

A community-led approach to wetland & peatland conservation in Ireland

Kate Flood, Dr. Marie Mahon, & Dr. John McDonagh
School of Geography & Archaeology, National University of Ireland Galway.

Introduction

This research focuses on the Community Wetlands Forum (CWF), a national network of community groups which emerged to foster a collaborative, partnership approach to conserving wetlands in Ireland. Community-led initiatives play an important, but often under-valued role in conservation, through education, habitat management, and raising awareness of the beauty and value of local wetlands. However, there is a need for more evidence of the impacts (direct and indirect) of such initiatives on both conservation objectives (Sutherland et al, 2004) and on communities themselves. Participatory approaches involving communities have long been endorsed in conservation, but often lack successful implementation. Policies exist to promote participation and stakeholder inclusion but operationally, mechanisms and procedures to support such participation are inadequate, leading to a lack of integration of community concerns and unequal power distribution among stakeholders. This research project examines the impacts of community-led conservation through assessment of cultural ecosystem services associated with Irish peatland sites (Fig. 3.)

Collaborative governance

The governance of peatlands has been highly contested in Ireland, and the Irish State faced significant resistance to implementing the EU Habitats directive from turf cutters who had traditional rights on designated bogs. The participatory processes set up by the State were not considered adequate in safeguarding the interests of turf cutting communities. The framing of such debates through scientific discourses also led to reinforcement of established power relations (O'Riordan et al, 2015). The CWF are re-framing perceptions and values of wetlands by focusing on benefits to communities. Appreciation of locally held cultural values can help to inform discussions on trade-offs and facilitate management actions that are more socially acceptable and sustainable (Waylen et al, 2016).

Methods

This case study of 5 member groups within the CWF (Fig. 3) will examine the emergence, formation, and structure of the network, through participant observation and interviews. The project will also elicit cultural ecosystem services associated with the case study sites, examining community benefits derived from wetlands and peatlands, using an online survey, community mapping workshops, and deliberation with stakeholder groups.

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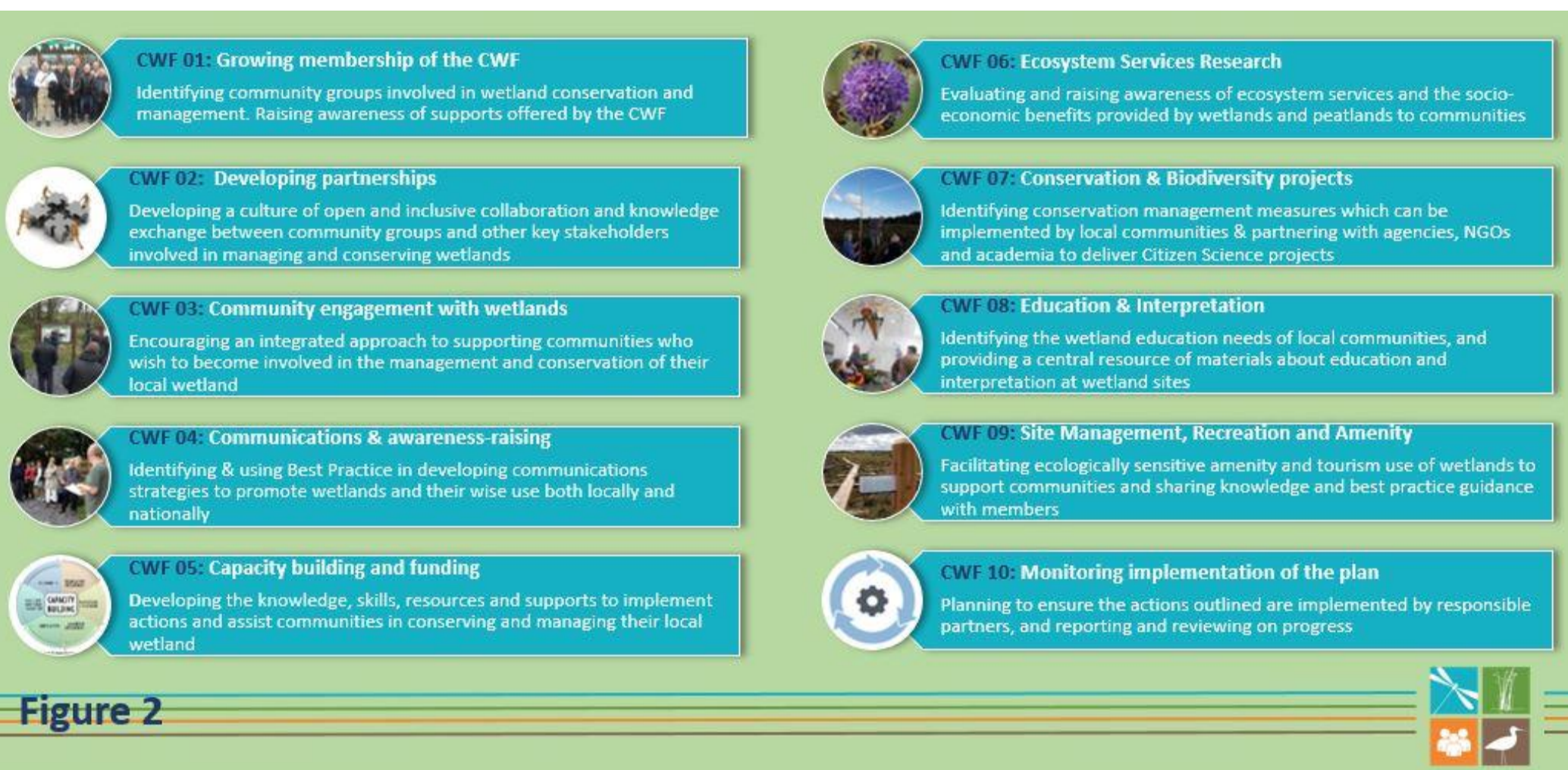
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Vision, Mission, Values of the CWF



