

Strasbourg, 11 August 2017
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T-PVS/DE (2017) 18

CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

37th meeting
Strasbourg, 5-8 December 2017

REPORT

**ON THE SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE
BURREN REGION (IRELAND)**

12-13 July 2017

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The European Diploma for Protected Areas (EDPA) was awarded to The Burren Region of Ireland in 2013 for a period of 5 years. The Group of specialists on the European Diploma for Protected Areas decided at its meeting in 2016 that an on-the-spot appraisal be undertaken during 2017 to assess whether the EDPA should be renewed for a period of 10 years from 2018.

This report is written in relation to a consideration of the renewal of the EDPA for the 10-year period from 2018 until 2027. M. Marc Hory was present during the on-the-spot visit from 11 to 14 July 2017.

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THE REMIT

In a letter dated 2 May 2017, signed by Iva Obretenova, I was asked to be “in charge of the on-the-spot appraisal, visiting the site, meeting relevant stakeholders as per the draft agenda, and preparing a report, including the necessary recommended actions”. Furthermore, the letter stated that “the objective of the on-the-spot appraisal is to assess whether the conditions of the site remain the same as when the Diploma was awarded and extended, or whether they have improved or deteriorated”.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BURREN REGION EDPA

The European Diploma for Protected Areas was awarded to ‘The Burren Region’ (see Annex 1) in 2013, with the actual Diploma being presented to the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht at a ceremony on 13 September 2013. In making the award, 2 conditions and 6 recommendations were attached. These are listed in Annex 2, together with a short summary of the achievements of the EDPA authorities in implementing these conditions and recommendations.

The Burren Region is extremely unusual, both as an EDPA and in the agricultural management of the landscape. These two unusual features were extremely apparent during the on-the-spot visit (the programme for the visit is given in Annex 3) and are outlined as follows.

First, the whole of The Burren Region EDPA is not included within a single formally-declared protected area. The Burren Region contains three large Special Areas of Conservation (see Annex 1 for the EDPA boundary, the Black Head – Poulsallagh Complex SAC, the Moneen Mountain SAC, and the East Burren Complex SAC). The Burren National Park and the Slieve Carran Nature Reserve both lie within the East Burren Complex SAC. As will be discussed in this report, areas outwith the formally designated areas, but within the EDPA boundary, are important for the management of the designated areas.

Second, in Europe people are familiar with the practice of transhumance, whereby livestock are sent to the upland (or hill) ground during the summer and brought back onto the low-lying ground during the winter, though the timing when livestock is moved up in spring and down autumn is variable. On the Burren the management practice is a reverse-transhumance, whereby the cattle graze the uplands during the winter, and are brought back down nearer to the farms for calving and for the summer period. This unusual form of agricultural management had developed over the centuries, or perhaps even over the millennia, on the Burren, and is key to the rich biodiversity of the area.

EUROPEAN INTEREST

For perhaps more than a century ‘The Burren’ has been a special place to be visited by botanists intent on seeing rare plants and unusual juxtapositions of plant species. It therefore became rather famous in plant hunting circles as a ‘must go to’ place to visit.

In terms of geological and geomorphological features, the Burren Region is an extensive karst landscape, with exception areas of limestone pavement and the associated microsolutional features. Petrifying spring with their associated tufa formations are found, but a particular feature are the turloughs, seasonal water bodies due to the rise and fall of the ground water in the karst environment.

Biologically, it is not just the rare plant species, nor the intermixture of Arctic and Mediterranean species, but the whole range of plants communities which are important. These include orchid-rich grasslands, the communities living in the grykes (cracks) in the limestone pavements, as well as *Cladium* fens. Some insect species are more or less confined to the Burren, such as the wood white butterfly (*Leptidea sinapis*) and the Burren green moth (*Calamia tridens*), and others are particularly notable, such as the pearl bordered fritillary (*Boloria euphrosyne*). The turloughs also have many unique insect species, either new to science or confined to this habitat in Ireland.

