

Multi-agency response sought for 'ecological disaster' in Lady's Island

THE COASTAL LAGOON HAS BECOME SO POLLUTED THAT IT WILL TAKE 'MILLIONS' TO REVERSE DAMAGE

BY PÁDRAIG BYRNE

FOR generations of locals and visitors, Lady's Island Lake on Wexford's picturesque south coast has been a haven for peace and tranquillity. Whether it be devout Catholics attending the annual pilgrimage or backpackers and kite-surfers enjoying the unique setting of the lagoon, it's a place that has been enjoyed by visitors since 600AD.

That could all be under threat, amid what's being branded an "ecological disaster" that is unfolding in the peaceful waters of the lake.

No ordinary lake, Lady's Island Lake is in fact a coastal lagoon with some very unusual features. Technically speaking a back-barrier seepage lagoon, it was formed over 4,500 years ago and is one of only two of its kind in Ireland.

The lake has no natural outlet, but is separated from the sea at the southern end by a sand and gravel bar, around 200m wide, which must be cut mechanically each Spring for drainage in what's known locally as "the cutting of the lake" - a process dating back to the 17th century.

It is also home to a unique ecosystem and is described as one of the most important ornithological sites in Ireland hosting increasingly rare birds like terns, tufted ducks, wigeon, teal and pochard.

However, the numbers of these birds finding their way to Lady's Island is plummeting. Experts believe this is down to the loss of their main food source - aquatic widgeon grass - which has been destroyed by algal growth and associated deoxygenation of the lake bed

sediments as well as pollution.

These experts have stated that the lagoon has become so polluted that it would take "millions of euro" to reverse it. Indeed, botanist Dr Cillian Roden said that 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 85pc to return Lady's Island Lake to its state in the 1980s, said fellow author Dr Brendan O'Connor, of Aquafact Consultancy.

With the future of one of Ireland's most unique ecological settings hanging in the balance, Social Democrats biodiversity spokesperson, and Wexford native, Jennifer Whitmore is calling for a "multi-agency" approach to save the lake before it's too late.

"It is heart-breaking to witness the critical state of Our Lady's Island Lake, a historically and ecologically significant area which is facing severe degradation due to pollution," she said.

"The lake's ecosystem is collapsing due to nutrient over-enrichment from agricultural runoff, leading to harmful algal blooms and fish kills."

Quoting the EPA report, Deputy Whitmore stated that 60 tonnes of nitrogen enters the lagoon annually, and 1,500 tonnes have accumulated in the lake bottom sediment.

"Sadly, this is not the only lagoon in Ireland in ecological decline, with other sensitive sites in agricultural areas facing similar threats," she continued.

"But inexplicably, even in the face of widescale ecological damage, the government continues to push for the continuation of Ireland's nitrates derogation - with a sixth extension expected to get the green light from the European Commission later this year.

"This lake's decline not only threatens its ecological integrity but also poses a risk to local agriculture and tourism. The EPA's report should have served as a wake-up call for the government and the local authority, but it has seemingly fallen on deaf ears."

With responsibility falling within the brief of a Wexford man, Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Whitmore is calling for him to take urgent action and save a beloved historical and ecological site in his own constituency.



The lagoon at Lady's Island Lake in Wexford.



Wicklow Social Democrats TD Jennifer Whitmore.



Cllr Ger Carthy, pictured in his home parish of Our Lady's Island.

"I am urging the government to oversee a coordinated approach by all the relevant stakeholders, involving the creation of a remediation plan between Wexford County Council, local farmers, the Department of Agriculture, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the EPA, and all other State agencies that should be working together on this urgent issue," she said.

"I have also called on Minister James Browne to start work on a remedial plan to halt the further destruction of the lake."

A native of Lady's Island and the Chairman of the Lake Drainage Committee, Cllr Ger Carthy is all too familiar with the issues involved.

"This is not something that's just come about now," he said. "We're talking 20 years of inaction from the relevant departments and stakeholders here, dating back to when the last report was done."

"I can confirm that the wheels are in motion and that the National Parks and Wildlife

Service (NPWS) were in Lady's Island in the past couple of weeks and have been instructed to report directly to the Minister (Browne) on it. The current status is that it's under the jurisdiction of the NPWS with support from Wexford County Council and other agencies."

Cllr Carthy also confirmed that a new drainage system for the lake was at design stage, but would require €2.5 million in funding.

"What we've had for years is scientists tripping over one another," he says. "What we need now is everyone to come together and come up with a workable solution. I would include Uisce Éireann in that, who have been discharging into the lake for years."

"What we have here is the Rolls Royce of special areas of conservation. It needs the appropriate investment to properly reflect that European status."

Inaction being a common theme in Cllr Carthy's observations, he also stated that Wex-

ford County Council's hands were not clean in terms of the current status of the lake either.

"There were millions of euro made available from the EU for this type of thing years ago," he says. "Wexford County Council dragged its heels in terms of accessing that funding and now things have gotten worse. I met with the County Manager at the time and senior scientists with the council down here, and we're still waiting on any funding to materialise."

With farming playing a big part in the issues at Lady's Island lake, Cllr Carthy said that the IFA needed to be involved. The most recent report suggested that the situation may be somewhat improved by protecting the lake shoreline with tree planting and the creation of artificial wetlands, but this is a process that could cost millions of euro.

"It's a difficult situation," Cllr Carthy said. "Years ago, the government of the day was giving grants for pulling up

ditches and trees and making fields bigger. Now they're saying that there's no longer adequate soakage."

"The IFA definitely has a role in what happens here, but the farmers will need to be recompensed for any adverse impact on their operations. It's as simple as that."

While happy that conversations are taking place in relation to the lake, the Independent councillor is not overly optimistic.

"Look, it's like the Grand Old Duke of York," he said. "We've been marched up to the top of the hill on this on several occasions in the past, and we've been marched right down again."

"I don't want to hear about money. Money is secondary. We need to do what needs to be done here. As the local councillor for the area and Chair of the Lake Drainage Committee I look forward to sitting down with all the relevant stakeholders and coming up with a workable solution, once and for all."

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