



WILD ATLANTIC  
NATURE LIFE



NPWS

An tSeirbhís Páircanna  
Náisiúnta agus Fiadhúlra  
National Parks and Wildlife Service

*Welcome message*



Dear readers,  
Welcome to  
issue four of  
our project  
newsletter!

We are now approaching the half-way point in LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature. Since our commencement in 2021 we have worked with hundreds of farmers, advisors, policy-makers, businesses, academics and community groups to improve our blanket bog habitats. We continue to strive to deliver better environmental condition in ways that also bring benefits for landowners and local communities. More than 40 local jobs have been created through our Natura Communities initiative and we expect this to expand in the coming years thanks to the support of National Parks and Wildlife Service. We are also developing a retrofitting-restoration pilot to help address turf-cutting in Special Areas of Conservation by providing homeowners with alternative energy sources. You can read more about these projects, along with lots of additional news and features, inside. You can follow our work on our website and social media accounts.

Regards, Gary Goggins



About LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is an innovative and ambitious project aimed at conservation and management of Ireland’s Natura 2000 network of blanket bog habitats. Funded under the EU LIFE programme for nine years (2021-2029), LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature works with farmers, landowners, local communities, state agencies and others across a broad range of actions spanning sectors including farming, forestry, tourism, community development, education and research. You can find out more about LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature by visiting our website at [www.wildatlanticnature.ie](http://www.wildatlanticnature.ie)



Who we are

Coordinated by National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), the project involves nine associated partners including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), RTÉ, Coillte, Fáilte Ireland, The Heritage Council, Bord na Móna, Teagasc, Northern & Western Regional Assembly, and Universidade de Santiago de Compostela.



An Roinn Tithíochta,  
Rialtas Aidiúil agus Ombudsána  
Department of Housing,  
Local Government and Heritage



COILLTE  
LIFE IP WILDLIFE NATURE

BORD na MÓNA

Fáilte Ireland  
National Tourism  
Development  
Authority

USC IBADER  
Escuela de Biodiversidade  
Agencia de Desenvolvimento Rural

An Chomhairle Cúlchrua  
The Heritage Council

RTÉ

An Roinn Talmhaíochta,  
Bia agus Mara  
Department of Agriculture,  
Food and the Marine

Northern & Western  
Regional Assembly

## Project news

### Wild Atlantic Nature wins major European award for work with farmers



Wild Atlantic Nature has won the 2024 *Natura 2000 Award* in the category ‘Working together for nature’. The [Natura 2000 Award](#) highlights projects that demonstrate excellence in nature conservation and sustainable land use. Wild Atlantic Nature is the first Irish project to win such an award.

Minister Darragh O’Brien congratulated LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature and said “this is an incredible achievement and speaks volumes to the huge progress being made in our engagement with nature in Ireland. My congratulations to the NPWS, Derek McLoughlin and his team and to all the farmers and landowners

involved in a win that is truly a great reflection on partnership in nature.” Minister Malcolm Noonan also offered his congratulations, adding “this award not only recognises the team’s hard work and dedication, but also celebrates the role of farmers in tirelessly managing and protecting Ireland’s Natura 2000 network.” Niall Ó Donnchú, director General of NPWS also recognised the primary role of landowners and their interactions with the project.

### Natura Communities *by Margaret Flaberty*

Natura Communities, an initiative from Wild Atlantic Nature and supported by NPWS, builds capacity in local areas for the delivery of nature conservation and restoration works. Currently, there are more than 40 local people employed under the initiative across three broad geographical areas in Donegal, Mayo and Galway, and more than €3m has been invested by NPWS to-date. You can read updates from one of these groups - Dúlra - on p9.



Further support for local communities is provided by the Natura Communities Seed Fund, which we launched at the end of 2023. Its aim is to assist communities with

mobilising complementary funding for projects related to blanket bog SACs and their associated habitats. The €100,000 fund was open to organisations within the Wild Atlantic Nature project target area, with the aim of helping towards preparation of funding proposals and/or as a contribution towards co-funding for grant applications for peatland related conservation and restoration projects.

In 2024, we awarded a number of grants to community organisations covering a range of topics including peatland restoration plans, research on farm by-products, study visits and feasibility studies. There was a good geographic spread of projects with initiatives from Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Mayo and Galway supported. We look forward to seeing how projects evolve and in continuing engagement with the groups involved, in particular exploring how the results of their work can help leverage further funding. Finance for the seed fund has been generously provided by Lifes2Good Foundation.

