

• FURTHER MEETING IN **COOTEHILL** TONIGHT AS...

Campaign to preserve last native Dartrey woodland intensifies

INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTALIST LEADS PROTEST CEREMONY AT OAK TREE SITE

THE battle to save the last remaining significant grouping of old oak trees in Dartrey Forest gathered pace on Sunday evening last (January 5th) when 81 people from the surrounding Cootehill and Rockcorry catchment areas braved the icy weather to gather at the 13-acre native woodland site and record their objections to Coillte's plans to fell a number of the trees — considered part of the natural heritage — in the coming weeks.

The significance of the demonstration was underlined by the presence of international environmentalist Sem Karoba, from West Papua on the Pacific island of New Guinea — a musician and storyteller known throughout the world for his relentless campaigns to preserve native cultures, plants and animals. Armed with a guitar and songs of his native tongue, he gave Sunday's event an atmosphere all of its own — aided with rhythms provided by some of the more youthful local enthusiasts on traditional tom-toms and bodhrans!

Karoba, who has fought tirelessly for the preservation of the natural rain-forest in his native country, led the gathering in placing stones and branches at the foot of one of the threatened 200-year-old oaks to mark their total opposition to cutting the trees.

By MICHAEL McDONNELL

A petition against the Coillte plan was signed by all who attended the memorable event, and a wider petition in the surrounding areas is currently attracting hundreds of additional signatures. It is significant in this respect to recall Coillte Forest Manager George Byrne's assurance to the *Northern Standard* in an article printed last month that his organisation did not want to "go against the wishes of the people".

However, the protesters were told that the road into the site was cleared during Christmas week, despite a commitment from Coillte that an ongoing process of consultation with local people would be completed before any trees were cut.

Concerns on the issue have also led to the formation of a "Dartrey Oaks 'Last Line of Defence' Committee", which has already set up an information website at www.briansdesign.com/oaks.

Campaign organiser Cormac McCaul lodged an objection in Monaghan County Council's Planning Office on Tuesday. On behalf of all who had signed the petition, he intends to send the same letter of objection to the Department of Communications, Marine & Natural Resources, which he said had granted Coillte the licence to fell some of the trees.

FURTHER PUBLIC MEETING TONIGHT (THURSDAY)

The committee will be seeking to consolidate growing support for the campaign at a public meeting to be held in the White Horse Hotel tonight, Thursday 9th. It is also hoped that another meeting with representatives of Coillte can be arranged to take place inside the next week.

The 13-acre canopy of Irish "Sessile" oak trees is the only remaining area of native oak woodlands in the 1,500-acre Dartrey Forest, most of which is now planted with quick-growing, imported evergreen trees. The Dartrey Oaks Committee has issued leaflets pointing out that many of the natural and built

heritage attractions in this scenic area have fallen into poor condition through neglect over the last half century. Little or nothing is left of the once magnificent Dartrey Castle, the mausoleum known as "The Temple" on the Inner Lough's Black Island is crumbling, and the historic "Iron Bridge" is in disrepair. The committee also claims that a ring fort was disfigured by forestry drains ten years ago, in what appears to have been a breach of the laws protecting such sites.

Fifteen years ago a previous campaign by a small group of locals had succeeded in preventing tree cutting in the same stand of oaks when it was pointed out that the area was a natural habitat for herons, whose nesting sites are protected by law. It now appears that the heronry has moved somewhat further up-river, but the objectors to Coillte's plans are adamant that the trees should all be preserved in their own right.

This latest controversy emerged when Coillte called a public meeting to explain their plans on November 28th last. A number of people at that meeting left the forestry representatives in no doubt about their objections to the proposals. Coillte subsequently brought a group of local people to the site itself and pointed to the trees they intend to cut. The committee say it was agreed that there would be further consultations — but they are incensed at Coillte's actions in clearing the roadway in the mean time.

The natural life cycle of these oak trees is believed to be in the region of 900 years — the first 200 to 300 years spent in reaching maturity, and the last 300 years in dying! So even though the group of trees in question are estimated to be about 200 years old, they are, in effect, only teenagers of their species!

Coillte have stated that their objective is to "manage and enhance" the area in question, and they claim that removing some of the trees would allow space for new oaks to be planted. The objectors, however, argue that there is ample room in the vast Dartrey Estate for planting new trees. They say the trees already in position should all be left as they are.

"PROPOSED" HERITAGE AREA

It has also emerged that an area which includes the oak trees and the surrounding lakes has been zoned as a Secondary Amenity Area, and has since 1994 been designated by the Department of Environment as a "proposed Natural Heritage Area". A document drafted in July 1994 by the Department cites the Dromore Lakes area as being of importance to protected birds such as whooper-swans, wigeons, cormorants and grey herons.

