

# Burren Life

## PROGRAMME



## The Burren

The Burren (from the Gaelic word *Boireann*, 'place of stone') is a distinctive limestone landscape which extends over roughly 720km<sup>2</sup> (72,000 ha) of north Co. Clare and south Co. Galway on Ireland's mid-western coast. It is a refuge for many plant and animal species which are now rare elsewhere in Ireland and Europe. The Burren boasts a fascinating archaeological record, mapping over 5,500 years of human endeavour on what is sometimes referred to as 'the fertile rock'. Though largely privately owned, the Burren and its rich and varied heritage represent a public resource of inestimable value.

## Farming and the Burren

Farming is integral to the character and composition of the Burren. The ancient transhumance practice of winter grazing on the rough limestone grasslands and heaths is central to the health and diversity of the many species and habitats therein. In a similar way, much of the Burren's landscape and rich archaeological heritage can be directly linked to the work of generations of farmers.

Today, several hundred farm families continue to live and farm in the Burren. Despite the challenges posed in an era of efficiency-driven farming and by the rough, unforgiving terrain, these farm families produce excellent livestock, like their forefathers, and in many cases this is achieved using the same ancient pastoral traditions. Crucially, these farmers also hold the key to the future wellbeing of the Burren.

## The Burren Life Programme

Burren Life is a locally targeted conservation programme which invests in Burren farmers, their land and livestock. It works closely with farmers to optimise the farming systems on their holdings, so they can continue to produce high quality agricultural goods whilst also delivering an outstanding

environment and conserving the important habitats of the Burren. Burren Life recognises that flower-rich pastures are as much a product for Burren farmers as the livestock they produce, and rewards them in accordance with their success in delivering these additional dividends.

# Burren Life

Burren Life began in 2005 as a 5-year research project funded by the EU LIFE Nature fund and three local partners: the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Teagasc and the Burren branch of the Irish Farmers Association. Concluding in 2010, the BurrenLIFE research project successfully designed, tested, costed and published, a blueprint for sustainable farming in the Burren.

Between 2010 and 2015, this blueprint was rolled out across 160 farms (c.15,000 ha of land) under the 'Burren Farming for Conservation Programme' (BFCP, though often still referred to as 'Burren Life'). The BFCP was jointly funded by the Dept. of Agriculture, Food and the Marine who paid €5m to farmers over 5 years, and the NPWS who funded the local management team and office.



## Burren Life Principles

The following principles are central to how Burren Life goes about meeting its objectives of conserving the heritage, environment and communities of the Burren:

- **Burren Life is farmer-led.** Farmers nominate and co-fund conservation actions on their own farms and are generally free to manage the land as they see fit (within the law). Burren Life minimises the bureaucratic burden (e.g. via a simple farm plan and support for securing permissions) so that farmers can concentrate on what they do best – farming!
- **Burren Life is results-based.** Simply put, Burren Life rewards those farmers who deliver the highest environmental benefits. Conservation becomes as much a product for the farmer as the livestock produced.
- **Burren Life is flexible and adaptable.** Farmers are given the freedom to deliver the required outputs using their own skills, experiences and resources, as best fits their own farms and circumstances. This flexibility means that Burren Life is capable of responding to the different needs and situations which invariably arise, from farm to farm, and from year to year.
- **Burren Life is local and practical.** It focusses on works which address real needs in the Burren and which will yield real agricultural and environmental benefits.



## Burren Life's Novel Approach

Burren Life has pioneered a novel 'hybrid' approach to farming for conservation which sees farmers paid for both work undertaken and, most importantly, for the delivery of defined environmental objectives. Within Burren Life, farmers are helped to prepare their own simple farm plan (most only 3 pages and very visual) each year by their trained advisor and the Burren Life team. The plan is tailored to suit the needs of the individual farm and outlines the two payment categories: **(1) Payment for Actions** and **(2) Payment for Results**.

# 1. Payment for Actions

The annual farm plan contains a list of actions (jobs) which are nominated by the farmer with the aim of improving the site's management and conservation condition. Each job is individually costed and co-funded by the farmer, and is carried out within the year by the farmer and/or a local contractor. Payment issues only when jobs are complete and to a satisfactory standard. The farmer can 'opt-out' of a planned action if he/she so chooses, ensuring maximum flexibility for the farmer.



