

## **WORLD WETLANDS DAY**

World Wetland Day is celebrated on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of February each year. The day marks the signing of the International Convention on Wetlands in 1971 at the northern Iranian city of Ramsar. Ireland is a signatory to this Convention, known as the 'Ramsar Convention'. **On this day, since 1997, citizens of the World are asked to consider the role that wetlands play in their lives. Government agencies, non-governmental organizations and groups of citizens at all levels of the community are asked to be aware of the values of wetlands, their benefits in general and the Ramsar Convention in particular, and to undertake actions aimed at raising this awareness. The theme of this year's World Wetland Day is 'Tourism'.**

Wetland tourism has known benefits both locally and nationally as places for people to visit, thus helping; our local and national economies, our wildlife and biodiversity, and providing essential habitat support for the wider environment through regulating water flow and quality, and other ecosystem services such as carbon capture.

At this point I would like to remind you of just how really important our wetlands are to human society, they for example, can capture and store carbon probably better than any other habitat and they can out-perform any conventional treatment system in cleansing polluted water.

It's worth remembering that there are about 50 different types of wetlands. Some are more natural than others thanks to human interference. Natural wetlands occur because of geological and glacial occurrences particularly in Ireland. Humans have largely removed those that could be converted to agricultural production...indeed the most agriculturally productive areas in the World were at one time shallow wetlands. While what was there before cannot be perfectly restored, wetlands can and should be reintroduced to the Irish landscape - if not for their beauty and wildlife, then for their ecosystem services that they so abundantly have; something that the Ramsar convention recognizes.

Wicklow county has a diversity of wetlands; coastal wetlands, such as at Kilcoole, Newcastle, Wicklow and Arklow. Also, some riverside wetlands such as those that skirt the small tributaries in the Vartry river basin, including the wetland at Carrigower, not too far from the North Lake at

Roundwood and also in the lakeside areas of Glendalough. Our wetlands also include some of the upland bogs in areas of the Wicklow Mountains. Indeed Wicklow also has other important wetland areas, such as the Blessington and Vartry Reservoirs that are the result of human activity.

Importantly, the Ramsar Convention is relevant to all kinds of wetlands, not just those designated for special protection as Ramsar sites. This has special relevance in Ireland as it includes the various innovative 'Integrated Constructed Wetlands' (ICW), built to clean sewage and soiled water from domestic dwellings, villages, farmyards and agricultural lands. These which can be seen in growing numbers, especially in County Waterford but also in County Wicklow. There is an ICW on the golf course in Ballyman on the way to Enniskerry and if you slip into the next county, there is one not too faraway in a public park close to Cabinteely. The integrated nature of these wetlands demonstrates the range of benefits wetlands can provide from improving water quality, enhancing wildlife and delivering recreational and tourism opportunities.

Conservation demands understanding the SYSTEM being conserved, recognizing that nothing has or can stand still. With adequate understanding - new wetlands, replacements for those lost, may be put in place. The ICW concept in particular, strives to mimic one general type of wetland. These are shallow, dense emergent-vegetated wetlands with multiple segments and sequential flow. This is for the purpose of cleansing through flowing water but with emphasis on explicit integration with biodiversity and landscape fit; and of course it delivers so much more, including insight and understanding into natural wetlands and how to protect them.

Wetlands are rarely ever isolated but are part of a wider ecology either receiving or providing water. It is important that they must not be seen in isolation, simply in order that they may be just 'preserved'!!

**Éamon de Buítléar**  
February 2012



An integrated constructed wetland - previously a small polluted stream