Within the Burren Programme, farmers receive their agri-environmental payments on the basis of the biodiversity quality of their fields. The quality is assessed by farm advisers using a scoring system which records the plant species diversity at a number of points within a field. Scores less than 5 receive no financial payment, scores of 5 receive payment but must have increased to 6 after 2 years for payment to be continued, scores of 6 to 10 receive payment, but scores of 9 and 10 receive a bonus

payment of 25% and 50% respectively. Year-on-year the number of fields scoring 9 or 10 has increased, and the average score across all fields has also increased. This would indicate that the natural heritage, albeit based on plants species and structural parameters as a surrogate measure of biodiversity, has been increasing since the initial award of the EDPA.

Culturally, the landscape is very rich in archaeological monuments stemming from the Stone Age, some 5,500 or more years ago. The monuments also include those of the Neolithic period, Bronze Age, Iron Age and on into the early Christian and Medieval periods. With this wealth of monuments blending into the landscape, and with the traditional land management of the ‘winterage’ (the livestock being on the hills during the winter), the Burren Region is a cultural landscape. The Burren contains a record of over 5,500 years of continuous human habitation.

Given the high quality of the area from geological, geomorphological, biological and cultural perspectives, and the beneficial work of the Burren Programme, it is clear that the Burren Region remains an area of considerable European interest.

CONSERVATION MEASURES

The attitude of the Irish authorities can be summed up by saying that “mere designation does not always lead to protection; designation is a tool to manage the land”. In order to manage the land for its high nature value (HNV farming) three Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) have been designated within the Burren Region – these are shown in Annex 1. If grazing is withdrawn from these limestone grassland areas, encroachment of scrub (predominantly by hazel, *Corylus avellana*) follows. In order to conserve the high nature value of these grassland areas, the Burren Programme uses a farmer-centred solution.

The SACs cover the area of particular interest in a European context, containing a considerable number of habitats and species listed within the Habitats Directive. However, to conserve these areas, the traditional system of wintering cattle on the upland areas has been established or re-established. In order to support this, farmers require the lowland areas, often of smaller fields, for the cattle during the spring (calving) period and during the summer. These lowland areas predominantly do not contain habitats included within the Habitats Directive, though there are fragments of these habitats, but they are an integral part of the conservation management of the whole of the Burren Region.

This system of farming maintains the habitats and the landscape. However, the grazing is extensive and for farm enterprises to be economically viable subsidies have to be paid to the farmers to maintain the Burren Region for the public benefit. This has been achieved by the Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP) which ran until 2015. The BFCP paid farmers for actions and outcomes and not on the overall size of their farms. The BFCP has been replaced by The Burren Programme (BP) which is based on Ireland’s Rural Development Programme, 2016 – 2020; it is similarly based on supporting farmers for their actions and outcomes. Agri-environmental funding for the BP is assured until 2022, i.e. for the first 4 years if the EDPA is renewed for a period of 10 years. Funding is, however, uncertain beyond 2022, depending on the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy and how it is implemented in Ireland. This therefore leads to a **condition** for the renewal of the Diploma: **The Irish authorities should ensure a budget from 2022 onwards for the development of a successor programme to the current Burren Programme.**

MANAGEMENT

Each farm which voluntarily joins the BFCP, and now the BP, has a simple management plan, agreed with agricultural advisers and the staff of the BP. The number of farms within the programmes has increased since the initial award of the Diploma from about 150 to 320 in 2017 and expected to increase to around 450 in 2018. The target is to have about 500 farms within the BP. During the on-the-spot visit we saw examples of what these plans contain: an example would be for a 4.7ha field, with a 2015 score of 5, where the management recommendation is “increased grazing is required in both winter and late summer (rest if possible until late July). Repair boundaries and tackle scrub encroachment, install water trough”. The field-by-field management recommendations are all aiming to increase the ‘nature value’ of the fields.

Whereas the SACs originally had management plans, these were found not to be effective. The development of the system of farm management plans, integrating the whole of the farm, has therefore superseded the three draft SAC management plans.

The area of the Burren National Park is state-owned and is subject to management by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). Its management plan, including the Slieve Carran Nature Reserve, is currently nearing completion, and we were assured that it would be completed and approved before the end of 2017.