Most farms nominate a mixture of jobs to suit the needs of their land e.g. removing encroaching scrub from species-rich grassland, repairing internal walls, improving water supplies or enhancing access. Work completed over the first 5 years of the BFCP includes:

- 214ha of scrub (mainly hazel and blackthorn) removed across a wide area of the Burren;
- 137km of (c.3m wide) stock paths opened through scrub to reconnect areas of grazing;
- 89km of broken wall (gaps!) repaired and 600 new gates fitted;
- 400 new watering points installed and scores of sensitive springs protected; and
- 45km of vehicle access tracks repaired or created, enabling improved long-term management.



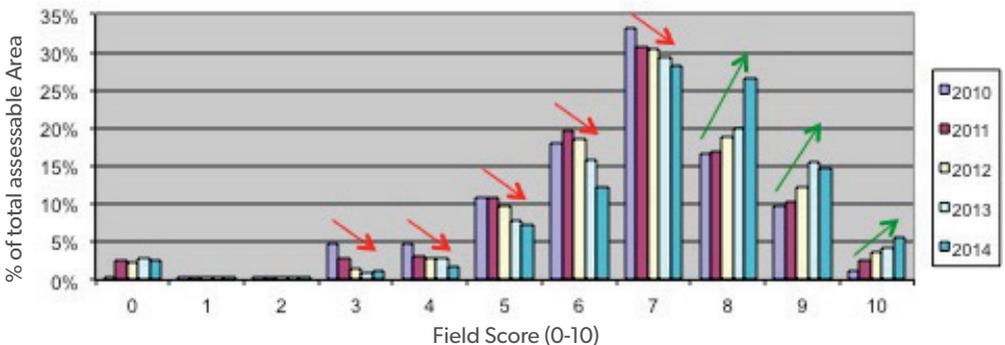
## 2. Payment for Results

Every eligible field of species-rich Burren grassland and heath is assessed annually with a user-friendly 'habitat health' checklist. Each field receives a score between 1 and 10: all fields with a score greater than 3 have received payment but higher scores receive higher payments. This gives farmers the incentive to manage their fields in ways that will improve their scores and their payment as well.

The results-based payment system allows farmers greater freedom to decide how to manage their land (with advice if needed) and also guarantees the taxpayer better value for money — no delivery, no payment! It also generates data (see graph below) which demonstrates the positive environmental impact of Burren Life. This graph shows that, between 2010 and 2014, the area of Burren grassland in very good condition (scoring 8,9,10) increased and the area in poorer condition (scoring 3–7) decreased.

**Variation in Field Scores 2010–2014**

*Arrows indicate trend of changing field scores*



# Impact of Burren Life

Over the course of the first 5 years, Burren Life has had major environmental and socio-economic impacts in the Burren. €5m has been invested directly in the region, with an average of €6,500 per year going to each farmer, and the added benefit is that much of this money is recycled locally. Farmers themselves have invested an additional €1.3m in the programme through co-funding of farm works, amounting to a total spend of €6.3m. This funding has contributed to a number of spin-offs such as increased work for local contractors, more custom for local shops and manufacturers (e.g. Burren gates) and new farm-based tourism enterprises.

Internationally, Burren Life has received many plaudits for its practical, 'hybrid' approach to farming and conservation whereby farmers are helped to use their own knowledge and expertise to solve local issues and are rewarded accordingly if they deliver the required environmental benefits. Building on this success are the new EU-funded pilot projects on 'Results-based' Agri-environment schemes in Ireland and elsewhere.

Burren Life has delivered a range of proven environmental benefits on about 14,500ha of prime Burren habitat. It has cemented strong partnerships between farmers and management agencies, helped to create a very positive attitude towards conservation among farmers, and has generated a far greater appreciation of the role of farmers by the wider community. Through this work, Burren Life has made a very meaningful and lasting contribution to the future of Ireland's most extraordinary landscape, the Burren.



## Burren Life is funded by



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