

## ***A vision for Heritage Ireland 2030***

Over the last couple of decades Ireland's heritage seems to have been relegated to something of secondary importance, with seemingly little appreciation of its crucial importance to our cultural identity and its integral role in our successes both economically and socially since the foundation of the State. Heritage as a resource has enormous potential, and unlike other resources, such as peat-harvesting or natural gas, it is effectively inexhaustible, provided it is valued, safeguarded and conserved. As a nation we have had a poor record of investment in, or indeed respect for, our unique island heritage; everything from the hedgerow to hare, field monuments to folklore, Kerry cow to curly kale, as these things have remained largely ubiquitous to our everyday experience. It is not invisible, however, to those who visit our island and express delight and wonder at the wealth and range of the natural and cultural amenities that many of us customarily inhabit as part of our day-to-day experience. Tourist brochures have long promoted Ireland as the 'emerald isle' with rolling hills, crystal lakes and romantic castles, inhabited by warm and welcoming people; but this is only part of the picture.

I believe the time is ripe to reinvest in our shared heritage in both an imaginative and practical way, so as to cherish, conserve and protect what we possess while at the same time reaping the rewards of its riches. To my mind heritage has for too long been considered something abstract or removed from the everyday world. It has for too long been dismissed as of no intrinsic value to the ordinary individual who is otherwise preoccupied with 'more important' everyday issues, or worse still, heritage is perceived as an impediment of modernity, development and progress. These perceptions are entirely ill-founded and I believe it is eminently possible to imbed heritage into the fabric of our everyday lives in meaningful and rewarding ways.

Our archaeological heritage has taught us that the landscape, ocean and rivers have been the mainstay of our economy over the millennia and have shaped our cultural heritage accordingly. To a significant extent, it has been our farming, fisheries and forestry that have provided the food, materials and resources necessary to underpin the foundations of our economy. The underlying economy that built the passage tombs of the Boyne Valley some five thousand years ago is the very same as that which supports much of our national economy and broader international outreach today. We can be grateful that the island of Ireland is still perceived in many quarters of the world, despite increasing environmental degradation, loss of habitat and destruction of cultural heritage, as 'green and clean', an environmental idyll of lush green meadows and rolling hillsides on which livestock thrive and a place where the footprint of previous farming generations can be observed in the field systems and monuments of past generations. Without making the correct protective measures, however, we are at risk of losing this fragile and vulnerable reputation.

My suggestion for *Heritage Ireland 2030* involves little more than a change in emphasis in the areas in which we traditionally excel. It involves integrating the various strands of Ireland's heritage, both natural and cultural, with those areas usually perceived as somewhat removed, or occasionally in conflict with heritage, namely the farming, fishing, forestry and food industries. In many instances the people who work in these diverse fields and related industry are unwitting, if sometimes reluctant custodians of our heritage, but could stand to be the key beneficiaries in the promotion and harvesting of this untapped resource.

There has been, for instance, an increased intensification and mechanisation of farming and forestry management systems in recent times, adopting a largely monoculture regime and the widespread overuse of herbicides and pesticides. This has been to the detriment of the environment and its biodiversity, threatening our native flora and fauna and the traditional features of our cultural landscape including its archaeological legacy. This is clearly not the best way to proceed. Surely it would be more prudent to market Ireland foremost for the quality of its produce and its progressive environmental innovations rather than striving for unsustainable levels of self-destructive productivity. We should instead be promoting a 'green, clean and carbon-neutral' Irish brand as part and parcel of our traditional heritage. This, for example could provide a means to market Irish farm produce and foodstuffs and showcase it to our best advantage to visiting tourists and the world at large. There is a world demand for quality products, produced to the highest standards, in an environmentally-, ecologically- and heritage-friendly way.

Perhaps our farmers, foresters, fishers and food-producers could also be at the forefront of conserving, preserving and promoting our natural and cultural heritage. This would enable individuals, particularly those in rural and coastal environments, to diversify their skillsets and provide additional, alternative and more creative ways of earning a livelihood. In a world of climate-change, ecological decline and economic uncertainty, it is the farmers, foresters, fishers and food-producers that are best placed to turn this tide and showcase how they are working in harmony with nature and our cultural heritage by applying new standards of best practice to age-old traditions. I could imagine that tourists and natives alike would enjoy a tour of a farm, a forest or a coastline, given by a farmer, forester, or fisherman/woman who can explain how it is possible to achieve a balance between safeguarding livelihood and heritage – its native wildlife, diverse flora, and ancient cultural landscapes and monuments – for future generations to study and enjoy through responsible and sustainable management solutions. It could also facilitate a meaningful engagement between the general public, schools and education, and business and tourism sectors with bodies such as the Heritage Council, the National Monuments Service, the National Museum of Ireland, in addition to county museums and heritage officers. It might also present an opportunity for these sectors and related public bodies to engage directly and positively with universities and third level institutions on new educational initiatives, in addition to contributing directly to academic research.

I look forward to the day when tourists, students and school children alike, flock to the ancient royal site of Rathcroghan, on the plains of Co. Roscommon, to learn of its progressive farming initiatives, the diversity of native flora and fauna in its managed hedgerows and marshland, and to explore the wonderfully rich complex of archaeological monuments, all of which tell part of the remarkable story of our special place on the planet. It is, after all, part of our shared human heritage (see Farming Rathcroghan - <https://www.nuigalway.ie/colleges-and-schools/arts-social-sciences-and-celtic-studies/geography-archaeology/disciplines/archaeology/research/ireland-atlantic-europe/the-connacht-project/> and also <https://www.nationalruralnetwork.ie/eip-agri/> )

Should you wish, I am happy to consent to the publication of my submission, along with my name, or the sharing of it with relevant government departments and other stakeholders.

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