



**ADL**  
Woodland  
Group



## **Our forest home**

Conserving the Abhainn Dá Loilíoch  
river valley and its ancient woodlands

I slept  
as never before, a stone  
on the riverbed, nothing  
between me and the white  
fire of the stars  
but my thoughts, and they  
floated  
light as moths among the  
branches  
of the perfect trees.

- by Mary Oliver

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01

## Introduction

Welcome to the Abhainn Dá Loilíoch  
Woodland guide!

What you are holding in your hands is an  
informative booklet and pocket guide to the  
work and vision of the Abhainn Dá Loilíoch  
Woodland group based to the south-east of  
Gort, in South Galway.

The Abhainn Dá Loilíoch (the river of two  
milch cows), flows from the Slieve Aughty  
Mountain range into Lough Cutra, which lies  
to the south-east of Gort. The river valley and  
the three woodlands that it connects are the  
focus of the group. Much of the Slieve Aughty  
Mountains were once covered in native,  
predominantly oak, woodlands. As such, the  
three woodlands were once part of the great  
forest of Aughty and are among only a tiny  
fraction that remain. Nevertheless, the three  
woods combined cover over 150ha, which

puts them among the largest ancient  
woodlands in Ireland.

The group was formed in 2020, in the midst  
of what we did not yet know was going to  
be a very hard two years for many people in  
the community. The existence of this area of  
natural beauty on our doorstep was suddenly  
of great importance. Somehow there was a  
general feeling in the community that if things  
were tough, we would have the forest; we could  
always go there in search of ease and support,  
to exercise and to walk with neighbours and  
connect with our local environment.

The mission of the ADL Woodland Group is  
to work towards collaboration with the local  
community, ecologists, and statutory bodies  
to recover, restore and increase native  
woodlands in the Abhainn Dá Loilíoch river  
and between the three native oak woodlands  
of Drummin, Gortacarnaun, and Lahardaun,  
located ten km south-east of Gort, Co.  
Galway.

During the short life of the project there have  
been several achievements by the group  
and by the community, which has benefitted  
from attending some of the day-long training  
sessions on very interesting and educational  
themes (mushroom identification, native  
flora, river quality and otters, bats, birds,  
biodiversity walks, etc.).

Having a place to walk and breathe in these  
gifts of natural habitat is a great resource  
to the community in this area but also a  
welcoming beauty for those who are seeking  
nature in its simpler and more humble  
expression.

You are very welcome to join the group, to  
participate in all the activities we are offering  
throughout the year and to connect with this  
beautiful area of ancient landscape which  
invites our hearts to be at rest.



02

## How the River Got its Name

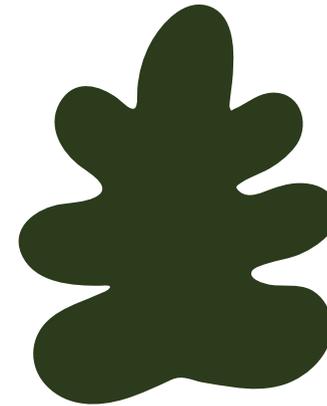
We live in an ecologically bountiful area which also enjoys a very rich heritage of folklore, and the Abhainn Dá Loilíoch (pronounce it "OW in DAW LIL eekh") is a good example. The name translates as "the river of two milch cows" and as you might imagine, there's a bit of a story behind it.

Before Celtic culture appeared in Ireland, the land was settled by the Fir Bolg – according to legend at least. Some of their names are still with us: Lough Cutra is named after a Fir Bolg chieftain. However, another people known as the Tuatha Dé Danann sailed southwards and made landfall in Conamara.

They were fierce warriors and reputedly had even stronger magic to accompany this, so the Fir Bolg were unable to prevail against them. Eventually the two people had to attempt to accommodate one another, and on one occasion the young Tuatha Dé Danann noblewoman Echtge was sent to marry Fergus mac Rúidí, who was cupbearer to the king of the Fir Bolg and ruled over both sides of this river valley.

Echtge brought her own herds of cattle with her, and her husband was obliged to give her land to keep them on. In order to decide which side of the river was the more fertile, Echtge placed one of her best cows on each side. When one of the cows came back looking thin and poorly fed, while the other was sleek and replete with milk, she knew which land to ask for.

The whole of the Slieve Aughty range is also named after Echtge, who must have been quite a character.



03

## Our Ancient Forests

The oakwoods of Drummin (c.60 ha), Lahardaun (c.20ha) and Gortacarnaun (c.95ha), are the jewels in the crown of the Abhainn Dá Loilíoch river valley. They are almost certainly of ancient origin, making them extremely valuable from both a heritage and a conservation point of view.

Old oak woodlands, also called Oceanic Temperate Rainforests, are possibly the rarest of Ireland's remaining original habitat. The entire island was once cloaked in these tangled, ferny, moss-covered wonderlands, and the memory of them must surely still lie buried deep in our psyches. We truly were a forest people, and when we lost our forests, we lost part of ourselves.

