

REP Workshop 23/24 April 2009

Welcome by Pat Boaden, Chairman Ulster Wildlife Trust

On behalf of the Ulster Wildlife Trust, The National Trust and the Rural European Platform, I welcome you all to this workshop. A special welcome to all our visitors from beyond Northern Ireland – I believe we have representatives from at least 7 European countries here.

At the start I especially wish to thank Hilary Kirkpatrick of the Ulster Wildlife Trust (UWT) and Diane Ruddock and David Hawthorn of the National Trust for their role in organising this workshop. I think the workshop is very timely, for the reasons which have been outlined in the documentation and the increasing disconnection between the urban general public and Europe's natural and cultural rural heritage.

In Northern Ireland we have particular concerns about agricultural policy for many reasons but I will simply state that the farming community here manages about 80% of our land area and that 70% of this (that is about 56% of our land) is officially classified as of Less Favoured Area status. This LFA land includes, for example, considerable areas of upland heather moorland which is a listed European priority habitat for conservation. Of course, when reviewing the value of agricultural land to the community we must consider not only food production, but also its value for other aspects such as water regulation and flood control and its landscape and recreation value in addition to its importance for wildlife.

In Northern Ireland currently we are worried about the possible effects of undergrazing linked to profitability problems with sheep and cattle. The report of the Northern Ireland Red Meat Task Force in 2007 concluded that current hill-sheep and suckler-origin beef farming is not economically viable.

The grazing issue reminds me that the Ulster Wildlife Trust has had a lead role in relation to GAPNI, the Grazing Animals Project Northern Ireland, which started in 2006. Management of about 45 prime conservation sites in Northern Ireland (totalling some 5,200 ha) includes conservation grazing. Eight of these are UWT managed sites and include for example a site noted for the orchid *Spiranthes romanzoffiana* and the Slievenacloy site you will be visiting tomorrow.

The Ulster Wildlife Trust is currently celebrating its 30th anniversary. At present we have just over 7,000 members and manage 22 nature reserves. Our vision is for an environment rich in wildlife, valued by all. Our 37 staff and numerous volunteers work hard towards this, not only through nature reserve management but through education and advocacy. This is of course not only directed at the general public but also at our local, regional and national government. In the latter case this is in conjunction with another 46 trusts under the umbrella of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts and we also realize the importance of debate and engagement at the European level. The Ulster Wildlife Trust are conscious that much of what is

currently of value in the countryside is due to past stewardship by the farming community but we are anxious that such stewardship is enabled to continue into the future so that our wildlife heritage both thrives and improves.

24/04/09

PJSB