**Natura Communities Seed Fund**

- Restoration Action Plans**
  - Inishowen, Co. Donegal
  - Malinbeg Mountains, Co. Donegal
  - O'Connell Mountains, Co. Sligo
- Study Visits**
  - Inishowen, Co. Donegal
- Feasibility Studies**
  - Achill, Co. Mayo
  - Co. Leitrim
- BIP Application**
  - Malinbeg Mountains, Co. Donegal
- Research**
  - Binn Breagh, Donegal
  - Wool as material for peatland restoration (in situ and plastic film alternative)

These projects were funded by LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature of the National Parks and Wildlife Service under the Natura Communities Seed Fund, with generous support from Lifes2Good Foundation.

**Shared Island initiative update** *by Derek McLoughlin*

LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature coordinates a €15m Shared Island Initiative project aimed at developing capacity and expertise, sharing knowledge and delivering peatland restoration in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. This is a collaboration of National Parks and Wildlife Service, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and NatureScot.

The project uses lighthouse demonstration sites to deliver practical peatland restoration, build capacity for long-term peatland management, undertake research and monitoring, exchange knowledge, and address socio-cultural issues across a range of restoration scenarios. In Ireland, we are currently delivering peatland restoration training to a wide range of peatland stakeholders. In addition, we are demonstrating restoration of erosion impacts and drained peatlands in Co. Leitrim and demonstrating forest to bog restoration on private lands in Co. Mayo and within Wild Nephin National Park.



In October 2024, the first in-person gathering the took place in Stirling, hosted by NatureScot Peatland ACTION. Delegates from organisations working on peatland restoration in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Ireland joined the event to build expertise, exchange knowledge and create new opportunities to collaborate and share best practices across the partnership. The event had a strong focus on understanding connections between peatland projects across the three countries. Bringing this first event to Scotland allowed delegates to learn from the experience of Scottish colleagues, and in particular Peatland

ACTION – Scotland’s national programme to restore peatlands, and the work which has taken place to build the peatland restoration sector over the programme’s 10-year span. Through presentations and discussions participants worked to identify topics where partner organisations could learn from each other or build on existing approaches in the peatland restoration sector.

**Peatlands Survey 2024 Update** *by John Derwin*

It has been a busy year on the Wild Atlantic Nature habitat survey. Nine project sites were surveyed in 2024, totalling over 25,400ha, with a further 70,000ha planned over the next two years. In 2024, Woodrow Consultancy and Studio Silva surveyed lands in Owenduff/Nephin Complex SAC and Glenamoy Bog Complex SAC in Co. Mayo and Slieve Tooley SAC in Co. Donegal. They also carried out a partial survey of Cloghernagore Bog and Glenveagh National Park SAC, Co Donegal. In addition, five smaller project sites totalling 5,700ha were surveyed by the Wild Atlantic Nature project ecologist, including Rosroe Bog SAC, Lough Hoe Bog SAC, Lough Nabrickeagh Bog SAC, Meenaguse/ Ardbane Bog SAC and Lough Golagh and Breesy Hill SAC.



The aim of LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature is to protect and restore blanket bogs and associated habitats, such as heaths and fens, with particular regards to priority Annex I Habitat ‘Active Blanket Bog’. By mapping the extent of the habitat, assessing its condition and identifying threats and pressures, the restoration potential for habitats can be determined. Areas of high restoration potential can then be prioritised for restoration actions, in consultation with farmers and other landowners.

Next year habitat surveys will extend into Connemara with Maumturk Mountains SAC and The Twelve Bens SAC scheduled for 2025 and Connemara Bog Complex in 2026. Landowners at these sites will be contacted before any surveys begin, and the project team will be on hand to answer any queries.

## WaterLANDS delivering peatland restoration with stakeholders and wider community

by *Guadumeth Chico*

WaterLANDS is an EU-funded project aiming to restore habitats through the creation of new models that consider finance, governance and local communities. In Ireland, we have an action site, which is coordinated



by LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature, located in Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC. Our work is divided in three main key aspects: Restoration, Training and Monitoring.

In relation to the **restoration programme**, WaterLANDS have started to restore over 500ha of blanket bogs during this restoration season from September 2024 to March 2025. We have already cleared several areas with invasive conifers, implemented measures to control erosion and reduce carbon losses, and reprofiled some turf banks, reducing erosion rates and improving water levels on the bogs.

