



Our Common Home Under Threat

Ciara Murphy, of the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, writes about the threat to biodiversity in Ireland, and what we can do to ensure the sounds of nature will be a part of the inheritance of generations to come.

John McGahern's prose often captures the combination of our relationships with the natural world. Writer, farmer and former teacher his writing reflects not only our own interaction with the world around us but demonstrates the evident richness and importance of a healthy biodiversity to human experience.

'A low red sun west of Killeelan was spilling over the sedge and dark heather. Long shadows stretched out from the small birches scattered all over the bog.'

Our connection and familiarity with nature captured in McGahern's literature is fast becoming something historic rather than a reality in the present. Consider the near absence of corncrake calls, the hum of insects in summer, the grassland meadow or forest floor littered with different flowers and herbs. Species loss is accelerating up to 1000 times faster than would naturally occur. As Pope Francis teaches, we must become 'painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own suffering and thus discover what each of us can do about it' (*Laudato Si'*, 19).

What Is Biodiversity?

Biodiversity is the variety of species with which we share our world. The

type and abundance of species define the health of our ecosystems. More diverse environments lend more space for species to inhabit.

It is the function species play in the environment which lends them such importance. Decades of research show that the more biodiverse an ecosystem is, the better it functions. Various species interact differently with each other and their environment, creating a 'harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system' (LS, 140). We depend on these systems for our survival, everything we need in life comes from nature and the functions these species carry out. "It is not enough, however to think of different species merely as potential 'resources' to be exploited, while overlooking the fact that they have value in themselves" (LS, 33). This importance resonates in *The Irish Times'* columnist, Michael Harding's article on the simple hawthorn, 'there is something terribly tender in the white bush that lifts my heart every year'.

What Is Happening to Our Biodiversity?

The loss of biodiversity is clear to us when we see the Amazon burning, coral reefs turning white or animals



hunted to extinction. What is not so clear is the level of biodiversity loss at home. How we produce our food and fuel, which is becoming ever more industrial with less space for nature, is having a major impact on biodiversity. This transition did not happen organically but is a result of decades of Irish and EU policy. The absence of holistic policy and foresight has landed us in a situation where we need to re-evaluate our systems. We have created a world with less diversity of habitats and consequently it is more silent. In Rachael Carson's book *'Silent Spring'*, she articulates how DDT, a pesticide, impacted biodiversity, specifically bird populations silencing nature and its richness. This is the case in much of our countryside.

What Can We Do?

Pope Francis calls on us to have an ecological conversion. "Living our vocation to be protectors of God's hand-

work is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (LS, 217). We need to make more room in our lives for nature. Protecting and restoring ecosystems, viewing them, not as what we can take from them, but for their intrinsic value.

Attempting to turn the tide on biodiversity loss needs community effort. The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan maps out how everyone, from farmers and council workers to schools and gardeners, can help pollinators survive and thrive. Farmers are increasingly turning to more ecological methods of farming, protecting not only biodiversity but also soil quality and animal welfare. Habitat restoration projects, such as the Abbeyleix Bog, are conserving and enhancing the precious habitats we have. Together these actions can aid our ecological conversion and allow us to live more gently with nature. ❤️