Dartrey Oaks Committee Secretary Andrew McCaul told the gathering at Sunday's walk that if this section of forest actually *was* designated a Natural Heritage Area, he believed it highly unlikely that Coillte would be able to fell any trees. The committee intend to pursue the Department to find out if any progress is being made on having the site designated.

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In the meantime, the immediate objective is to prevent Coillte from cutting any of the oaks. He revealed that Coillte have been granted a licence to cut 15 oaks this year, and 70 over a longer period. He said the forestry people were seeking to justify their

plans on economic, social and environmental grounds. They were saying that the money raised from felling the trees could be used to enhance the general area and make it more accessible to the public. This would also leave more space to allow new oaks to grow.

But he questioned the need to grow new trees in the very space where the older oaks were located. There was no shortage of space elsewhere in the forest, even in areas adjacent to where the present group of oaks is located.

He also pointed to the large growth of rhododendron, a shrub imported in Victorian times which was stifling the growth of native vegetation and trees. Why could Coillte not cut back the rhododendron, as was being done to help native woodlands in Donegal and Kerry?

It was pointed out that the forestry service had been in charge at Dartrey for over 50 years, and that if they were really interested in managing the oak woodlands, there would now be groups of 50, 30 and 20-year-old trees rather than just one group of 200-year-olds with no younger ones. About 100 oak trees planted by Coillte ten years ago had been eaten by deer. Now Coillte was proposing to erect more deer fences, which was fine, but did this mean heritage trees had to be cut?

While he welcomed the idea of enhancing the roads and making the area more accessible as a quiet, scenic tourist and local ameni-

ly, Mr McCaul questioned the idea that any of the older oak trees — the most important part of that amenity — should have to be felled to finance these improvements. He believed the impact on the area would be devastating if even a few of the oaks were taken out. Between them, they created a canopy that had an almost spiritual atmosphere; a sense of place that was not to be found elsewhere in the region.

A discussion ensued as to the value of the trees to Coillte, an organisation which Andrew said was promoting "Irish Oak" in the lumber/wood-product industry. Some of those present argued that a perfect specimen (similar in age to the Dartrey oaks) could fetch well in excess of 10,000.

The former SAI Chief Scouting Officer for the North East Region also argued that Coillte were trying to apply the French system — where there were large numbers of oaks that had been managed for over four hundred years — to this small 13-acre site. These trees, though 200 years old, were not yet even fully mature, and he felt strongly that they should be left in place for future generations of people to see them continue to grow. New oak trees could be planted in adjacent sites, and it would be a pity to cut through this unique area for the sake of raising finance for other necessary improvements.

Cormac McCaul, who has been the driving force behind the campaign to date, said he had brought hundreds of people from the Tanagh Outdoor Education

life of its own. He reminded the gathering that in special guest Sem Karoba's native West Papua, people considered themselves at one with the trees and nature. That was what was being lost to this country, and we should be trying to get that connection back at a very deep level.

In introducing Mr Karoba, committee member Ruairi McKiernan said almost half the world's remaining rain-forests were located in West Papua, and if they were lost there would be flooding and storms in this country. Sem had risked his life in touring the world to highlight this and other injustices in his country, and it was great to have him in Dartrey.

Mr Karoba said he was happy to see so many people at the event; they had come out of respect for the forest. In his own country, white people were cutting down the trees; they could not understand how the natives saw themselves as part of the forest. It was not something to be learned about in a classroom, or

out of a book -- the forest was a real-life experience. It was the place where his father would go to pray, and where his people were at one with nature.

He believed that if we helped the forest and nature, it, in turn, would help us. He had expected to see only ten or so people turn up, but now it looked as if there were sixty or more.

"That means my heart is telling me -- that we are going to stop it; they are not going to cut it down!" he declared to resounding applause.

"GUY FROM THE JUNGLE"

"Tell them the guy from the jungle came here said said: 'If you want to cut it down, you must go and ask him for permission!'" he told the delighted listeners.

His people in Papua were being told all about "development" by the world's biggest mining company, with its tractors and chain-saws. But in his land, the mountains were looked on by people as their mother, while the forests

were seen as themselves and their friends.

"But now they are saying 'God is not here, but somewhere up there', and they are cutting the trees."

He chanted a song, which he translated as: "*My son, they are taking you away... but I need you... This lady is crying.*"

Everyone was then called on to lay a stone at the foot of one of the oak trees. Each person who laid a stone or branch was signing another petition, this time to the trees and nature herself, pledging their support. And in doing so, they were also sending a message to those in authority, Mr Karoba said.

What proved to be a strangely moving occasion concluded with Sem offering another song in the language of the Koteka people. Those with drums and bodhrans joined in, creating a wonderfully primitive, world-music resonance that was surely new to the oaks of Dartrey!