

Report on “Biodiversity and Health: a presentation and discussion”

Wednesday May 19 at 8pm (part of the 2021 Irish National Biodiversity Week)

21 people attended this online meeting, which featured a presentation by Dr Liz Cullen. Attendees were located across Ireland including Monaghan, Leitrim, Kildare, Cork, Cloughjordan, Dublin and Kerry, as well as the US and France.

Liz began by giving a 20-minute powerpoint presentation, beginning with a run-through of what biodiversity is, and continuing with a description of several important links between biodiversity and health, including valuable sources for medications such as antibiotics which came from fungi, and the drug paclitaxel used in chemotherapy, which came from the random screening of 35000 plant samples.

She commented on how we can learn a lot from the physiology of animals, such as the ability of polar bears to hibernate. She also explained that exposure to biodiversity has strong health benefits because it reduces stress.

In addition, Liz’s presentation included a general overview of the state of biodiversity in Ireland and the threats that it currently faces - a very sobering and worrying analysis, with over-consumption identified as the biggest single threat. She finished by touching on some economic and social measures that might help to overcome those dangers.

Her presentation was illustrated with over 80 stunningly beautiful photos and other graphics, some taken by herself and some from sources including the National Biodiversity Data Centre, Birdwatch Ireland, the EPA, the Botanic Gardens, Stop Food Waste, the NPWS, the Irish Peatland Conservation Council and Salmon Watch.

Liz’s talk was followed by a wide-ranging discussion, both verbal and via the chat function of the zoom meeting, on how to try to protect biodiversity in Ireland and elsewhere and to enhance its health-protecting qualities.

Suggestions made by Liz and the participants included:

- the need for the media to record important happenings in the biodiversity year, such as the arrival of the first swallows in springtime, or the appearance of the Maybush
- The need for improved labelling on products, including food miles and carbon footprints
- Improved measurements of progress, drawing from the work of Feasta¹ and Kate Raworth (‘Doughnut Economics’²)
- The need to confront the hugely negative role that is played by advertising; experiments have been made in the Brazilian city of Sao Paolo and elsewhere with banning advertisements³
- The need for a new narrative around the implications of giving nature priority and putting ourselves in our ‘rightful’ place (i.e. fully recognising our dependence on nature)

¹ <https://www.feasta.org/beyond-gdp-new-approaches-to-measuring-well-being/>

² <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

³ <https://www.rapidtransition.org/stories/adbblocking-the-global-cities-clearing-streets-of-advertising-to-promote-human-and-environmental-health/>

- ‘Enough is Plenty’: how the thinking of Anne Ryan could contribute to narrative change⁴
- Talking to our politicians so that they know what we want them to prioritise - should there be a Biodiversity Bill?
- Dietary change, including the benefits of growing our own food as much as possible, and of reducing or completely eliminating meat in our diet. There was some discussion as to whether it is better to emphasise eating locally-grown food that comes from producers whom you know personally and which may include some meat, or to eliminate meat completely, even if that means bringing in some food from far away and/or possibly supporting large agri-businesses. A related point that was discussed was the need to reduce or eliminate pesticide and herbicide use.
- The need to provide strong policy support for farmers because their individual capacity for change is very constrained by the system
- Campaigning for the re-framing of goals on the EU level, e.g. moving away from growth as an objective and towards wellbeing, including in the EU’s founding legal documents since their effect on policy throughout Europe is so powerful and wide-ranging
- Campaigning for the protection of 30% of the earth for nature, which is to be proposed at the UN Convention on Biodiversity that will take place in Beijing this October⁵
- Following the advice of the Irish Wildlife Trust for enhancing biodiversity across different landscapes⁶
- The huge benefits of getting to know and nurture our own spaces, even if it’s just one little wild patch in our back gardens. It sparks conversation and builds awareness and reflection, and helps us to realise that there’s something we can do about these problems, even if the contribution we can make is modest

Some useful links that were posted (or mentioned) in the chat:

Our Rural Future (government rural development policy): <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4c236-our-rural-future-vision-and-policy-context/>

Why the UN Biodiversity Convention is making a mistake by ignoring biodiversity on agricultural land: <https://theconversation.com/new-targets-to-protect-biodiversity-must-include-farmers-and-agriculture-149997>

‘Whittled Away’ by Padraic Fogarty of the Irish Wildlife Trust: <https://iwt.ie/product/whittled-away/>, and his ‘Shaping New Mountains’ podcast series: <https://iwt.ie/shaping-new-mountains/>

Moy Hill Farm (described as a good example of a sustainable farming model): <https://www.farmersjournal.ie/my-farming-week-fergal-and-sally-smith-moy-hill-farm-lahinch-co-clare-588708>

‘Shaping a Greener Future’: free Law Society course: <https://www.lawsociety.ie/News/News/Stories/2021-mooc/.YKVuXeR4WEc>

All Ireland Pollination Plan, which has many resources: <https://pollinators.ie/>

Change by Degrees: <https://changebydegrees.com>

⁴ <https://www.feasta.org/category/documents/projects/enough-is-plenty-projects/>

⁵ <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit-2021-en/un-biodiversity-conference>

⁶ <http://www.iwt.ie> . See also the links in the chat section.

We would like to thank Liz for her presentation, and all of the participants for a stimulating and memorable discussion.

About the presenter: Dr Elizabeth Cullen is a long-time Feasta member and a medical doctor with a long-standing interest in the impact of the environment on health. Her Ph D was on the impacts of climate change on health.

Feasta (the Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability) is an ecological economics think tank. Its aims are to identify the characteristics (economic, cultural and environmental) of a truly sustainable society, articulate how the necessary transition can be effected and promote the implementation of the measures required for this purpose.

It is a member of the Irish Environmental Network, the Environmental Pillar, Stop Climate Chaos Ireland and the global Wellbeing Economy Alliance, and is a partner of the International Movement for Monetary Reform.

