

‘Save Lady’s Island Lake’ campaign

Public meeting: Thursday 24 July 2025, Our Lady’s Island Community Centre

Summary of points made by Jim Hurley during his talk at the meeting.

First significant publicity: The front page of *The People* (Wexford), issue dated 24 June 1983, reported that the lake was “almost a cess pool” and that the amenity was “being shamelessly destroyed by pollution”.

My involvement with Lady’s Island Lake:-

1. **SWC Promotions.** I’m a long-time, personal promoter and campaigner advocating for better nature conservation measures to protect the many natural heritage resource values of the South Wexford Coast, that is, the coastal zone from Hook Head to Carnsore Point that includes Lady’s Island Lake (see <https://www.southwexfordcoast.com/>).
2. **Water level data.** Concerned about both the impact on feeding for wild birds of the aforementioned 1983 pollution report, and the collapse of the internationally-important tern colony on islands in the lake due to eggs, chicks, and birds being eaten by rats, the CEO of BirdWatch Ireland asked for a meeting with senior officials of Wexford County Council regarding Lady’s Island Lake. That meeting was held in County Hall on 7 March 1984. As Chair of the Wexford Branch of BirdWatch Ireland at the time, I was invited to attend the meeting and did so. At that meeting the need for water level data was raised as an urgent issue. I volunteered to look after that issue. My offer was accepted, and I have been involved in matters to do with water levels in the lake for over 40 years.
3. **Advocacy.** In 1984 the late Gerry Forde Senior, County Engineer, invited me to accompany him to address a public meeting of farmers in Lady’s Island. At that meeting I outlined the importance of the lake for biodiversity while he focused on speaking about the need to control pollution inputs.
4. **Drainage Committee.** I have been a member of the Lady’s Island Lake Drainage Committee since its inception on 24 July 1990. The Lake Drainage Committee was established as a sub-committee of the Wexford District Committee of Wexford County Council.
5. **I-WeBS.** In 2004, I volunteered to be core counter for the lake for the Irish Wetland Bird Survey (I-WeBS), a national monitoring programme that tracks wintering waterbird populations (<https://birdwatchireland.ie/our-work/surveys-research/research-surveys/irish-wetland-bird-survey/>). I have fulfilled that role for the past 21 years.
6. **Steering group.** From its inception in 2016, I was a member of the steering group tasked with informing the design team of a long-term engineering solution to cutting the lake.

Twelve pollution reports: Following the publication of the news item in the press in 1983, Wexford County Council commissioned a report regarding pollution in the lake and its feeder streams. That report was published in 1984. The report found that the lake was polluted and that several of the twelve feeder streams were polluted, two of them badly. Further monitoring was conducted, and further reports were published in 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004 (two reports: EPA and ASU), and 2006. Several of these reports contained recommendations of the specific actions required to improve water quality in the lake and its feeder streams. Wexford County Council ceased commissioning reports in 2006. In 2019, the EPA commissioned the most recent report, the CLEAR (**C**oastal **L**agoons: **E**cology **A**nd **R**estoration) report, the twelfth in the series of reports detailing the level of pollution in the lake. The online version of the CLEAR report was published on 9 January 2025 and is available at <https://www.epa.ie/publications/research/water/research-473-coastal-lagoons-ecology-and-restoration-clear.php>.

Agriculture: The pollution reports clearly identified that agriculture is the dominant pressure responsible for the decline in water quality in the lake and its feeder streams.

The problem: Too much nitrate getting into the lake. Nitrates are salts containing the ion NO₃⁻ and are commonly found in fertilisers, animal manures, and human sewage.

The farmers' position: In a presentation to the Oireachtas Joint Committee meeting held on 11 June 2025, the three-person deputation from Wexford County Council stated that the Council conducted 30 farm inspections in the area to monitor compliance with relevant legislation, and that most of “*the approximately 56 farmers*” in the Lady’s Island Lake catchment are “*substantially in compliance with the legislation*”. The Council representatives felt that farmers are not the problem; they felt that the problem is that a site-specific plan for the catchment is needed. They advised that the Council would be happy to drive such a plan forward subject to appropriate funding being sourced, and the support of all relevant stakeholders being forthcoming (a video of the Oireachtas Joint Committee meeting can be viewed or downloaded at <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/oireachtas-tv/video-archive/committees/10290>).

The quest for solutions: In my view four key issues need to be addressed:-

Issue	Suggested solution
1. Too much nitrate in the lake water.	Cut the lake to flush it out.
2. Too much nitrate entering the lake.	Devise an action plan to support farmers throughout the catchment to farm in a more environmentally-friendly way.
3. Too much nitrate in the lake bed.	Desludge the lake bed by dredging it rotationally to remove more than 40 years of accumulated pollutants.
4. The Uisce Éireann WWTP	Relocate the WWTP to a less sensitive location.

The present position:- On 18 June 2025, during a debate in Dáil Éireann, Green Pary TD Roderic O’Gorman asked the Taoiseach if he agreed “*that it must be a priority to reverse the pollution of the lake? In light of the absence of sufficient action for more than four decades, a solution needs force and political clout ... to stop an ecological disaster that is unfolding in real time and in full view of us all?*” Taoiseach Micheál Martin replied “*I agree with the Deputy this must be a priority to reverse the pollution of Lady’s Island Lake. A specific action plan should be developed for the lake ...*”

On 3 July 2025, Deputy O’Gorman asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine what steps his Department is taking to deal with pollution in the lake. The Minister replied: “*An action plan to address the challenges Lady’s Island Lake is facing is being developed by Wexford County Council. My officials are contributing to that, and my Department is committed to fully engaging with the local authority, all state agencies and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage as we seek to address the challenges facing Lady’s Island Lake.*”

Conclusion: The *Wexford Environmental Network* theme of this public meeting and open forum is “*Perils and Prospects for Lady’s Island Lake*”. In my view, the worst potential **PERIL** is that there would be no meaningful outcome of the present surge of public concern and that interest would fizzle out. On the other hand, the best potential **PROSPECT** is that meaningful actions will be taken on this occasion to copper fasten the safeguarding for the common good of the wonderful amenity that is Lady’s Island Lake and that the project becomes a national exemplar.



Further information: Media coverage, background information, reports, leaflets, sources, and more are available at <https://www.southwexfordcoast.com/ladys-island-lake/>.

