



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN NATURE RESTORATION

A CASE STUDY

Harper's Island is a small low-lying island near Glounthaune in the northern section of Cork Harbour, Ireland. This case study highlights key processes, partners, skills and contributions which made this a very successful community-based nature restoration project.

“

'But I must say you know as a member of the Community, I've been living here 40 years, it was only about 8 or 9 years ago I began to understand the value of something like Harper's Island, and then to gradually start learning about Arctic Godwits and Barn Owls, and the flora and the fauna you know, and the butterflies and the moths.'



INTRODUCTION

This case study was funded under the European Commission's Horizon Europe funded A-A Agora project (<https://a-agora.eu/>). The A-A Agora project focusses on the need to protect and restore marine and freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity, to protect valuable ecosystems located in coastal communities and to mitigate the effects of climate change. The case study within the Cork Demonstration Area of A-A Agora was compiled through desk research and through conducting semi-structured interviews with members of the Harper's Island Wetlands steering committee, BWI members and Cork County Council staff and elected members. The case study design and approach was co-created with the steering committee.



Bird Watch Ireland (BWI)



Comhairle Contae Choraidh
Cork County Council



Glounthane Community Council (GCC)



University College Cork



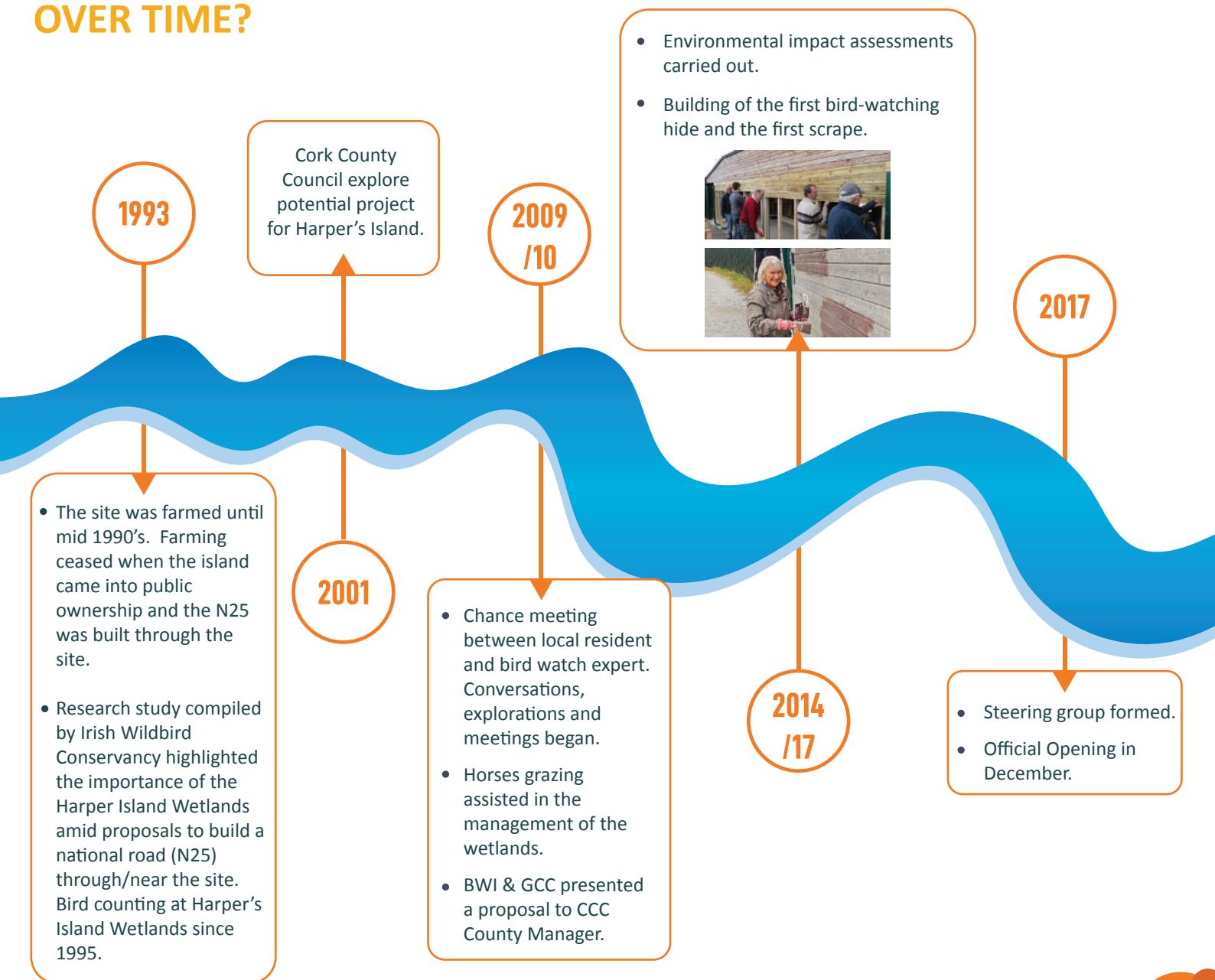
MaREI, the SFI Research Centre
for Energy, Climate and Marine