There are other organisations involved in the management of various aspects of the Burren Region. For the cultural heritage this includes The Heritage Council and the National Monuments Service. There is also some management activity related to the Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark. Whereas management of the Burren Region appears to be satisfactory, given the many management interests in the region, it is perhaps surprising that there is no overarching management document. This could set out the vision for the Burren Region and demonstrate how all of the different management initiatives fit together as a coherent whole. A **recommendation** would therefore be: **to prepare an overarching management framework document for the Burren Region EDPA, outlining the various management initiatives and their inter-relationships.**

Inevitably most attention is paid to the three core areas of the EDPA – the Black-Head-Poulsallagh Complex SAC, the Moneen Mountain SAC and the East Burren Complex SAC. Whilst this is important, the areas outwith the SACs but nevertheless within the EDPA perform important functions. There are small areas of excellent quality habitat, and in other places the habitats support the management of the SACs. This is essentially the buffer zone around the most important areas from a European perspective. As such, it needs to be managed so as if possible to enhance its value as well as ensuring that no damaging operations take place. A **recommendation** for these area would therefore be: **to aim both to increase the quality of the natural heritage and to prevent damage to the cultural heritage in those areas of the Burren Region not included within the three Special Areas of Conservation.**

USES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

The key to the successful conservation of The Burren Region is the living community of the area and particularly their farming activities. Without this form of land management the area would gradually become almost completely dominated by hazel scrub. During our visit we were able to make an assessment of socio-economic activity in a number of ways.

First, we attended a meeting of the Steering Committee of the Burren Programme. Second, we also attended the workshop, discussing the future of High Nature Value (HNV) Farming, which was designed to develop community-based approaches for new projects and actions, capitalising on the achievements of both the BFCP and the BP. Third, we were present at the public meeting with the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and the Marine, Michael Creed, when about 200 people were present. The Minister presented the ‘Best of the Best EU LIFE award’ which the Burren had achieved. Fourth, we noted the active involvement of volunteers through the BurrenBeo Trust.

It was very clear that there is a huge willingness for people to work together for the good of their community and for the good of the environment. Indeed, in the longer term, this cooperation might be a possible way of somewhat reducing the farmers’ dependence on financial incentives such as the BP. Although it is already part of the life of the Burren, the continuation of the impressive spirit of cooperation leads to a renewed **recommendation: to work with others, especially in relation to tourism predicated on the farm holdings, as well as the natural and cultural heritage, to support the community living and working in the Burren Region.**

On visiting the National Park Information Point in Corofin, we were given two leaflets outlining trails within the Burren National Park. One of the leaflets describes eight trails varying in length between 1.3 and 7.5km. The other leaflet outlined the nature trail with 16 marked stops featuring both geological and wildlife interest. We also saw the example of The Burren Way, a long-distance route of 123km, many sections of which are along small country roads. Talking to NPWS staff, there are no trails which link the population centres situated on the fringes of the EDPA, such as the towns/villages of Gort, Lisdoonvarna and Kinvara, with the more central areas represented by the three SACs. A

recommendation would therefore be: **to consider the development of further walking trails throughout the Burren Region.**

CONNECTIVITY OF THE AREA

It is important to recognise that the three SACs, together with what is here referred to as the 'buffer zone' around them, is managed as an integrated whole. Ecological connectivity is therefore established, and no particular connectivity with areas outside the EDPA boundary, which differ in their geology, would be appropriate.

There are other facets of connectivity which should be mentioned. The BurrenLIFE project was selected as the recipient of a 'Green Award' (see Annex 4 for details of this award) by the European Union, and this award was essentially presented to the people of the Burren Region by the Minister for Agriculture, Forestry and The Marine at the public meeting which we attended. It is a real accolade for the Burren Region and its EDPA status that this 'best-of-the-best' was chosen from all of the EU LIFE projects of the last 25 years. There is also the 'Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, which covers part of the area of the EDPA. The Burren also remains on the tentative list of Irish World Heritage Sites, essentially for its important cultural heritage rather than for its natural heritage.

