volunteers with sustainable management of The Burren.