A-A Agora

University College Cork Contacts: Dr Emma Verling, Dr vMaria Power | Cork CoCo EU Lead: Darragh O Suilleabhair, Lee Wah-Pay

HOW DID THE PROJECT DEVELOP OVER TIME?



- 5 year Conservation Management Plan put in place.
- Second scrape built attracting over 20 bird species.
- Road signage created and installed.

2019
/20

- Construction of the first Sand Martin bank.

- Second Sand Martin bank under construction.
- Conservation study of Farm building completed.
- UCC and Transition Year students undertaking placement studies.
- Participation in case study and reflection time.

2024

2018

- Creation of Nature Trail and Reed Bed.
- Education boards created and installed in hides.
- Feasibility study into education and interpretative centre completed.
- Formal arrangement for horse grazing agreed.
- Feasibility Study funded by SECAD.



2021

- Improved ground works, pedestrian crossing, bicycle stands and car park completed.

2023

- Plan to build a third hide and develop a visionary plan.



BIRDLIFE

Over half a million birds counted at Harper's Island Wetlands in the past 30 years. Most visited species include; Black-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Curlew, Wigeon, Teal, Pintail.

“

'Views from the hides. Being wowed at the sight of birds'

‘STAND OUT MOMENTS’

“

'Working with the lads developing the nature trail and the second hide'

“

'Building the Sand Martin bank and 24 families taking the 24 spaces'

“

'Opening Harpers' ..and my first time seeing a Kingfisher'

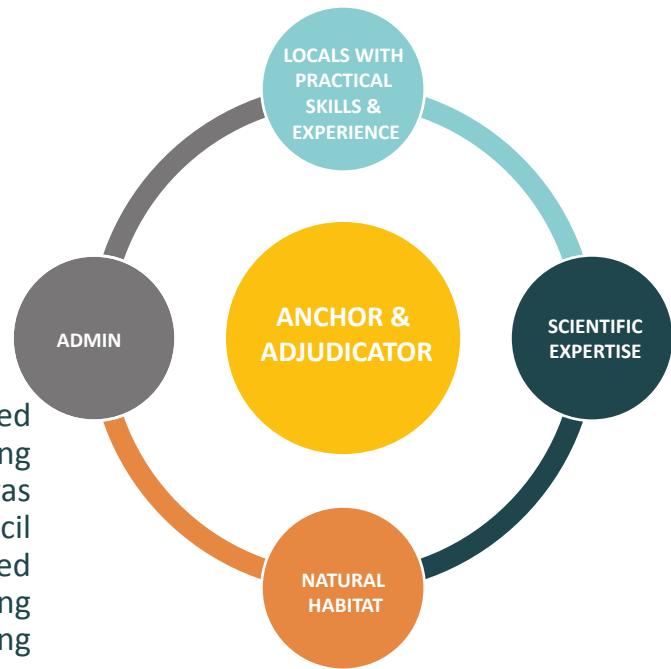
“

'Building the first scrape and almost immediately seeing lots of birds'

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP!

The success of this community based wetlands project is a result of key ingredients and processes:

- **LOCAL INVOLVEMENT:** Brings commitment, local knowledge and passion for the area. It also facilitates drawing on personal contacts and widening the resources/volunteers to be drawn upon. The 'getting to know you' phase lasted a long time, doing smaller tasks, until the bigger actions, e.g. building a scrape, were initiated.
- **MIXED SKILL SETS:** Brings the balance of supports, knowledge, practical skills and the expertise required (BWI) to correctly restore nature whilst also allowing access to the public, in harmony with nature. It was acknowledged by many that the role of the Council (anchor and adjudicator) and land owner who invested funding, was crucial in stabilising the project, aligning different partners' goals, keeping it focused and resolving issues as they arose. This is a high-functioning committee.
- **COLLABORATION:** With different partners facilitates cross learning about nature and brought about wider engagement in appreciating the wetlands and the birds beyond scientists and birders. Partners have mutual respect for each other's offering.
- **DETERMINATION AND RESILIENCE:** There is a win in this project for all partners, e.g. community gets an amenity and recognition, BWI meet their goals around conservation and increasing bird habitats and CCC get to restore a nature reserve. 'All partners get kudos' but one must stay focused and committed for the long term.
- **TAKING OPPORTUNITIES:** Being ready to take up opportunities when they arise, e.g. building of a railway to Midleton which facilitated a bridge to the Island. Having the practical skills and willingness to build the hide when assessments were completed and approval given.
- **PASSION AND COMMITMENT:** All partners identified this as a core element though for slightly different purposes (community, nature, birds, amenity) but all are complimentary. Because the buy-in is broad and significant, the workload is shared. This is a common denominator amongst all partners. All partners are driven and lead from the front on a regular basis.
- **CONTRACTING A LOCAL GROUP:** For example, the Council contracting the Men's Shed and Cork Branch of BirdWatch to do the practical work is very good value for money, deepens relationships, trust and local ownership of the project.
- **DOING PRACTICAL WORK TOGETHER BUILDS TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE PARTNERSHIP:** 'Building hides and trails together and not just sitting in meetings' helps build trust and facilitates members to resolve challenges and differences as they arise and work in harmony.
- **DEMONSTRATING WHAT WORKS:** The restoration of a nature reserve, while keeping it open to the public, was done carefully, by slowly progressing the project in phases and by having a well-informed conservation management plan.
- **REWARDING SUCCESS:** Success breeds success and energises the partners. Receiving awards acknowledges the success of this project. All identified 'serendipity' as playing a role. Even Covid helped local residents to appreciate the special amenity they had on their doorstep'.



CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNT

- The Harpers Island Wetlands project is **DEMANDING OF SIGNIFICANT TIME** for both volunteers and staff. The availability of Local Authority staff is limited and there are many community projects seeking support. Yet, if community is given support, resources increase making it easier to achieve agreed goals.
- All partners would like to have **MORE VOLUNTEERS** involved in the Harper's Island Wetlands project, especially young people, women/girls in a structured manner. This requires a separate programme of work.
- There is no overall **LONG TERM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY** for Harper's Island Wetlands and that would be helpful.
- **AGE PROFILE** of the steering committee is rising and there is a need for a legacy plan to be put in place. Many of the partners are acutely aware of this profile and agree it needs discussion.
- Having a **FACILITATOR** to tease out issues among the partners as they arise is a very helpful structure and resource. This helps to keep 'everyone happy and on board' by aligning the different visions. Members strongly argue for their view point but are not territorial.
- Partners are politically astute. This includes working with key institutions and departments, building good relations with local councillors, senior Council staff, local industry and regularly bringing visitors to the Wetlands. This raises the profile and positive image of the project, making it easier to access funds. 'But, (members warn) be careful how you choose your partners' as this **POWER DYNAMIC CAN CAUSE TENSIONS AND CONFLICT**, which in some cases can cause the collapse of a project or group.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

We're not asking the Council to do (the practical) work for us..... Oh we'd take care of it. They (Council) will do a good few reports (assessments) and (BWI) are able to do all the conservation (scientific) reports.

-  Turn the Farmhouse building and courtyard into an interactive nature education and field research centre. To be accessed by the public and students with a full-time education officer in place, and with a specific focus on young people.
-  Develop an education strategy for young people, particularly pre-school, primary and early secondary school students. This should include materials, VR (Virtual Reality) content, dipping ponds and learning the science. Plan to host large school tours and events.
-  Develop a programme to get more volunteers involved and to lead out tour groups particularly school tours, this will require training, support and social networking as part of a volunteer programme.
-  Harper's Island Wetlands to become a nationally recognised nature reserve – restoring habitats, biodiversity and nature for all to appreciate. Harper's Island Wetlands could be a template for actively managing local habitats with communities and highlighting the importance of nature restoration to a wider public.

WHAT VOLUNTEERS SAY

A survey was completed by 14 volunteers. In summary, these are the findings:

Significantly **90%** said they would volunteer again.

Almost **86%** were between the ages of 45 and over 65 and 70% of these were male.

70% of respondents offered their time on more than three occasions.

Many volunteers volunteer across a number of projects. When asked what would help you in your voluntary role: some suggested having an increase in social volunteering events, more notice of time request and more workshops, e.g. how to set up nature projects with young people.

89% of volunteers helped out because they are interested in nature followed by **56%** who wanted to offer their skills.

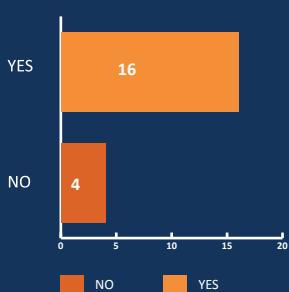
The **benefits of volunteering** were identified as: Nature (80%), Exercise (70%), Sociability (70%), Mental Health (70%), Education (50%).