Our restoration actions are delivered by landowners that have been trained by the team using good practices through our **training programme**. In order to support this training, the team has also published a [Farmer Toolkit](#) to help landowners understand the issues that they have in their farms and how we can address these problems. WaterLANDS has also delivered the first Peatland Restoration Training course in Ireland for peatland practitioners, with an intensive week where all the attenders were able to develop Restoration Action Plans and get on-ground experience about field surveys and restoration actions. We also have visited over 100 students in the area and facilitated excursions to local peatlands aiming to highlight the value of peatlands in the young generations.

Finally, our **monitoring programme** is already providing the first scientific evidence of our peatland restoration work, with the largest research experiment on blanket bogs globally. We are monitoring water levels, soil temperature and soil moisture, water quality and vegetation. We have also installed three meteorological stations that will help us to understand rainfall, temperature and humidity. The data collected will provide evidence of how restoration actions are affecting blanket bogs, with particular interest on eroding blanket bogs and drain management.



### Cowberry in east Mayo by *Eoin McGreal*

Wild Atlantic Nature carries out Peatland Plans in counties Galway and Mayo as part of the [Hare's Corner](#) project, co-ordinated by the Burrenbeo Trust, an initiative to increase biodiversity that is funded by public and private sources. This involves a site visit and a subsequent report, written in consultation with the land-owner or community group, which discusses the details of their peatland and recommendations on ways of improving its ecological condition. One such site visit earlier this year was to a low-lying bog near the Dominican Abbey at Urlaur, where a great surprise was that of a low-growing

ericaceous shrub, Cowberry *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, flowering on the site amongst the heather and sphagnum mosses. This is now quite a rare plant in Ireland, mainly found on high mountainous peaty slopes in the east and north of the country, such as the Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC in County Cavan, where one of our partner projects, WaterLANDS, is involved in peatland restoration. It has only ever been seen on Irish low altitude bogs on a couple of instances in the past and this is the first time it was recorded in east Mayo. It is a northern species and its fruits, known as lingonberries, are an important food source for indigenous peoples in Scandinavia. Perhaps this may also have been the case in ancient Ireland when our heathlands were interspersed with open forests of Scot's Pine and when Cowberry may have been a more characteristic understorey species with a much wider distribution. Such findings illustrate that our peatlands are never uniform but are full of revelations and also provide clues as to our landscapes were composed in the past.

### Restoration Retrofit Pilot Project *by Margaret Flaherty*

Wild Atlantic Nature is conducting a Restoration Retrofit Pilot Project in the Owenduff Nephin Complex SAC. This pilot is looking to demonstrate the deep retrofit of homes as a way of reducing demand for turf, which is an important domestic fuel. Simultaneous to this, participants will agree to restoration of turbary areas in Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and sustainable management of peatland habitats on their farms. This project will align with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland’s (SEAI) National Home Energy Upgrade Scheme managed via One Stop Shop (OSS) service providers.

Whether landowners currently cut or burn turf is not part of the eligibility assessment, however they must own peatland in the SAC. Expressions of interest were invited from previous Wild Atlantic Nature RBPS participants in the target area. All those that expressed an interest and who meet the pilot criteria will be offered a Home Energy Assessment (HEA), which will provide a comprehensive report on the work required to bring homes up to the required level B2 Building Energy Rating (BER). Up to 24 applicants will then be selected for a full home retrofit and peatland restoration package.



### Teagasc Knowledge Exchange groups *by Ivan Kelly*

In recent months, Teagasc, in partnership with Wild Atlantic Nature, has developed innovative pilot projects aimed at enhancing upland farming in Sligo, Donegal, and Galway. These initiatives focus on improving the economic, environmental, and social sustainability of upland farming systems, benefiting farmers, their families, and the broader rural community.

A key development is the establishment of an Upland Farmers Knowledge Exchange Group in Sligo and Donegal, building on a successful pilot in County Mayo initiated in 2022. These groups provide a platform for farmers to share best practices, exchange ideas, and tackle common challenges collaboratively. By fostering a sense of community among upland farmers, the initiative seeks to strengthen local networks and improve overall farm management strategies. Historically, agricultural Knowledge Exchange groups have concentrated on intensive lowland farming, often overlooking upland systems. The goal of these new groups is to create a model that addresses the unique challenges of upland farming while ensuring sustainability for farmers and their communities.



