



Can the 'Critically Endangered' native Cottonweed be brought back from the brink of extinction?

Cottonweed, a native plant, is one of the rarest wild flowers found growing in Ireland. It used to grow at five sites nationwide but is now confined to a single site on the south Wexford coast.

The 'cotton' part of the plant's name refers to the fact that the plant's leaves are covered with a dense growth of downy, woolly, cotton-like, off-white hairs. It is a member of the large Aster or Daisy family and bears small, golden-yellow flowers in late summer.

In his survey of the Cottonweed population in 1901, Cecil Hurst recorded that the Wexford stand extended along a stretch of "about three and a half miles of sandy coast". However, since then, the population went into a freefall decline and is now reduced to just eight remaining plants. The species is rated 'Critically Endangered' and is afforded legal protection.

Why the Cottonweed is in decline is not fully understood. The immediate threat to its survival is invasion of its habitat by Marram grass, another native seaside species.

Cottonweed is divided into two sub-species: an Atlantic one and a Mediterranean one. In its heyday the range of the Atlantic sub-species extended north from the Gironde on the west coast of France to the Channel Islands, the south of England, Wales, and the south of Ireland. The species became extinct throughout Britain; the last recorded plants were seen there in 1936 in the Isles of Scilly off Cornwall. The French coast still supports a handful of sites.

In an attempt to save the species from extinction, our National Parks and Wildlife Service, in association with the National Botanic Gardens, harvested seed and took cuttings from the remaining Wexford natives and propagated a large number of healthy plants with a view to reintroducing them back to the wild.



Some of the last remaining eight native Cottonweed plants in flower in Ireland.

English Nature, the British government agency that champions nature conservation in England, was thinking along the same lines. They acquired some of the Wexford plants, grew hundreds of offspring, and, with the support of Havant Borough Council, introduced them to a beachfront on Sinah Common on Hayling Island, Hampshire, as the species was recorded growing there in 1621 by the botanist John Goodyer.

It remains to be seen if the plants can reestablish on Sinah Common after an absence of over 400 years and if similar reintroduction experiments in Ireland meet with success. Success may depend on understanding why the species went into freefall decline in the first place.