VISITORS FEEDBACK

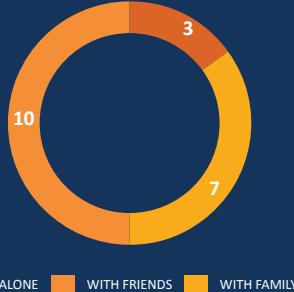
A survey was carried out with visitors face to face on one week-end day. 20 respondents completed the survey and these are the findings:

- A face-to-face survey was carried out with visitors on one week-end day.
- There were a variety of responses as to why people visited Harper's Island but most centred around, the place being peaceful, great variety of birds which are easy to see from the huts, the place being accessible and easy to navigate.

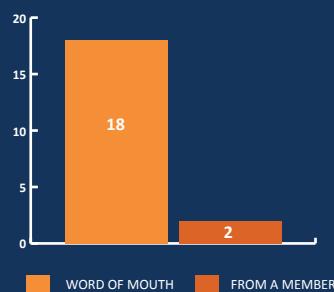
IS THIS YOUR FIRST TIME HERE?



VISITING ALONE OR WITH SOMEONE?



HOW DID YOU HEAR ABOUT HARPER'S ISLAND?



- Hearing about Harper's Island was predominately word of mouth – not official media channels. This area requires attention.
- Biggest improvement request was for improved pathways as they flood and get too mucky to walk on.

STEERING GROUP

MEMBERS

BirdWatch Ireland – Cork Branch

TOM GITTINGS	PhD in Ecology, Post Doc experience and offers Ecological consultancy services. Monitors Harper's Island habitat from a scientific view, tracks visitor nos. and provides data analysis.
PAUL MOORE	Farmer, grassland management, practical experience with using equipment, machinery and fencing.
ALAN FARRELL	Birder with over 20 years of experience. Practical help with hides and trails. Leads out groups and volunteers.
JIM WILSON	Passionate about birds. Has scientific background, creates resources and information. Monitors email and social media.

BirdWatch Ireland – National HQ Reserves

DAVE SUDDABY	45 years experience in conservation, habitat management and bird research. Worked in England, Scotland and since 2001 in Ireland.
---------------------	---

Glounthaune Men's Shed/Glounthaune Community Association

DERRY DELANEY	Local resident. Has passion and commitment for the area, has local knowledge and history, practical building skills and local contacts.
GARRY TOMLINS	Local resident. Many years' experience in business, industry, physics, electronics. Offers practical assistance.
CONOR O'BRIEN	Local resident. Has passion and commitment for the area. Chemistry background and very experienced at funding applications and awards.

Cork County Council – Elected Member, Cobh Municipal District

CLLR ANTHONY BARRY	Councillor for x years with lots of experience of working with various Local Authority departments and staff.
---------------------------	---

Cork County Council – Cobh Municipal District Office

PARAIG LYNCH - S/SEO	Not Interviewed.
CARMEL MCDONNELL – CLERICAL OFFICER	Responsible for administration and financial governance. Has passion & commitment for nature.
ROBERT O'SULLIVAN – AREA ENGINEER	Not Interviewed.

Cork County Council – Ecology Office

SHARON CASEY - ECOLOGIST	Ecologist with many years' experience. Carries out technical assessments & reporting. Facilitation and adjudication when required. Has passion and commitment for nature.
---------------------------------	---

“

'Any of the things that I've brought up, putting them into perspective are small beer compared to all the positives we've managed to do and all the cooperation to get as far as we got. You know it has been just amazing'

SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT & REACH



FACEBOOK 2.3K FOLLOWERS: 36.5% men and 63.5% women with the majority in the age cohort 35 to 54.



SOCIAL MEDIA HITS: Typical month on Facebook: 4,046; Website 2021-2023 had 108,018 views.



VISITOR NUMBERS: On average 16,600 per annum (visitor counter in place since October 2022) with higher nos. visiting on week-end days.



GOOGLE MAPS LINK HERE:

<https://birdwatchcork.com/about-harpers/>
<https://ebird.org/hotspot/L4227847>
<https://youtu.be/I0wjrv6ruZs?feature=shared>

AWARDS

HARPER'S ISLAND WETLANDS

- **2017** - Tidy Towns Waters & Community Regional Award Mid-West and South-West.
- **2017** - Best Small Village Award Muintir na Tíre Pride in our Community Awards.
- **2019** - Excellence in Placemaking Award by Urban Land Institute.
- **2020** - Urban Land Institute Category Winner Munster.
- **2021** - Cork County Mayor's Awards – Overall Group Award.
- **2021** - Pride in our Community, Winner of Eco-friendly Award.

“*There was ability there you could support ... the interest and commitment they have ... they pull us in. We would not be doing this (project) if we didn't have the community, birdwatch or the lads'*