In Connemara, County Galway, two new Pilot Upland Farmers Courses started in November 2024. These courses equip farmers with essential training on upland management. Participants will learn sustainable farming techniques that enhance productivity while protecting the natural landscape. An important objective of these pilot projects is to broaden farmers' understanding of various income streams, including livestock production, diversification, organic farming, and results-based payment schemes. These payment schemes incentivise farmers to improve environmental outcomes, such as biodiversity, water quality, and carbon storage. By integrating sustainable practices, farmers can boost their

income while positively impacting the environment. These pilot projects are a significant step toward creating resilient upland farming systems that support livelihoods and promote the health of rural landscapes, setting a benchmark for sustainable agriculture in Ireland’s uplands.

## Southern European Blanket Bog working group delivering results *by Javier Ferreiro*

Networking activities in Wild Atlantic Nature are achieving important milestones with our knowledge exchange events along with several projects including The Blanket Bog project. A new assessment of the impact of wind farms on blanket bogs was published in *Nature* portfolio journal, [Scientific Reports](#), and currently, we are working closely to assess the erosion rates on these ecosystems to understand the carbon accumulation rates across the Atlantic region.

Almost all networking technical visits on Southern Europe blanket bogs have been completed, including a visit to Azores. Macaronesian blanket bogs are very rare, and different from European continental examples. This has led to IBADER from University of Santiago de Compostela, as associated beneficiary of LIFE Wild Atlantic Nature, together with NPWS as project partner of WaterLANDS, initiating a new publication about a proposal to standardise the classification of blanket bogs in Europe. This new publication will be a massive outcome from the networking actions of the project, increasing knowledge of blanket bogs and a common classification, considering all the characteristics of the Atlantic region.



## Presentations at national and international conferences and local events

Once again, 2024 was another busy year for LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature communication and dissemination activities. The team attended several agricultural shows, fairs and other events including the Clifden Arts Festival, Bangor Sheep Fair and Clonmany Show. Margaret Flaherty gave a presentation at the Changing

Landscapes Conference in Clare, and attended several workshops and other events organized by NPWS, ETB and others. Gary Goggins was invited to give a presentation at a OECD workshop on scaling up biodiversity positive initiatives held in Paris and at a LIFE Platform meeting focusing on Results-Based Payment Schemes, in Leuven. He also travelled to Hillsborough to give a presentation at a peatland symposium hosted by AFB. Julie Reynolds presented at the SERE 2024 conference in Tartu, Estonia. Guaduneth Chico travelled to the UK to present at the IUCN Peatlands Programme Conference

and to Spain to share his experience of GIS with Conference attendees there. LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature were once again at the National Ploughing Championships in the National Parks and Wildlife Service tent, where we met with many farmers involved in our project activities. Another highlight was *Tae in the Bog*, which this year involved music and ecology at Dunlewey in Donegal. Wild Atlantic Nature also hosted a group of academics, policy-makers and practitioners from Estonia, co-organized with the ForEst&Farmland LIFE IP. In addition, more than 30 people participated in accredited Wildfire Training, which was held in Galway and Donegal, and supported by the Shared Island initiative. Meeting farmers continues to be a priority for Wild Atlantic Nature, and our staff attended and spoke at several farmer events right across our project area, and beyond.



## News from partners

### LIFE Insular project continues to achieve important results on Irish fixed sand dunes

by Javier Ferreiro

IBADER-USC, NPWS and Coillte Nature are joining efforts in LIFE INSULAR (LIFE20 NAT/ES/001007), a 5 year transnational project between Ireland and Spain, with a total budget of €5.2m, implementing a transnational strategy for integrated restoration of fixed dunes habitat (2130\*), promoting their favourable conservation status and increasing their resilience as the main measure of adaptation to current global changes.



In this project, four different Irish Natura 2000 sites were selected to develop conservation actions, addressing common conservation threats to increase the area and improve the structure and future prospects of the targeted habitats. These include Donegal Bay (Murvagh) SAC, Sheephaven SAC, Horn Head and Rinclevan SAC, and Raven Nature Reserve SAC.

NPWS and Coillte Nature are progressing at good pace, eliminating old forest plantations and encroached trees on sand dunes, protecting them against anthropogenic pressures, and restoring insular habitats through sowing/planting their characteristic plant species. This will lead to prove that LIFE INSULAR's transnational strategy is a successful way to address current global changes on natural ecosystems.