Because the remaining fragments, rich in rare species, form a direct, living link to our past, they are truly as important a part of our

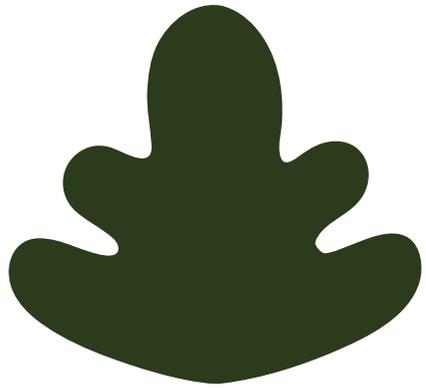
heritage as Newgrange, Tara or any of the other places we hold precious. If anything, they could be said to be more precious, because they contain the means of their own renewal\_ the vast seed bank and the rare plants of the forest floor.

Drummin and Gortacarnaun woods have survived largely intact, because of careful management by local landowners in present and previous generations. They now have protected status and the greatest threats to their survival are overgrazing by deer and, in the case of Gortacarnaun, rhododendron infestation.

The third woodland, Lahardaun, was sadly felled during the 1940s and replaced with a commercial conifer plantation. Nevertheless, it still possesses some lovely mature oaks, which hold the seeds of a future forest, as well as many rare old woodland plants along the banks of the river: some examples would be the bright green Irish Spurge, the very rare Sword Leaved Helleborine, and rare species of Horsetail, Wood Rush and Sedge.

The value of these woodlands, from a heritage and conservation perspective, has been recognised in some quarters for many years.

In 2007, local naturalists, Cillian Roden, Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, and Gordon D'Arcy, published a paper in the Irish Naturalist's Journal, in which they detailed the fascinating botany of the three woodlands and emphasised their national importance from a conservation point of view. The paper concludes with a call for "a visionary project for the reestablishment of a natural forest over a wide area of the Owendalulleagh River Valley... to allow future generations the experience of native woodland which can, even now, be glimpsed by the naturalist who explores the woods."



04

## Our Work with the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO)

In 2021, and again in 2022, the ADL Woodland Group group, in partnership with CELT, received funding from LAWPRO under the Community Water Development Fund, to carry out a series of trainings and public talks on various subjects relating to the biodiversity of the river valley.

We also received training from LAWPRO in the Citizen Science Stream Index survey method. This is a method of assessing water quality based on the presence of certain key invertebrates.

The group now carries out this survey three times a year, at three sites along the river and the data is collected by LAWPRO.

The Abhainn Dá Loilíoch is one of very few remaining high-status rivers in Ireland. It is a key objective of LAWPRO to protect and maintain such rivers. The CSSI survey is an important tool in the ongoing monitoring of the health of our river. The invertebrates we collect data on are vital components of the food chain, providing food for trout and other fish, and for birds like the Dipper and the Grey Wagtail.



05

## BLUE DOT Catchments

“Working to let life thrive in some of our wildest waters.”

The Blue Dot Catchments Programme was set up in 2019, with the objective of addressing the decline in high status water bodies in Ireland. The water bodies within its remit are those which have, as yet, suffered little or no disturbance or interference, and which still support high biodiversity levels...healthy macro invertebrate populations, trout, salmon, etc

High status sites have declined significantly in recent years. In 1990, they comprised 31.5% of all sites. By 2018, this had declined to 17.2% of all sites. Our highest quality river

sites, as defined by the EPA, numbered 500 in 1990. By 2018, there were only 20 such sites. This is a catastrophic decline.

The aim of the Blue Dot programme is to highlight this serious loss and to work with communities to raise awareness and take action to reverse declines.

For communities that live, work or farm within Blue Dot Catchments, it is important to recognize that their water bodies are in good condition in large part because of their responsible working and farming practices, and that this should be acknowledged and be a source of pride! The Abhainn Dá Loilíoch river and its tributaries, from Derrybrien to the bridge at Derreen, Gort, is designated high status, reflecting the overall excellent condition of the river and its riparian zones in this area. Therefore, it is a Blue Dot River, and its protection is of paramount importance.

06

## Water Quality and Native Trees

Good water quality is vital for the health of all living things, not least us humans. It is dependent on lack of pollution. A healthy ecosystem can break down pollutants whilst putting oxygen into the air and the water. Native trees play a major role in this. What we mean by “native” is having a long-term relationship with many other native organisms, developed over hundreds or thousands of years. Our native oak has well over 600 such relationships with other organisms, compared to introduced or ‘naturalised’ conifers which do well to have a dozen such relationships. Thus, a diversity of native trees in the vicinity of a river help to form a rich and flourishing ecosystem with good water and air. This is nature creating Heaven here on Earth! We can help make it happen by planting more native trees and we will therefore be doing our bit to address the climate and biodiversity crisis.