Key actions of the CWF Strategic Plan 2017

“Asking whether community-based conservation works is the wrong question. Rather, it is more important to learn about the conditions under which it does or does not work.” (Berkes, 2004)



Case study sites

“The literature suggests that institution building at the community level may take on the order of 10 years for simple, local-level institutions” (Berkes, 2004)

SITE/LOCATION	DESIGNATION	COMMUNITY GROUP	FORMATION AND STRUCTURE	MEMBERS	ESTABLISHED
CABRAGH WETLANDS	Not designated (pNHA)	Cabragh Wetlands Trust	Trust/charity	150	1993
CLARA BOG	SAC / NHA Nature Reserve Ramsar Site	Clara Development Association	Community group (not exclusively focused on the bog)	40	1998
ABBEYLEIX BOG	Not designated (pNHA)	Abbeyleix Bog Project	Community Group (Limited Company, Not for Profit)	50-60	2000 (2009)
SCOHAHOY BOG	NHA / SAC	Cloughjordan Community Development	Registered charity	42	2006
GIRLEY BOG	NHA / SAC	Girley Bog Meitheal	Community group	23	2014

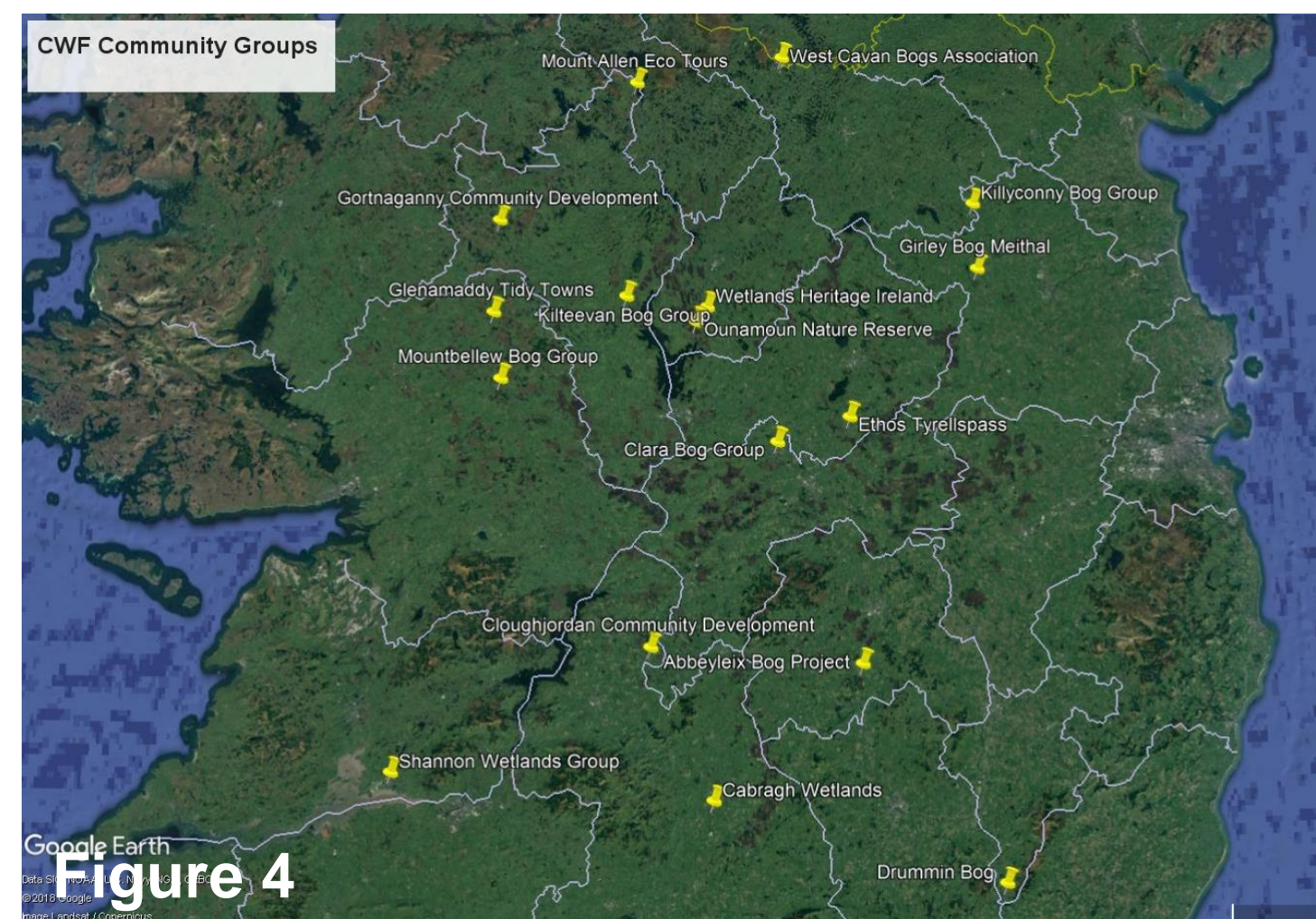
Cultural ecosystem services of wetlands

“Cultural ecosystem services inspire “deep attachment” in communities becoming entry points for public engagement with environmental matters” (Chan et al, 2011).



Case study description

The CWF membership has grown from 4 to 17 groups since it formed in 2013 (Fig.4). The main objective of the network is to provide a platform to support communities involved in wetland conservation based on the principles of community development (Fig.1). The CWF network facilitates sharing of knowledge and best practice in the areas of conservation, recreation, and education, as well as providing mentoring and funding advice. These activities are guided by the group's Strategic Plan (Fig. 2). A bi-monthly meeting is held where all stakeholders are invited to participate. These meetings are hosted by community group members, and followed by a field trip to the associated wetland or peatland site.



The CWF brings together stakeholders from across sectors, with membership open to community groups, as well as any organization involved in wetland/peatland conservation. This combination of different types of knowledge and expertise at meetings facilitates shared learning. Members include National Parks & Wildlife, Environmental Protection Agency, Bord na Móna, Coillte, Irish Ramsar Wetlands Committee, and various NGOs.



Framing of conservation

There are multiple ways of framing human-environment relationships in conservation. Recent framings describe a shift to a shared human-nature environment, as expressed in social-ecological systems approaches. This “people and nature” framing “emphasizes the importance of cultural structures and institutions for developing sustainable, resilient interactions between human societies and the natural environment” (Mace, 2014).

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