Website: [www.lifeinsular.eu](http://www.lifeinsular.eu) Twitter: @life\_insular



### LIFE GLOBAL: transnational strategy for restoring Natura 2000 high conservation value areas under a global change perspective

IBADER-USC has started a new LIFE adventure, as coordinator of the LIFE GLOBAL project (LIFE23-NAT-ES-LIFE GLOBAL). It is a 5 year transnational project between Spain and Portugal, with a total budget of €5.2m. The project implements a coherent restoration strategy in 31 Northern Iberian Natura 2000 high conservation value areas through small-scale actions, as a main measure of adaptation to current global changes. The project focuses on 10 priority habitats and three priority species, which are considered representative from Atlantic and Mediterranean regions of high conservation value including coastal zone, continental wetlands and mountain area. The project facilitates learning to be replicated in other European territories where high conservation value areas are isolated in fragmented and vulnerable mosaics. NPWS and LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature have expressed their interest and support to this very interesting project, and look forward to learning from its activities.



## News from related projects

### Lough Carra LIFE by Kieran Flynn



This 5-year project aims to improve the water quality and restore the natural habitats of the Lough Carra SAC and SPA. Following the success of our 2023 Results-Based Agri-environment Scheme, we reopened expressions of interest for 2024, and subsequently developed farm plans with 64 farmers. The farm plans

were developed following the concept of ‘the right action in the right place’, and included fencing, riparian zones, solar pumps for livestock drinking facilities, tree and hedgerow planting, and settlement ponds.

Throughout the year we worked closely with our partners in progressing our Biodiversity Management Plans for forests in the catchment, modified Drain Management Plans for our streams and channels, and year-round controls on invasive species. We advanced our groundwater study of the catchment with dye tracing events and karst feature mapping, and our Monitoring Programme progressed with the ongoing collection of field data. All of this data is helping us to better understand the catchment area and how to target our actions more effectively. In the later part of the year we completed the construction of a demonstration reedbed wetland system to manage the treatment of effluent from septic tanks. This site will act as a fully functioning treatment system and be used for workshops and education purposes.



With the help of our project partner the LCCA, we maintained a significant level of public engagement within the local community. Our spring and autumn schools programme was again a great success with 13 different schools taking part this year, along with a further four third-level institutions. We also released our project promotion film and took part in the Lough Carra podcast series, all of which can be viewed on our social media pages and our website, loughcarralife.ie.

### Corncrake/Traonach LIFE Island networking event by Patrick Fitzmaurice

Corncrake/Traonach LIFE is a 5 year EU funded project aimed at improving the conservation status of one of Ireland's most iconic farmland bird species. As part of its community engagement strategy and in response to the needs identified in its project areas, the project organised and facilitated a visit by Donegal islanders to Inishbofin, Co Galway over two days in September 2024.

The aim of this networking event was to provide the opportunity for Donegal islanders who are participants of the Corncrake/Traonach LIFE project to research, learn from and experience sustainable eco-friendly tourism initiatives which are in place in the Galway Island. The exchange provided islanders an opportunity to share information on practical levels such as funding and successful business models, which could be replicated. Comparisons between approaches to the creation and maintenance of Corncrake habitat were imperative; the bird numbers are increasing in the Donegal Islands and stationary in the Galway islands.

The emphasis was also on creating sustainable tourism income with respect and cognisance of the Special Protection Areas, and inhabitants.



Local business showcased their work including accommodation services, microbrewery, bike rentals, restaurant and food services, book shop, craft shop and community led grocery shop. The islanders found many commonalities around culture and heritage and the steady transition of Inishbofin from being mainly an agricultural and fishing community fifty years ago to a modern tourism destination today was highlighted.



## News from community networks

### Protecting our environment: Updates from the *Dúlra* Natura Communities project *by Sinéad Grimes*



Thanks to the support from Wild Atlantic Nature and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Dúlra team has been busy over the past few weeks, focusing on rhododendron control in Connemara and Mayo and sharing knowledge with like-minded groups.

#### Safety on the Mountains with Cleggan Coast Guard

On Monday, November 11th, 22 members of the Dúlra team participated in a full day of mountain safety training, hosted by the outstanding Cleggan Coast Guard. We extend a huge thank you to Officer in Charge Micheal Murray, and the rest of the team. These dedicated volunteers generously shared their expertise in search and rescue, helping ensure our team is better prepared for challenges in the mountains. The Coast Guard team, made up entirely of volunteers, provides an incredible service to the local community, and we are so grateful for their time, knowledge, and dedication.