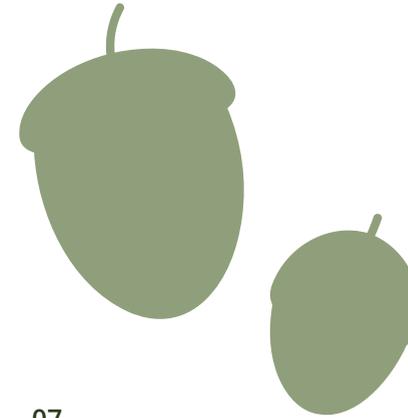
Planting trees or allowing natural regeneration close to rivers delivers many benefits. Trees or hedgerows in the right location can prevent virtually all diffuse and point source pollution from reaching rivers.

They are also a vital flood defence. The underground root network created by tree roots contributes to higher infiltration rates of soils, meaning that water is absorbed into the soil and replenishes aquifers, rather than running into the river.

Fallen trees in rivers also help mitigate flooding by creating ‘leaky dams’, which slow the water flow. Fallen trees also serve other functions, including trapping silt and providing shelter for fish and food for the invertebrates on which the fish feed.

Trees are, in general, very beneficial for soil health, but on river margins they serve the additional purpose of stabilizing the riverbanks, preventing erosion and sediment run-off.

Finally, they provide vital biodiversity services and transform rivers into valuable wildlife corridors.



07

## An Overview of Native Woodland and Environmental Innovation Grants in Ireland

We welcome cooperation with the local farming community, who may have land beside the river or the native woodland in the area. Over the course of the project, we have become aware of different schemes that benefit the farming community and could lead to better water quality and more native woodland in the area for future generations.

There are several grants available from the Forest Service for planting native woodland and for existing native woodland. These are applicable under the forestry programme until the end of 2022 after which a new programme, likely with higher rates, will apply.

A grant of €5620 (Oak-Birch) or €528 (Alder) per Ha covers work and materials (including trees) for establishment, payable to your forester. The landowner then receives €665 - €680/Ha for 15 years as a premium. A once-off payment of €1000/Ha to the landowner under the Woodland Environmental Fund (WEF) is also available, depending on your forester finding a suitable business partner for the scheme. There is also a grant for fencing, and since deer are the biggest obstacle to native woodland

establishment locally, a deer fence is crucial. There is a grant of €2,275/Ha, but whether this is sufficient will depend on the shape of the site and the terrain.

The Native Woodland Conservation scheme is available for existing native woodlands or for conversion of conifer plantations in key sites. For existing woodland, a grant of €5000/Ha is available for works (e.g. underplanting, thinning, rhododendron removal) and the landowner receives a premium of €350/Ha for 7 years. For conifer plantations, a grant of €3000/Ha is available for works, and the same premiums apply. Key sites include by watercourses and within 1km of ancient woodland, and it is likely that many sites in the valley would qualify. Crucially in both cases the same deer fencing grant is available as for afforestation.

For existing woodlands there is also the Woodland Improvement scheme which will cover the costs of thinning in certain circumstances. This also supports conversion to Continuous Cover Forestry, at a rate of €750/Ha.

Currently, no afforestation is possible in the Hen Harrier SPA, but individual applications may be assessed on a case-by-case basis in the future. For sites in proximity to any SPA or SAC, it is likely a Natura Impact Statement (NIS) will be needed. A new grant of €450 -€2050 is now available to cover this cost. This also applies to felling licenses.

In all cases it is worth talking to a forestry advisor at Teagasc or to a professional forester. It is anticipated that many of these grants will increase from January 2023 with the new forestry programme.

It is important to note that farmers who avail of forestry grants can keep their basic payments for those areas. As of 2022, there is no requirement to keep farming to a minimum area.

Another welcome change to land payments is that scrub and woodland are now seen as ecologically beneficial features which may constitute up to 50% without making the land parcel ineligible.

Funding is also possible from the European Innovation Partnership to undertake Farming for Nature activities. Landowners in this river valley are in an ideal position to receive this funding, particularly if the project has the support of a community group such as the ADL Woodland Group.



## A Few Last Words...

Thank you for reading this little booklet from the Abhainn Dá Loilíoch Woodland Group.

It was with great joy that this came into being, to be shared with the local and wider community of South-East Galway.

How to get involved with the group:

# 1

Become a member. You can join on our website. Alternatively, send an email to the group and we will be delighted to welcome you and to add you to our mailing list.

# 2

Ask to join the working group if you feel you can give some extra time and energy to make things happen. Maybe you have a skill in lobbying with statutory bodies or you really enjoy helping and supporting events to come to life.

 Abhainn Dá Loilíoch  
 Ancient Woodland





Fáilte chuig an tír álainn seo  
atá lán d'fhoraóisí ársa agus  
uiscí draíochta!



**ADL**  
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Local Authority\*  
**Waters**  
Programme



vibrant communities | catchment assessment | healthy waters

**CELT** 