

The Caha project

A farming community protecting its natural heritage

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Since COVID-19 arrived, we have been encouraged to do our bit for the common good. Caring for Ireland's waters, a shared resource, is also for the common good and the beef, sheep and dairy farmers of the Caha valley in west Cork have been doing so for generations.

The Caha Priority Area for Action (PAA), was one of the first areas that the Local Authorities Waters Programme (LAWPRO) and Teagasc Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advice Programme (ASSAP) teams worked in during early 2019.

The Caha is the headwater to the Bandon River and has a 'High Water Status' objective. Much of the lower section of the sub-catchment is also located within a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), primarily due to the presence of the critically endangered Freshwater Pearl Mussel.

The region is home to a diverse mix of land types and land use, including forestry, low intensity sheep and beef farming and pockets of intensive dairy farming. ASSAP advisors have been met with open minds and genuine interest during farm assessment visits. The farmers' desire to protect 'their river' was evident from the start.

One outcome of the ASSAP visits was the setting up of a group includ-



Tim O'Donovan and, below, pictured with Lane Giles and Clare Donovan. Pictures: Valerie O'Sullivan

ing the most interested beef, sheep and dairy farmers, which applied for and received a grant from the Community Waters Development Fund. The application was made in conjunction with the Bandon rivers trust to help them to protect the river.

This group, consisting of nine farmers, are now well underway, fencing off almost three and a half kilometres of previously unfenced sections of the most sensitive lengths of the river.

The group will also install piped water troughs or mechanical nose-pumps to these now fenced off fields. Tim O'Donovan and Jerry and John McCarthy are three of the nine participants in the Caha Project.

Tim O'Donovan

Tim O'Donovan of Waterfall house is a local historian and suckler farmer, whose family has been farming in the locality since the 14th century. Tim's

family has kept a record of the many floods in the area, including the great flood of 1903. Tim tells us the story of a flood that caused a local family to retreat upstairs.

"To their amazement, a loaf of bread that they had been baking on the bastible floated up the stairs to them during the event," he relates. "A 1903 flood washed a bayonet dating from the 1790s onto the river bank." This was passed down to Tim and he still has it to this day.

As a result of that same flood, the river changed its course on Tim's land, creating islands. The dry river bed was later filled in and converted to farm land. In 1972, within this same section of river, Tim recalls being called home from agricultural college, as a cow and a sheep had been swept away in a flood while grazing on one of these islands.

"I remember some of the 'land improvements' initiated during the 1960s," recalls Tim. "Stepping stones across the river channel, the main access to a deserted famine village of 12 houses called Bothy, which had been there for hundreds of years, were bulldozed to improve drainage."

The river, as Tim says, is "steeped in history. People who come to stay do so as a result of the history and the natural beauty of the area."

In the past, when pearls were rare and valuable, the Pearl Mussel was sought by many a treasure seeker along the Caha River. Tim explains:





The McCarthy twins farm within the Caha Catchment.

“It is said that the pearl used in the brooch that tied the cloak of King Henry VIII came from the Caha river.”

Tim is one of a number of farmers who are taking steps to protect the life of their precious Caha River; recognising how it was key to their community’s survival throughout history and particularly during the potato famine, providing both salmon and mussels when the potato crop failed. Tim explains that he is participating in the Caha Project so that “the river will there for the benefit of generations to come.”

John and Jerry McCarthy

Twins John and Jerry McCarthy farm in partnership within the Caha catchment. They operate one of only seven dairy farms located within the boundaries of the PAA. Their land bounds a section of the main river along their out farm, an organic sheep farm and their main dairy enterprise, which is located along a main tributary into the Caha PAA.

Prior to a farm visit through the AS-SAP project, much work had already been carried out to protect water

quality and enhance biodiversity on their lands. On the day of the AS-SAP farm assessment, John pointed out numerous areas of land within the 105ac home block that had been planted with a mixture of deciduous trees almost 20 years ago.

Much of this planted area was along the banks of the Caha stream and is acting as a buffer, helping to prevent any nutrient loss from the grazing platform. John and Jerry’s father always had an interest in trees and clearly passed along this interest to his sons. In total, over 15ac of non-commercial deciduous trees had been planted.

The boundary along the main Caha River (within the SAC), stocked only with sheep, had been completely fenced off and only three small, well-managed cattle access points still existed within the home block. These three drinking points have now been fenced off and water troughs have been installed to supply water to these plots through the Caha Project.

Another eye-catching feature on the farm is the relatively large fen wetland area, located just under the highest peak of the farm. This wet-

land, known fondly to the McCarthy brothers as ‘the lake’, is now almost completely filled in with vegetation, since it has been fenced off and left completely untouched for many years. This habitat is an important, natural flood relief mechanism, slowing the movement of water during flood events. It also acts as a carbon sink, locking in carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In addition, it massively increases the biodiversity on the farm.

When asked why they wanted to get involved in the Caha project, John’s answer was that “water is such an important amenity that we need to do as much as we can to protect it.”

Jerry then listed some of his neighbours, whose income depends on tourism and explained that tourists are here to visit the pristine waters.

Whether looking into the past or examining the present, the Caha River is intrinsically linked to the livelihoods and lives of those who live here and the local community is determined to protect it for future generations to come.

A short video can be viewed on YouTube by searching ‘The Caha Project’.