

Publish the Final Report on the NPWS now, Minister Noonan

By Tony Lowes

The NPWS handles the State's nature conservation functions. As well as managing the national parks, the activities of the NPWS include the designation and protection of Natural Heritage Areas, Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas.

A 2019 report to the EU written by the informed scientific division of the NPWS stated that "85 per cent of habitats are in unfavourable (i.e. inadequate or bad) status, with 46 per cent of habitats demonstrating ongoing declining trends".

Recognising this, the Dáil declared a biodiversity emergency that same year. Green Party leader Eamon Ryan fulminated that the climate and biodiversity emergency meant "absolutely nothing unless there is action to back it up". Well there is no action. Ryan went on: "That means the Government having to do things they don't want to do". Well in government the Greens won't push their agenda when it hurts or annoys.

In an article last year in *Village* I posited that the NPWS need the following: more money, deference to EU habitats laws, more emphasis on science not local politics and more power to experts not bureaucrats.

Perhaps recognising these and other deficiencies a strategic review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) by Professor Jane Stout and Micheál Ó Cinnéide had been commissioned in 2021 by Green Heritage Minister Malcolm Noonan, Last June, the authors submitted their "Final report on the Key Recommendations and Findings" to the Minister. It was expected, from the Terms of Reference, that it would be published shortly afterwards.

The June report remains unpublished but details have leaked into the public domain. It appears to be an admirably frank and forensic analysis of the NPWS. The authors find the organisation is not fit for purpose, and "cannot meet current obligations, let alone plan for and respond to future challenges and legislation".

The title page calls it 'Review of the NPWS 2021:

An extraordinary chance to change our conservation culture is being blown by a weak minister, intimidated by a cabal of senior civil servants and National Parks and Wildlife Service careerists who don't want a critical report published

Final Report on the Key Findings and recommendations, June 2021'. But according to a spokeswoman for Malcolm Noonan, it is in fact not so much "final" as a 'draft review'. She said "Mr Noonan will not be commenting as a final version is as of yet unpublished". Clearly there is a battle over the final version with some people close to Noonan keen to adulterate the substance of the review.

The Minister was more polished, explaining in a written parliamentary response to a question on 21 January this year that there were in fact three phases to the Review process. The first phase of extensive research, consultation and orientation "feeds into the remaining phases as the rest of the Review process continues apace".

Veteran restoration ecologist Paddy Woodworth pointed out in the *Irish Times* on 15 February that it went through a laborious process within the NPWS. Now, "It would hardly be acceptable for an independent report to be rewritten by those it's reporting on".

We are now in the second phase. The 'reflect phase'. That is the Minister is in the 'reflect phase'. Though – keep up - we the public don't actually get to reflect before it's all over – when we move onto the final phase – the 'Renew Phase'.

"None of the component parts of the Review process will be disaggregated or published separately ahead of a Government decision on the


'Strategic Action Plan for the NPWS' which is the planned outcome of the Review process", he replied to a written Parliamentary question on 21 January 2022.

This technique of making a final report part of an ongoing multi-part bigger report, to avoid release, has been resolutely struck down by the EU Commissioner for Environmental Information.

Unfortunately for the Minister, he forgot what he had said in his written reply. Pádraic Fogarty author of 'Whittled Away' wrote on 4 February that he had been "assured by the Minister that the review of the NPWS and an action plan to implement its recommendations would be published next week or the week after".

The 'NPWS Review', was leaked to anonymous but well-informed campaigning website - irishriverproject.com. It was even more devastating than anyone imagined. Tim O'Brien of the *Irish Times* synthesised its findings: "not fit for the task, according to a Government-commissioned report". What was needed was "a fundamental overhaul of structures and governance" (the NPWS doesn't even have a single boss), "a clear strategic plan and leadership to implement it, better internal and external communications, and re-energised teams".

Otherwise the NPWS "cannot meet current obligations, let alone plan for and respond to future challenges and legislation, including the Climate Action Bill and EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2030".

Paddy Woodworth summed it up: "It is vital that the review, and associated materials, are published now so that the public can judge for themselves whether this 'action plan' really follows through from the incisive proposals put forward in the Final Report on the key findings and recommendations". 



Grasp the nettle, Malcolm



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