

Woodlands laid waste



Intense tree-felling in the forests of Wicklow and Dublin has created a Chernobyl-like landscape, writes Paul Cullen

If you go down to the woods today, you're sure of a big surprise - especially if you visit the forests of south Dublin and Wicklow now approaching maturity.

Almost overnight, it seems, vast swathes of trees have been chopped down, their timber harvested by mammoth tree-felling machines that can topple a 100-foot tree, shave off its branches and toss the remaining trunk to one side within seconds, as though it were a matchstick.

The change in the landscape evokes conflicting feelings. On the one hand, the oppressive gloom of our conifer forests has been lifted somewhat, with new vistas of the mountains opened up where before the trees obscured the view.

Anyone familiar with Ticknock, just south of the M50, over the past 30 years, would hardly recognise the place today, with so many trees removed. Down in Co Wicklow, mass felling under Djouce mountain has opened up pleasant views of Powerscourt waterfall and the mountains above it.

But there is a considerable downside, as anyone who has passed by a site that has recently been clear-felled will know. Think Chernobyl, the worst kind of post-nuclear landscape without the radiation, all grey and broken and bleak. Utterly impassable terrain filled with tree-stumps and treacherous pools, too toxic for anything but moss and lichens to flourish in.

Eventually, foresters do get around to planting new trees in the felled area, but

little is done to remediate the terrain and the new saplings are simply planted in between the ghostly stumps of their predecessors.

Of course, trees, once planted, grow and eventually die. But what makes the problem acute in Irish forests is that so many trees were planted at the same time, about 30-40 years ago, and so are due for felling today at the same time. Also, there is little variation in species; the fast-growing Sitka spruce and a handful of other conifers dominate nearly everywhere. As a result, huge areas are being clear-felled at present.

While the practice has prompted widespread comment among walkers, bikers and other recreational users of the hills, Dundrum vet Mark D'Alton decided to do something about it.

"When I saw what happened in Ticknock, that really got me going. So I stuck up signs and posted messages on websites looking for people who were equally concerned." It didn't prove difficult to find like-minded people, concerned not just about clear-felling but also about the preservation of the hills as a precious recreational amenity for the people of the capital.

Out of D'Alton's solo run has grown the Dublin Mountains Initiative (DMI), a coalition of interest groups dedicated to the creation of a recreational park in the Dublin hills, a kind of playground for the city's citizens.

"We found Coillte very positive to deal with. They agreed to reduce the amount of felling in the area by over half. We feel that issue is out of the way

now and it's time to move on," says D'Alton.

"The Dublin mountains are a huge resource, but they're hugely under-utilised. Very few capital cities have mountains as close as we do. People are starting to live on top of each other - literally, for example, in apartment blocks - like they never did before, and they are going to need an outlet. The mountains are there to be used, but this has to be done sensitively."

WHILE THE DIN of the traffic from the M50 gets louder every year, and the trail of planning application notices on green fields draws ever closer, the hills can still be a surprisingly empty place. Walk the rutted trails from Three Rock mountain to Kilimashogue on an afternoon in mid-week and you're likely to have the place to yourself and the local deer.

D'Alton's group, which includes organisations representing walkers, bikers, hill-runners, orienteers and scouts, would like to see the area traversed by walking and cycling trails suitable for all types of user, including the disabled, with educational routes for children.

Access car parks would be properly sited and equipped and new public transport links would open up the hills to people without cars. Park rangers would patrol the area and a Dublin Way would be created to link up to the long-established Wicklow Way.

The DMI says there are well-established examples of recreational parks near urban areas in cities such as Adelaide in Australia, or Vancouver, Canada. "If we get it right here, this will provide a template for action in other parts of Ireland."

The group may be pushing an open door. With 18 million visits to its forests each year, Coillte is only too aware of the recreational demands on its properties. It and the local authorities in south Co Dublin and Co Wicklow are also familiar with the anti-social activities

'A post-nuclear landscape without the radiation, all grey and broken and bleak.'
Deforestation scarring the landscape at Ticknock, Co Wicklow.
Photograph: Eric Luke

increasingly besetting the mountains; these include litter, fly-tipping, car break-ins, illegal long-term camping and unauthorised use by mountain-bikes, scramblers and even quad bikes.

Earlier this year, Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown and South Dublin county councils, Coillte, together with the DMI and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), got together to examine ways of improving access and facilities in the hills.

As a first step, the group has commissioned a study to draw up a fully costed 10-year strategy for the area. Efforts will be made to encourage Dublin Bus to provide more links to the hills and a voluntary ranger corps may be set up.

"It's an exciting proposal with great promise, but unless we get everyone on board we won't be able to unlock the potential of the area," says Bill Murphy, recreation manager of Coillte.

While the plan will cover the State-owned lands between Shankill and the Hellfire Club, Murphy hopes it might be possible to negotiate some limited rights of way with private landowners. This would enable sections of Co Wicklow that are currently on the public road to be made safer by moving them onto green ways, for example.

He looks with envy at the UK, where there is a right to roam and the forest trails are only one part of a nationwide network of trails. "Here, the only place to go is Coillte or NPWS lands. It's just something we have inherited."

WHILE FARMERS FREQUENTLY cite worries over liability for injuries to walkers crossing their land as a worry, Murphy believes this issue is "over-hyped" given the legal situation.

In spite of the popularity of its forests for walking and other activities, it receives few claims, perhaps because it signals a willingness to contest these in court if necessary.

Many of the uses made of the mountain are conflicting, pitting man

against nature, and user against other user.

Walkers erode the bog by forging tracks and cyclists, scramblers and quad-drivers make the damage much worse by further degrading and widening the paths.

However, efforts are now being made to provide dedicated facilities for specific users; specific trails for mountain-bikers are being developed at Ballinastoe and Kindlestown woods, in cooperation with that community.

NOT EVERYONE IS enthusiastic about the new initiative. Roger Garland of the access group Keep Ireland Open likens it to "grandma's apple pie".

"No one's opposed to it but it won't do anything to make the legal situation on access any clearer."

Garland says the State should go a stage further and acquire the mountain land for a national park. He also says Coillte should replace its forests with broadleaf trees.

Murphy says Coillte is making efforts to "remodel" its forests in the long-term, so that no more than 2 per cent of the trees would be cut down in any year and there would be a greater variety of species. The existing trees can't be left there "forever" because they would blow down.

He says the Dublin hills are too high for broadleaf trees to flourish.

"It's pretty bleak up there, and windy too. Oak won't go, and sycamore isn't a native species. We have to balance our growth as a company with our timber needs and the recreational needs of people."

Tree-felling, although it may leave behind a stark terrain, releases valuable nutrients into the soil, which eventually recovers, he maintains.

♦ For information on the National Parks and Wildlife Service, see www.npws.ie. See details on Coillte and Ireland's forests at www.coillte.ie