

# 'Dogs in the street' have known about lake pollution 'for years'

## EPA ISSUES REPORT INTO OUR LADY'S ISLAND LAKE

By LORNA SIGGINS and SIMON BOURKE

THE "dogs in the street" have known for years that Our Lady's Island Lake is one of "the most polluted water bodies in Ireland" according to local naturalist Jim Hurley. Responding to a study commissioned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which found that the lake has become so polluted it will take "millions of euro" to reverse it, Mr Hurley said anyone with intimate knowledge of the area is aware of how "dire" the situation is there.

"A front page report in *The Wexford People* dated 24 June 1983 described the lake as being 'almost a cess pool'. So, the new report confirms what we have known for years," he said. "The lack of action to restore biodiversity at Our Lady's Island Lake is in stark contrast to the firm commitment made in the Programme for Government to make the case

at EU level to secure the retention of the nitrates derogation."

Councillor Ger Carthy, a native of Our Lady's Island, described the situation at the lake as "catastrophic, but nothing new".

"It looks like the department (of the environment) may have been sitting on its hands, and now it faces substantial fines from Europe," he said. "But I would encourage it to invest in the amelioration works required to bring the lake back into line with the habitats directive. The lake is considered a priority under the EU Habitats Directive; I wouldn't like to see a place that wasn't a priority if that's how it treats priority cases."

"The new minister for the environment, the Office of Public Works (OPW), the EPA, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) need to come together and discuss how best we're going to progress this now. As someone who has lived there for over 40 years I can see how the reeds are growing at a massive rate and a big issue is the lack of ditches in the fields to soak all this excess water."

Botanist Dr Cillian Roden, one of the authors of the study, said the eutrophication — which occurs when water becomes over-rich in plant nutrient — is so bad that the lagoon would appear as "glowing blue/green" from space.

"We feel like undertakers to

Ireland's natural heritage as we keep writing these obituaries," Dr Roden said.

Nutrient levels would have to reduce by over 85 per cent to return Lady's Island Lake to its state in the 1980s, said fellow author Dr Brendan O'Connor, of Aquafact Consultancy.

Lady's Island Lake is a saline lagoon and pilgrimage site in Co Wexford and extends over 300 hectares. Named Chuaín na mBan, or "meadow of the women", in Irish, it is believed it was inhabited by female druids in pre-Christian times.

It was founded as a pilgrimage site in the sixth century by St Abbán and was the location of a massacre by Cromwellian forces in 1649. The annual August 15 pilgrimage dates back to 1897.

The lagoon is now so polluted it stands to lose many "specialised species" along with feeding grounds for migratory birds, the study says. The cause of eutrophication is severe damage by nutrient over-enrichment, mainly from agriculture. This has resulted in harmful algal blooms and fish kills and so little oxygen that few species can survive.

Aquafact Consultancy was commissioned to carry out the study as part of the Coastal Lagoons: Ecology and Restoration research programme.

The results show a "five- to sevenfold reduction in nitrogen

and phosphorus inputs to Lady's Island Lake will be necessary to return the lagoon to its previous condition". The authors warned that "no improvement... will be possible without a large reduction in nutrient run-off from land".

They suggested some amelioration may be possible by protecting the lake shoreline with tree planting, the use of artificial wetlands and the removal of nutrient-rich sediments, but warned that a full restoration could cost "millions of euro".

Mr Hurley welcomed the work of those behind the report and said what was required now was the "political will" to bring the lake back to its former state.

"The report is very welcome and very valuable to have in that it has its origins in robust research conducted by leading experts in their fields," he said. "It establishes a strong scientific basis for meaningful action to be taken to haul back from the brink of extinction the unique element of our natural heritage that is Our Lady's Island Lake. In publishing the report, the EPA has done a great service in environmental protection."

"Chapter 5 of the report sets out a number of different actions that could be taken to improve water quality in the lake. What is needed now is the political will and the resources to make these suggested actions a reality."

(Source: *Wexford People*, issue dated 22 January 2025, page 20)