#### Battling Invasive Species Across the West

Meanwhile, our team has been making great strides in controlling invasive rhododendron ponticum in two key areas: the Crumlin area of Inverin and the Althore area of Mayo. This challenging work is essential to preserving the health of these ecosystems. In addition to tackling invasive species on the ground, we're also committed to empowering other communities to do the same. On Sunday, November 17th, we welcomed a group from Pettigo, Donegal. During the visit, we demonstrated our techniques for controlling invasive species, showed sites where various methods have been applied, and shared practical advice on administration, health and safety, and accessing grant funding. By sharing our knowledge and lessons learned, we hope to inspire and equip other groups to protect their local environments.

#### Looking Ahead

Whether it's preparing for health & safety or tackling invasive species, the Dúlra team is dedicated to making a positive impact on our environment and community. If your group is interested in learning more about invasive species control, we're always happy to share our knowledge and experience. Together, we can protect and restore the incredible landscapes we call home. For more updates, stay tuned to our newsletter or follow us on social media on <https://www.facebook.com/ForumDulra>





*Closing message*

Dear reader,

Thank you for your ongoing support for our project, LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature. It is this support that has encouraged us to continue to develop and grow our ambition, as you can see from some of the work presented in this newsletter.

We are very proud to have our work recognised by the European Commission through the Natura 2000 Award for ‘Working Together for Nature’, the first such award for Ireland. Challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss highlight the need for restoration of our ecosystems. Nature restoration can create opportunities for local employment and prosperity, as demonstrated through our Natura Communities initiative, which created over 40 jobs over the last two years, providing an excellent template for collaboration between scientists and farmers. As always, we welcome suggestions for how we can work better for all stakeholders.

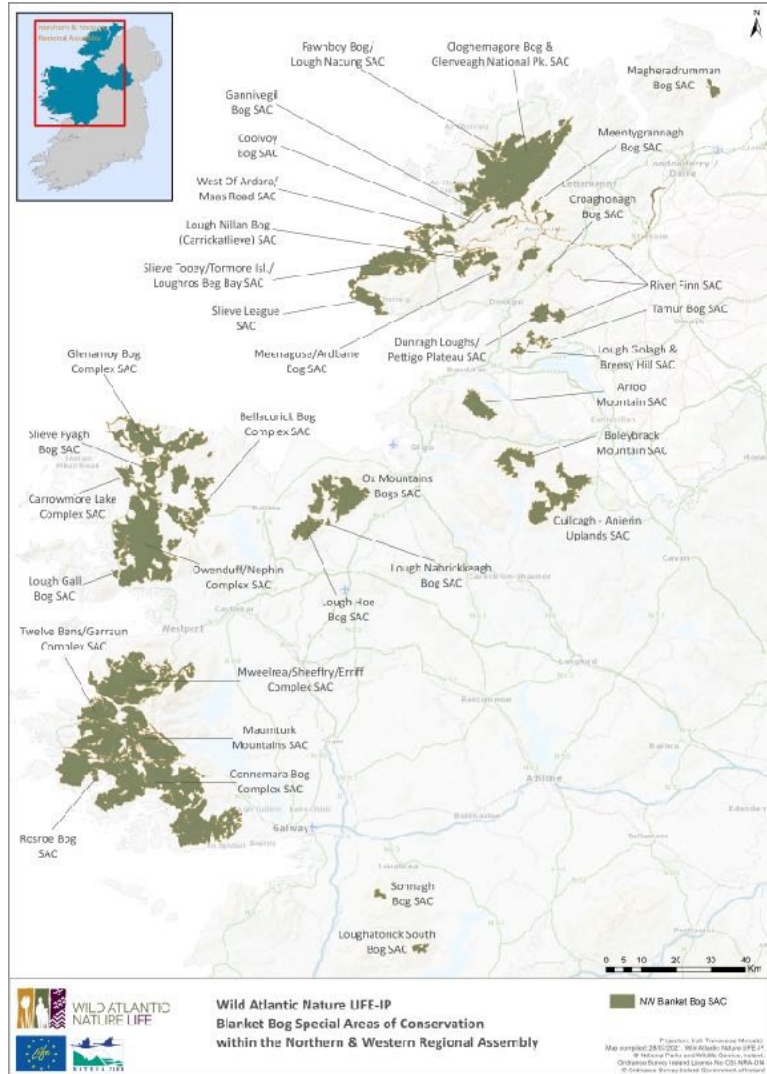
We look forward to your continued support in 2025.

Regards,

Derek McLoughlin and the LIFE IP Wild Atlantic Nature team



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