

Public representatives to approach Coillte on Dartrey oak trees issue

CAMPAIGN ON LAST NATIVE WOODLAND HIGHLIGHTED AT COOTEHILL MEETING

THE Dartrey oak trees campaign was highlighted on Thursday night last when over 80 people attended a meeting on the issue held in the White Horse Hotel, Cootehill.

The meeting was organised by the Dartrey Save the Oaks Committee to heighten public awareness about plans to cut some of the last remaining batch of native woodlands in the estate, a 13-acre stand of 200-year-old oak trees on the eastern shores of the Inner Lough.

Public representatives in attendance included TDs Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin and Brendan Smith, Senator Diarmuid Wilson, Monaghan Mayor Hugh McElvaney, independent Carrickmacross town councillor and general election candidate Vincent P Martin, and a number members of Cootehill Town Council. The oireachtas members present gave a commitment to pursue the issue with relevant local authorities and Coillte.

By MICHAEL McDONNELL

Coillte officials say they want to cut a number of the trees in order to allow new oaks to be seeded in the 13-acre site. They say that monies raised from the tree felling could be used to enhance the scenic area and make it more accessible as a tourist amenity. It would also finance the erection of fences to prevent deer in the estate from eating any new oaks planted.

Those opposed to the plans, however, argue that there is plenty of room to plant new oak trees elsewhere in the Dartrey Estate. They believe that the 13-acre canopy of oaks is a natural heritage asset that should be left completely intact for future generations. They say that Coillte proposes to fell 15 of the trees this year, and up to 70 over the next five years, and claim that any such action would decimate the woodland in question.

Concerns were also raised about Coillte's decision to clear a forest roadway into the oak woodland during Christmas week, an operation in which campaigners say damage was caused to the bark of some of the trees. This action heightened fears that tree-felling would begin without further consultation with locals.

However, Coillte District Man-

ager PJ Fitzpatrick this week assured the *Northern Standard* that no trees would be cut until the ongoing consultation process with concerned local people had been completed. He was hopeful that agreement on the issue would be reached before the end of February, after which no trees can be cut because of the nesting season.

NO CUTTING UNTIL AGREEMENT IS REACHED

Mr Fitzpatrick accepted that no trees would be cut this year if agreement could not be reached by that time.

Recalling that Coillte had brought a group of locals to the woods last month to explain their plans for the area, he said the roadway had been in a very poor condition. That was why Coillte had decided to have it cleared. He agreed that any damage caused in the clearance would be a cause for concern.

The District Manager confirmed that Coillte had obtained a licence for the cutting of 15 oaks in the 13-acre site this year, and that they had also been licensed to cut 100 beech and 100 ash throughout the estate. A second licence had been applied for, which would allow the cutting of 15 sycamore.

But he refuted the idea that Coillte intended, over the next five years, to cut up to 70 oaks in the woodland at the centre of the controversy. The 70 trees in question were located all over the estate. Mr Fitzpatrick said only 15 trees in the 13-acre woodland had been earmarked for felling this year, but he would not be drawn on exactly how many more would come from that section of woods in the following years. He would prefer if a number could be agreed with local people before it was announced to the media.

Save the Oaks Committee Secretary Andrew McCaul told Thursday's meeting that he looked on the large turnout as a show of support for the campaign.

PASSIONATE

"We are here because we feel very passionately about these trees and whole area..," he said. Everybody they had spoken to had been supportive of keeping the stand of oaks intact, and that was giving them motivation to ensure that the trees would be preserved in the long term.

Committee activist Cormac McCaul said an earlier campaign had

succeeded in preventing the trees from being felled 15 years ago when a small group of locals had pointed to the area as a wildlife sanctuary for herons. Dartrey once had the largest oak forest in Ireland, but 89% of these had been felled. Since taking over in 1949, Coillte (the Forestry Service) had failed to successfully replant any of the native hardwoods, and had replaced them with quick-growing foreign evergreen trees. As a worker for Tanagh Outdoor Education Centre, he had taken groups of children from all over the country to view the estate. The most beautiful view of all was that of the 13-acre oak woodland, as seen from "The Temple" on the adjacent island. But conifers planted seven years ago were blotting out this view, and now the stand of oaks itself was in danger.

In addition, some of the conifers planted by Coillte seven years ago were causing damage to an ancient ring fort on the island, and he believed this was in breach of laws protecting national heritage sites. The entire area was not reaching its potential as an amenity because paths were overgrown, there was no signage, and historic sites such as the Temple had been allowed to decay.

Recalling last week's ceremony at the oak tree site — at which 81 people had heard international environmentalist Sem Karoba speak out against felling the trees — Mr McCaul noted that the area was classified by Monaghan County Council as a "Secondary Amenity Area", and that since 1994 it was a "proposed" Natural Heritage Area (NHA). He said the Committee would now seek to establish why the area had not yet been classified as an NHA.

