

A Guide to Farming for Conservation in the Burren

BURRENLIFE BEST PRACTICE GUIDE No. 1



The BurrenLIFE Project

The Burren, also known as *An Bhoireann* - the 'place of stone' - and described by Cistercian monks as the 'fertile rock', is a unique and very special place. It is one of Ireland's most outstanding landscapes: a place of great beauty and fascination, steeped in history, teeming with wildlife and blessed with a rich culture and strong sense of community.

For some the Burren is a home, for others a place to visit, to study or simply to enjoy. But the importance of the Burren extends far beyond its borders - its heritage is of outstanding universal value. This value has been recognized at European level by the designation of much of the area as Natura 2000 Sites, or Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), under the EU Habitats Directive. As such we are obliged to manage the Burren in such a way that future generations from near and far can continue to benefit from it.

To look after the Burren properly we must appreciate that the Burren has been shaped, not just by natural forces, but by countless generations of farmers as well. The BurrenLIFE Project has worked closely with Burren farmers and other experts to create a blueprint for farming in the Burren, through which farmers can earn a decent living from the land and continue their longstanding role as producers of quality food and custodians of a magnificent heritage and landscape.

The information contained in these guides is based on five years of applied research which took place on 20 farms across the Burren. The practical, locally-targeted solutions contained herein have been tried and tested by Burren farmers on their land and closely monitored by the project team.

The BurrenLIFE Project was co-ordinated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. It was a close partnership between the NPWS, Teagasc and the Burren IFA. The Project was part funded by the EU LIFE Nature Fund. NPWS wishes to acknowledge the strong support provided by Teagasc, the Burren IFA and the Burren farmers for this Project.

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FARMING FOR CONSERVATION - WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

'BurrenLIFE - Farming for conservation' is a new model for farming in the Burren. It involves a number of practical changes to the way we currently farm so that we can go on producing great quality food but in a way that helps to protect the Burren.

Farming has shaped the Burren for almost six thousand years in so many different ways. Stone Age farmers began by cutting down the original tree cover to expose the limestone rock and rough grasslands from which the Burren got its name - *Boireann*, 'place of stone'. Generations of farmers built the Megalithic tombs and stone forts which are now prized archaeological sites. Farming traditions such as low-input winter grazing help to maintain the gentians, orchids and other flowers and insects for which the Burren is famed. And let's not forget the farmers themselves who continue to contribute greatly to the culture and character of the Burren.

Without farming, most of what is special about the Burren - the rocky scenery, the monuments, the flowers and insects, the rich culture - will gradually change, arguably for the worse. To stop this happening we must continue to farm the Burren but we need to be clever and innovative in how we do this, making sure we produce quality food and a healthy, heritage-rich environment - products and services that people value and are willing to pay for.

Today, farming in the Burren, as elsewhere in Ireland, is at a crossroads. To address this, the BurrenLIFE project has devised a Burren-specific plan for a new generation of Burren farmers. Better still, it has tried and tested its ideas on 20 Burren farms under the watchful eyes of the farmers themselves.

'BurrenLIFE - Farming for conservation' is farming for our future, farming to conserve not only the Burren but also the communities who live and work here.

SOME KEY PRINCIPLES OF FARMING FOR CONSERVATION

'BurrenLIFE - Farming for conservation' is a new approach to managing our countryside. It is built on a number of important principles.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE FARMER

The farmer is the key to farming for conservation. Firstly, farmers own the land of the Burren and the livestock needed to graze it. Secondly, farmers have the understanding and experience of how best to manage the land and livestock, knowledge that has been built up over generations. Thirdly, farmers are the ones with the most to lose and the most to gain from farming for conservation. Farmers need to play a vital role in planning, delivering, monitoring and promoting farming for conservation (page 8).

PARTNERSHIP - PULLING TOGETHER

Farming for conservation does not rely solely on the farmer, it requires different agencies to work together and pool their skills. NPWS, Teagasc and the Burren IFA were the main partners in the BurrenLIFE Project. A team of ecologists, agronomists, economists and farmers helped deliver the programme. This approach was taken because in spite of differences in their interests and skills, groups and individuals who have a common objective can achieve more by working together than they would by working alone.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FARM PLANNING

Every Burren farm is different and must be treated differently. We need to know and understand a farm well before we can recommend management changes. Effective farm planning - where the farmer combines his or her expertise with that of a trained farm advisor - can help to create a template from which the farmer can work effectively in future years. Without such a plan, works undertaken may be haphazard and will probably fail to deliver the best possible result for the farmer and the Burren.

BEING PRACTICAL AND INNOVATIVE

Farming for conservation is based on sound, traditional principles of managing the land with respect and care, but is not an approach which seeks to 'turn the clock back' to old ways of farming. Instead, this is a practical approach which seeks to blend the best aspects of existing farming systems with new innovations and technologies to develop effective ways to feed and water livestock and to control scrub.