Because of the current satisfactory condition, no recommendations are being made in relation to the connectivity of the area.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONDITIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The brief analysis in Annex 2 of the two conditions and six recommendations, attached to the original award of the Diploma, have all been acted upon. The two conditions have been fulfilled, and progress has been made on all of the recommendations. Whereas this might indicate that no further conditions or recommendations are required, funding remains a critical issue in the future. This is therefore embodied in my recommendation that the renewal of the Diploma has a single condition about future funding attached to it.

Discussions with NPWS staff, staff of the Burren Programme, and listening to others in the meetings which we attended, have led to four new recommendations being suggested, as outlined above. However, during the visit we were aware that the holding of the European Diploma was not widely visible, and hence a fifth suggested **recommendation** is: **to ensure that the award of the European Diploma for Protected Areas is more visible.**

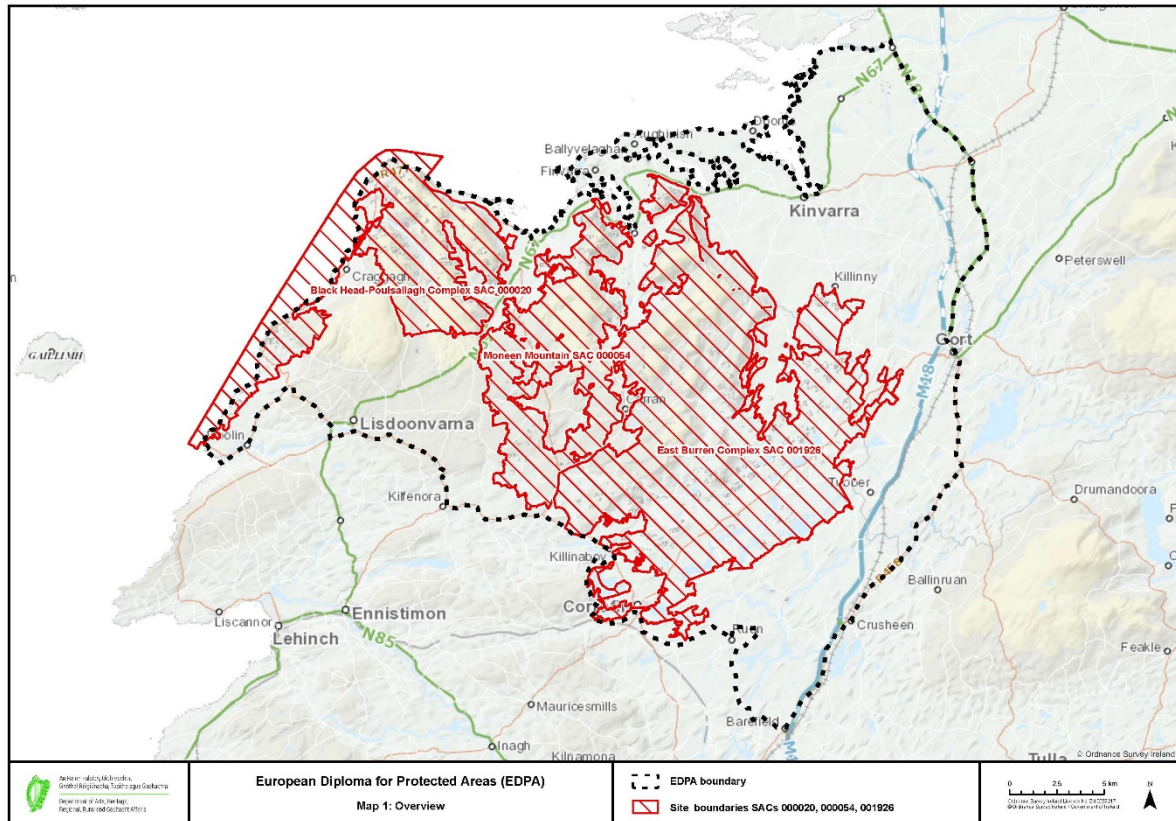
CONCLUSIONS

My conclusion is that the European Diploma for Protected Areas, originally award to The Burren Region in 2013, should be renewed for the period 2018 to 2027. In reaching this conclusion, I suggest that one condition and five recommendations are attached to the renewal, as discussed in this report and listed in Annex 5.

