

# 'A total failure of leadership' has resulted in 'ecological disaster'

## OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE HEARS HOW THE DAMAGE AT LADY'S ISLAND LAKE HAS REACHED CRISIS POINT

By PÁDRAIG BYRNE

JUST how do you turn the tide on an "ecological disaster" that's been unfolding over four decades? That was the question posed to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy as they gathered to discuss the significant decline of one of Ireland's most unique habitats at Lady's Island Lake on the Wexford coast.

The largest lagoon of its type in Ireland, it is home to a unique ecosystem and is described as one of the most important ornithological sites in the country hosting increasingly rare birds like terns, tufted ducks, wigeon, teal and pochard.

But all of this is under massive threat. An increase in nitrogen and phosphorus levels in the lake means that the unique ecosystem there has gone from "near pristine" conditions in the 1970s, to the verge of complete collapse.

Agricultural practices in the area are the primary concern, however, representatives from Wexford County Council were keen to stress that the 56 farmers draining to the lake were engaging with them and were largely compliant with the current regulations set out by the Department of Agriculture.

"This is probably not the fault of the farmers involved," Deputy Chief Executive of Wexford County Council Eamonn Hore stressed. "They are all performing within regulations."

This point was laboured

by Senior Executive Scientist at Wexford County Council Brendan Cooney.

"This will take time," he said. "The farmers have been doing exactly what's been asked of them for decades, and that's looking at production. Farmers are engaging with us and we have some evidence that the work we're doing now is having an impact insofar as things are not getting worse."

"We need to let things settle for a while. We could go looking for more stringent conditions, but they may not be needed yet. We're looking for farmers to work with us and, so far, engagement has been very good."

"The farmers are substantially compliant with the regulations that are there. So what the situation requires is either a big change to the rules, or to help farmers to farm in a different way."

"We can only enforce what's enforceable," Mr Hore added.

However, Social Democrats TD for Wicklow and Wexford native Jennifer Whitmore was not entirely convinced.

"This problem didn't spring up overnight," she said. "We've been talking about these problems for 40 years. We've a huge amount of data and surveys that have been carried out. We know what the problems are. We need to identify solutions and establish what are the next steps."

"Lady's Island doesn't have long. I don't even know if it's recoverable at this point, which is a real shame. It's dying right before our eyes."

Deputy Whitmore also raised concerns that on her own recent visit, she saw "a five foot pile of manure draining directly into the lake".

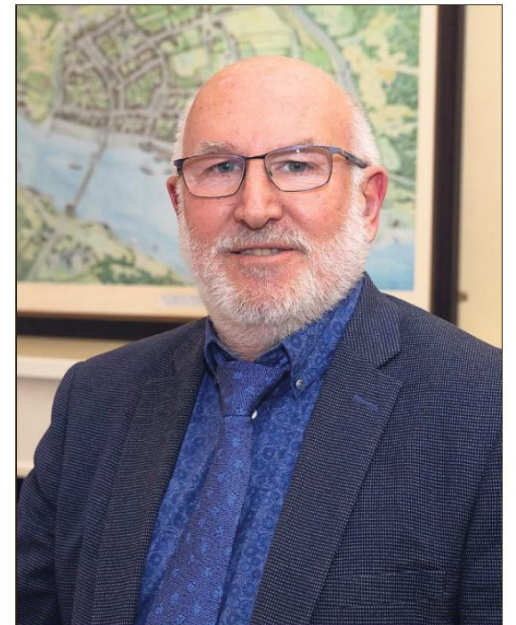
Mr Hore assured here that Wexford County Council had carried out over 30 farm inspections in the area since 2018 and stated that he was reluctant to place the blame on farmers for the situation, as they were acting within the regulations.

The genuine appetite that exists locally for solving the issue was also stressed to the committee. Indeed, Ciara O'Mahony of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) stated: "I have never come across a community more motivated by the natural heritage of their area."

Unfortunately for Lady's Island, it seems to be a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth, going back decades with several stakeholders like Wexford County Council, NPWS, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Uisce Éireann and others playing a role, but not taking full responsibility for



ABOVE: The lagoon at Lady's Island Lake in Wexford; LEFT: Social Democrats TD Jennifer Whitmore; BELOW: Wexford County Council director of services Eamonn Hore.



**LADY'S ISLAND DOESN'T HAVE LONG. I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF IT'S RECOVERABLE AT THIS POINT, WHICH IS A REAL SHAME. IT'S DYING RIGHT BEFORE OUR EYES**

the situation at the lake.

"When everyone is responsible, nobody is responsible," Deputy Whitmore blasted. "Someone needs to put up their hand and take ultimate responsibility for this or it will never be solved."

It was a point echoed by the committee chair, Dublin TD Naoise Ó Muirí.

"What we have here is a total failure of leadership from a state agency point of view," he said. "Nobody has taken real ownership of this issue for 40 years."

Pointing to Wexford County Council's success in rolling out the Duncannon European Innovation Partnership (EIP) project to improve water quality at Duncannon Beach, Deputy Chief Eamonn Hore was adamant that the local authority is best positioned to lead the charge in repairing decades of damage and restoring Lady's Island Lake before it's too late.

"Somebody has to take con-

trol and we're happy to do it. I'd be annoyed if anyone else took the lead," he told the committee. "We know more than anyone about it. We have the likes of the Lady's Island Lake Drainage committee and the oracle of that area Jim Hurley."

However, Mr Hore says that the local authority's leadership of the project is dependent on one vital issue.

"To quote a famous film, 'show me the money!'," he said. "The cost of doing the work required for this would be around €2.25 million. Then in terms of addressing the level controls and lake-cutting issue, you're talking about another €3.6 million."

"We also have to pay farmers to take good land out of production. They have to be compensated for that."

"There are seven sources of funding mentioned in the report, how are we supposed to bring all those together?" he asked. "What we need is

one source of funding, possibly through the Department of Food, Agriculture and the Marine. I understand it's a significant amount of money, but we either put a value on the lake and what's there, or we don't."

"We could have this started in six months if the funding was there."

Other stakeholders in the room such as NPWS seemed to feel that funding wasn't the primary issue, it was developing co-operation between all agencies and establishing a mandate to meet the problem at Lady's Island head on.

However, through the engagement, everyone seemed a little more optimistic that something could be achieved and they may just be able to prevent a unique habitat from slipping into oblivion.

It was stressed, however, that this won't happen overnight.

"We won't see results in six months to a year," Wexford County Council scientist Mr

Cooney stressed. "Even if we shut down all of the farms in the area, it would take time. What's already in place is already having an impact though."

Dr Brendan O'Connor of Aquafact, who compiled the most recent damning report on the state of play at Lady's Island Lake, conceded this was the case and that even if all agricultural practice of using nitrates was stopped tomorrow, it would still take some 20 years for the lake to be restored to its former glory of the 1970s.

With time being of the essence, the groups left Leinster House with a greater sense of purpose. While stakeholders like the EPA weren't present on the day, the NPWS, Wexford County Council and Aquafact were committed to working with all relevant bodies to try and find a workable solution as expediently as possible and they will return before the Oireachtas committee in nine months to present their progress.