

Farming in the MacGillycuddy Reeks

The MacGillycuddy Reeks is Ireland's highest mountain range and it is part of a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) which is a European designation for sites that support rare and threatened habitats and species. The Reeks contains protected habitats such as the heath and blanket bog (Ireland has 8% of the world's blanket bog), and rare species such as the Kerry Spotted Slug, (*Geomalachus maculosus*) and the Killarney Fern (*Tichomanes speciosum*). Despite the steep mountainous terrain and ever changing weather conditions, the Reeks are actively farmed. In more recent times, sheep farming has come to dominate the area; but in the past summer cattle grazing would have been a common sight across the landscape with people (often young women) moving up to higher ground with the cattle for the summer. Here, they milked the cattle, made cheese and stayed in small stone shelters.

Farmers in the Reeks not only produce food, they play an important role in managing the landscape. Grazing is essential for the management of the heath and bog habitats and for all the wildlife they support. Healthy peatland habitats are important sinks for storing carbon. Today, as is true of many places, the rural population is in decline. The farming cohort is ageing with fewer young farmers in the wings to take over. Now more than ever, with the continual pressures on national and global biodiversity and the adverse impacts of climate change, it is important that farmers are supported to continue managing our uplands in a sustainable manner which protects our native wildlife and maintains the carbon storing function of these habitats.

The MacGillycuddy Reeks European Innovation Partnership (EIP) Project is a locally led agri-environmental project, which aims to improve the sustainability and economic viability of the farming in the MacGillycuddy Reeks through the development of practical, achievable and innovative solutions in order to protect the biodiversity of this unique High Nature Value area. The project is funded by the Department of Agriculture Food and Marine as part of the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020. It is overseen by an Operational Group with South Kerry Development Partnership as the lead partner. The project team, who are based in Beaufort, have been working with farmers in the area over the last 2 years to tackle issues such as the spread of bracken (*Pteridium aquilinum*) and rhododendron (*Rhododendron ponticum*) and to develop

sustainable grazing regimes which allow the heath and bog habitats to thrive. Assistance is given for maintaining existing tracks which are essential for supporting farmers in their daily activities and for managing the erosion that can be caused by recreational users.

The project undertakes annual habitat assessment between May and September each year to monitor the condition of habitats in the Reeks. Each site is given a score based on the assessment and participating farmers receive a payment linked to the score, thereby incentivising participants to take appropriate actions to improve the habitat condition. The assessment considers the ecological integrity of the habitats including factors such as the diversity of species, the percentage cover of mosses and lichens, the condition and height of the vegetation and the level of grazing. Existing pressures and threats to these habitats such as the invasion of bracken and rhododendron are also assessed.

The MacGillycuddy Reeks EIP Project Team assists farmers in identifying actions which can be carried out to improve the habitat score on their land and find practical and innovative ways to carry out the work. In the coming months, we hope to share more information on the project and the work that is being undertaken. For more information please contact a member of the Project Team.

Photo Option 1: The Kerry Spotted Slug, a rare species that occurs in limited areas in southwestern Ireland and northern Iberia, with no records anywhere else.

Photo Option 2: Heath and bog habitats of high nature conservation value in the MacGillycuddy Reeks.