Annex 1

A PLAN OF THE BURREN REGION

The plan shows the outline of the EDPA (the series of black dots), the three SACs (outlined and cross-hatched in red) and the 'buffer zone' (those areas between the red hatched areas and the black dotted line). The Burren Area EDPA is about 38km from west to east, and about 35km from north to south.



Annex 2

THE 2 CONDITIONS AND 6 RECOMMENDATIONS ATTACHED TO THE AWARD OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA FOR PROTECTED AREAS IN 2013

The actual conditions and recommendations are given in normal typescript. My analysis, based on the 2014, 2015 and 2026 reports, and from the on-the-spot visit, are given in italics after each condition and recommendation.

Conditions

1. The Irish authorities should ensure the budget for the maintenance and development of the Burren Farming for Conservation Programme. *This condition has been fulfilled with the development of the Burren Programme, which runs from 2015 until 2020.*
2. The national and local authorities should prevent possible negative environmental damage from the surroundings areas of the Burren Region. *The wording of this condition is ambiguous. However, if it is taken to be all those areas outwith the three formally protected SACs, then this condition has been fulfilled. All farmers in the Burren Region are able to join the Burren Programme, whether or not their land is within the SACs.*

Recommendations

1. To encourage the participation of more farmers in the Burren Farming for Conservation Programme. *The number of farmers participating in the Burren Programme has been increasing, and by 2018 is expected to reach 500 (i.e. more than three times as many as when the EDPA was awarded).*
2. To plan subsequent steps in the second phase of European Union funding of the BurrenLIFE project through the Burren Farming for Conservation Programme. *This has been achieved through the development of the Burren Programme and the successor to the Burren Farming for Conservation Programme.*
3. To stimulate the further development of the Burren Community Charter. *The Burren Community Charter is a slightly nebulous concept which brings together the majority (perhaps all) of the organisations and groups interested in The Burren Region. The meeting which Marc Hory and I attended in Kilfenora on 13 July, attended by about 200 people from many organisations, clearly indicated the extent of cooperation which exists. This recommendation has been implemented satisfactorily.*
4. To stimulate further development of sustainable ecotourism and practice in the Burren Region. *Small scale sustainable tourism initiatives can be seen in The Burren Region – bed-and-breakfast facilities in private homes, including farmhouses, provision of farmhouse refreshments, etc. Whilst these might not be strictly ‘ecotourism’, they nevertheless add support to the community of people living and working in the Burren Region. Projects more directly related to the environment of the Burren Region are taking place, partly with free transport into the National Park, guided walks, and a symposium focussed on learning through the landscape. This recommendation has therefore been acted upon.*
5. To discourage mass tourism in the Burren Region which does not accord with the principles of sustainable development. *There is a single ‘mass tourism’ attraction – the Cliffs of Moher – said to be Ireland’s most visited attraction! This is managed in relation to the Geopark, which links closely with the Burren Ecotourism Network. All evidence is that this is being managed to balance conservation with tourism, and it provides a useful source of income to the region. During the visit we heard of no other mass tourism developments either occurring or planned. This recommendation has been followed.*
6. To encourage volunteers to participate in the sustainable management of the Burren Region. *The work of the Burrenbeo Trust, in particular, highlights the voluntary input occurring in the Burren Region. The Trust is “a landscape charity dedicated to connecting all of us to our places and our role*

in caring for them". The Trust promotes the Burren as a learning landscape for the sustainable management of the region and it aims to share knowledge of best practice in active community stewardship, place-based and community-based learning. This is an example of how this recommendation has been implemented in an area with a decreasing rural population.

Conclusion

It is my opinion that the management of the Burren Region EDPA has complied with both of the conditions attached to the award of the Diploma in 2013. Further, from the evidence seen, and discussions held, during the on-the-spot visit, and from the annual reports for 2014, 2015 and 2016, it appears that all six recommendations have been acted upon satisfactorily.

