

Solid Fuels and Birch Woodlands.

After the last Ice Age and before farmers arrived in Ireland, 80% of the land surface of Ireland was covered by deciduous woodland. Many of the plant and animal species currently found in Ireland are woodland species. They lost most of the woodland and now they try to survive in any scrap of woodland remaining. They turned to hedgerows but these too are slowly but surely losing out to all sorts of development. They turned to gardens and now most gardens do not support any wildlife habitat whatsoever.

Most people throughout rural Ireland use “Turf” (Fuel Peat) and any change to that will be extremely difficult. Raised Bogs in Ireland have been used for peat extraction to the extent that most of them are badly damaged and of no great scientific or ecological value. Trees don’t normally grow on the surface of Raised Bogs because tree roots cannot penetrate the peat down to the groundwater and nutrients however trees do grow on cutover peat creating semi-natural “Birch (*Betula* species) Woodland”.

Everyone knows that most Raised Bogs will be “cut out” sooner or later. In many areas turf cutters will not stop until there is no raised bog left. The cessation of turf cutting is absolutely necessary but this must be planned and implemented in a manner that protects these now vital woodlands. Demand for alternative sources of fuel will pile additional pressure on these woodlands which are already threatened. The tops of young Birch are used in horse racing for hurdles. This practice is particularly destructive as large swathes of developing woodland never achieve maturity.

Birch woodland often contains other tree species such as Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) and Yew (*Taxus baccata*) and Alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*) now rare in Ireland. Birch woodland in many areas also stabilize wet peaty areas that otherwise could release peat silt to wetlands, lakes, rivers and river catchment. Regardless of their importance, the destruction of this natural habitat in Ireland is alarming. It is more alarming to see old birch woodland around raised bog being felled and transformed into grassland for agriculture; this is a step in the wrong direction.

For many years, the State and the EU have been funding so called “nature conservation measures” with little or nothing to show for it. Take a look at any aerial or satellite imagery at the extent of grasslands and cereal in Ireland. Grasslands without even hedgerows and headlands so that even insects have nothing left. Proper management of these habitats is essential any alternative fuel must be sourced from sustainable management systems. These systems take a long time to put in place. Sustainable Ash woodland takes about 10-12 years to start! All of us want to see progress in relation to solid fuels (and smokeless fuels) and the natural environment in general but this must include robust protection of natural habitats. This is an opportunity for some nature conservation that can actually make a difference.