Committee member Aisling Murray said Coillte had indicated that only 15 trees would be initially cut, and just "a few here and there" after that. But the committee's own investigations had led them to discover the issuing of a licence for felling 70 oaks, which she claimed would all be in the 13-acre woodland. Coillte had stated they wanted to fell some of the trees to make way for new growth and that the money could be used to fence newly planted trees and enhance the area generally. But she argued that there would be no area left to enhance if

these plans were to go ahead.

"There are huge areas of clear land in the forest. Why can't they use these to plant new trees in, and leave this group alone," she queried, pointing out that Coillte Forestry Manager George Byrne had accepted that this was "the last batch of oaks in the forest". Surely Coillte could fund improvements to the area out of monies earned from the felling of spruce trees throughout the 1,300 acre Dartrey Estate.

"We ask them to act in the best interests of the entire forest, and not just for commercial gain," she stated.

Ms Murray said she discovered that Coillte had gained a licence on October 10th to fell 270 trees including 70 oaks. They had re-applied for the licence in order to have 15 sycamore included. Authority to grant these permits rested with an individual Felling Section official in the Dept of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources at Johnstown Castle, Wexford.

Andrew McCaul said he did not think it acceptable that one person should have the right to come to Dartrey and say "You can take out those trees", and then return to Wexford.

"CROP HARVESTING"

Ms Murray contended that the oaks were being felled because of their commercial lumber value, something they would lose as they got older. Coillte might say they were "enhancing" the forest, but this was nothing short of crop harvesting.

The trees would take generations to be replaced. If the felling was not stopped, future generations would be denied the opportunity to experience the pleasure of walking in this last piece of native woodland, she concluded, to a round of applause.

Mr McCaul said he had read Coillte's Felling Licence in the local garda station, and that all 70 oak trees marked were situated in a small 2.5 hectare (just over 6 acres) section. But he noted that Coillte had promised to have further local consultations before any trees were cut. He was hopeful that a meeting with Coillte could be arranged for next week. They had agreed to come back with information regarding the felling licence, the time involved, and their general plans for the en-

tire forest.

Objections to the proposals had already been lodged with Monaghan County Council's Planning Office, and with the Dept of Communications Felling section.

Over 500 signatures had also been gathered in a petition on the issue, inside the space of a week, he said.

Andrew also pointed out that as the relevant planning authority, Monaghan County Council could, according to its own development plan, make a Preservation Order in relation to groups of trees or woodlands which formed a "significant feature of the landscape or in setting the character of an area". He felt that such an action would be very apt in this case. The Committee wanted to see this group of trees protected permanently.

Ms Murray called on everyone at the meeting to voice their objections by writing to Felling Section, Department of Communications, "Marine and Natural Resources, Johnstown Castle Estate, Co Wexford. She also called on Duchas, the Heritage and Wildlife Service, to get "off the fence", and determine if there was still a heronry in the stand of oaks.

PUBLIC REPRESENTATIVES' COMMENTS

Caoimhghin Ó Caoláin TD commended the committee members for the amount of work and research they had put into the issue in a short period of time. He said he would follow the matter up with Monaghan County Council, as it had a particular role of responsibility in protecting areas such as the woodland in question.

Cootehill town councillor Michael McCarey called for a long term plan for the Dartrey Estate that would involve doing away with a lot of the evergreen trees that were preventing people from seeing its beautiful landscapes. He believed the area could be enhanced as a tourist amenity, perhaps with golf-course or hotel facilities.

Brendan Smith TD said it was his understanding that Coillte would not cut any trees until they had met with representatives of the local people again. He was hopeful that an accommodation could be made for everybody. He would like to see the area made more accessible in the long term.

Monaghan Mayor Hugh McEl-

vaneys said there appeared to be a degree of cooperation between the parties involved, and he hoped this would lead to a resolution. As a member of Monaghan County Council, he would do whatever was needed to help in this. Mr McCaul pointed out that while Coillte had agreed to a process of consultation, its representatives had at no time indicated that the felling programme might be abandoned.

Cootehill councillor Harry McCabe suggested that a fund be organised to hire an independent expert to assess the needs of the area, and the necessity or otherwise of cutting any of the oak trees. Mr McCaul agreed, provided that this expert would be independent of any government or semi-state bodies, of which Coillte was one.

"SABOTAGE"

Carrickmacross councillor Vincent P Martin described the Coillte plan as "sabotage of the highest order" on a part of the local heritage. He agreed with the committee's opinion that lands owned by Coillte were ultimately public property, and that local people's rights on the issue would have to be established. He said the people in Cavan and Monaghan should work together on this.

Cootehill Heritage Society Chairperson Patrick Cassidy said all groups with an interest in preserving heritage assets should unite on the issue.

A series of photos displaying the beauty of the area was prominently displayed at the top table. Maps of the of the estate were also displayed, in which the areas covered in the tree-felling licence were highlighted. A computerised artist's impression was superimposed on one of the photographs to highlight the devastation that could be caused by felling in the 13-acre oak-tree section.

In conclusion, Mr McCaul said the idea of local elected representatives meeting Coillte on the issue seemed positive. Ms Murray said she hoped the TDs and public representatives could help in having the felling programme stopped in the immediate term. In the long term, she said it was important that some form of statutory protection would be put in place for the oak woodland.