Annex 3

ON-THE-SPOT EXPERT APPRAISAL OF THE BURREN REGION:

Programme, 11 to 14 July 2017

Tuesday 11 July 2017

Fly from Edinburgh to Shannon; collect rental car and drive with Marc Hory to Ballyvaughan via the Burren National Park (*Páirc Náisiúnta Bhoirne*); accommodation in the Hylands Burren Hotel, Ballyvaughan.

Wednesday 12 July 2017

- Update on the Burren Life Programme (BLP), Burren Farming for Conservation Programme (BFCP) and the Burren Programme (BP) with Dr Brendan Dunford and Dr Andy Bleasdale at offices in Carron.
- Lunch at the Burren Perfumery.
- Visit to a farm at Derreenatloughtan (owners Anthony and John Hynes) with Dr Sharon Parr and Dr Andy Bleasdale.
- Visit to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Information Centre at Corofin, and subsequent visit to the National Park in the vicinity of Lough Gealáin and Mullochmore, accompanied by Dr Andy Bleasdale and NPWS regional staff (Denis Strong, Enda Mooney, Seamus Hassett and Emma Glanville).
- Return to Ballyvaughan (to review problems with car tyres)
- Marc Hory and MBU drive to the western side of the EDPA: drove from Ballyvaughan to Lisdoonvarna, then via Poulsallagh to Fanore, and the round Black Head back to Ballyvaughan. Along this coast road, we had appropriate stops to see the Black Head – Poulsallagh Complex SAC.

Thursday 13 July 2017

- Meet at Carron, followed by a visit to a farm at Deelin More (owner Philomena Hynes), accompanied by Dr Sharon Parr, Dr Andy Bleasdale, Dr Barry O'Donoghue (NPWS Scientific Unit) and Denis Strong (NPWS Divisional Manager).
- Meeting with the BP Steering Group at Carron (meeting attend by about 30 people, including William Cormacan from NPWS).
- Lunch at a farmhouse near Carron.
- Workshop in Kilfenora on the future of High Nature Value (HNV) farming in the Burren (attended by about 40 people, including farmers, NGOs, Galway and Clare County Councils, The Heritage Council, etc.).
- Attended the public meeting in Kilfenora where the Minister for Agriculture present the EU LIFE 'Best of the Best' award (about 200 people, mostly Burren farmers, attended this meeting). The Chairman of the Burren Irish Farmers Association, Michael Davoren made presentations, on behalf of the farmers, to both Dr Brendan Dunford and Dr Sharon Parr.

Friday 14 July 2017

Drive from Ballyvaughan to Shannon with Marc Hory, and return to Edinburgh.

Annex 4**THE 'GREEN AWARD'**

The 'Green Award' is a special award, organised by the European Union, which celebrates the 25th anniversary of the LIFE programme. Since its inception in May 1992 the LIFE programme has supported over 4,300 projects. To mark this anniversary, a competition was organised to choose the very best projects undertaken during the last 25 years. Ireland's BurrenLIFE project emerged as joint winner in the 'nature and biodiversity' category.

The Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Michael Creed TD, presented the Burren farming community with this prestigious award at the community event held on the 13th July 2017 in Kilfenora. The award marks the tremendous role which the farmers have played in protecting and enhancing the unique landscape in which they live and farm.

ANNEX 5

THE RECOMMENDED SINGLE CONDITION AND 5 RECOMMENDATIONS WHICH COULD BE ATTACHED TO THE RENEWAL OF THE EUROPEAN DIPLOMA FOR PROTECTED AREAS IN 2018

Condition

The Irish authorities should ensure a budget from 2022 onwards for the development of a successor programme to the current Burren Programme.

Recommendations

To prepare an overarching management framework document for the Burren Region EDPA, outlining the various management initiatives and their inter-relationships.

To aim both to increase the quality of the natural heritage and to prevent damage to the cultural heritage in those areas of the Burren Region not included within the three Special Areas of Conservation.

To work with others, especially in relation to tourism predicated on the farm holdings, as well as the natural and cultural heritage, to support the community living and working in the Burren Region.

To consider the development of further walking trails throughout the Burren Region.

To ensure that the award of the European Diploma for Protected Areas is more visible.