BEING FLEXIBLE

Farming is a highly unpredictable business and is increasingly so. Climate change is leading to unforeseen events, from floods to droughts. Markets are highly volatile and diseases new and old continue to impact on livestock. A farmer needs the flexibility to respond to unforeseen events. Farming for conservation sets out conservation goals and gives guidelines, advice and incentives to reach these goals, but ultimately, it allows the farmer the flexibility and discretion to deliver these goals as he/she sees fit.

AN HONEST DAY'S WORK FOR AN HONEST DAY'S PAY

Farmers have the knowledge, skills and experience to farm for conservation. At a time when farming is not viable, farmer's need society's support to apply these talents for the benefit of the Burren. Farming for conservation is based on results - it doesn't just seek to support farmers per se; it supports active farming which helps to maintain or enhance the Burren's heritage. Under the BurrenLIFE project, money was paid to farmers only when work was completed and completed properly. In all cases the farmers also had to contribute a proportion of the cost involved whether in labour or money.

CREATING REAL BENEFITS

Farming for conservation will benefit the Burren and its communities. It will help to improve incomes and create new opportunities. It will help to protect the Burren's heritage for the people of the Burren so that they can enjoy it and hand it on in a condition of which they can be proud. It will help Ireland meet its legal obligations under the Habitats Directive, avoiding hefty fines for the Irish taxpayer. Society too will benefit from having this special place well looked after for this and future generations (page 7).

THE IMPORTANCE OF MONITORING

Monitoring is essential to prove that farming for conservation does what it is meant to, and to show that it provides value for money. A rigorous monitoring programme, which confirms that work has been done to a high standard and has had a positive impact on the Burren's habitats, will help guarantee the future of 'farming for conservation' by proving to the taxpayer and tourist alike that this approach actually works. Monitoring is something we cannot afford not to do.



FARMING FOR CONSERVATION ON THE GROUND

Farming for conservation is not rocket science: it is for the most part simple commonsense. A few basic principles underlie farming for conservation on the ground.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT IT IS WE WANT TO PROTECT

The Burren means many different things to many different people. Interests include geology, history, archaeology, flora, fauna, folklore, music, tourism, farming or a combination of these. Whatever our interest, it is important to be aware of the Burren's unique and diverse heritage, to appreciate that all of this heritage is inter-related and worthy of our respect and care. All of us have something to learn in this regard and this learning can be great fun.

For more information, please see **BurrenLIFE Best Practice Guide No. 2 - A Guide to the Agricultural Heritage of the Burren**

GETTING THE GRAZING RIGHT

The Burren is a pastoral landscape, one 'where the cowman, not the ploughman, is king'. Grazing has been the primary land use here for almost 6,000 years. Winter grazing is the key to maintaining the Burren's rich biodiversity. Grazing too little will lead to rank vegetation, a loss of species and increased feeding costs for the farmer. In contrast, grazing too much or at the wrong time may result in poaching, pollution and habitat change. Only by grazing at sustainable levels will the farmer minimise feed costs while maintaining the winterage - and its biodiversity - in prime condition.

Getting the grazing right requires skill but it also needs appropriate structures and equipment. For example, well maintained internal stone walls help to simplify herding and improve grazing levels. Water troughs, tanks, pumps and pipes are required for livestock to have access to water during drought times and while being fed concentrates. Providing better access to remote winterages is important for time-pressed farmers and also for the welfare of sick and injured livestock. BurrenLIFE has piloted some useful techniques and technologies to address these infrastructural needs.

For more information, please see **BurrenLIFE Best Practice Guide No. 3 - A Guide to Grazing Burren Winterages**

COMPLEMENTARY FEEDING SYSTEMS

Supplementary feeding with silage can cause major problems such as poaching and point source pollution and can lead to undergrazing. In-calf, suckler cows overwintered in the Burren need some additional nutrients and minerals; the BurrenLIFE ration is tailored to meet this need. Feeding at the recommended quantities and times is the most cost-effective way to complement the diet of the grazing animal. This helps to maintain animal condition and health and also helps to improve the water quality, landscape and biodiversity values of the Burren.

For more information, please see **BurrenLIFE Best Practice Guide No. 4 - A Guide to Feeding Cattle on Burren Winterages**

SCRUB CONTROL

Farmers have always had to work hard to control scrub in the Burren. Scrub was cut for fuel, fencing, thatching and as a fodder source. Though a lot of these uses are no longer viable, there is still a need to control scrub particularly where it is blocking access and where it is beginning to encroach on to other valuable habitats. The BurrenLIFE project has piloted a range of techniques to control scrub.

For more information, please see **BurrenLIFE Best Practice Guide No. 5 - A Guide to Controlling Scrub on Burren Winterages and Other Areas**



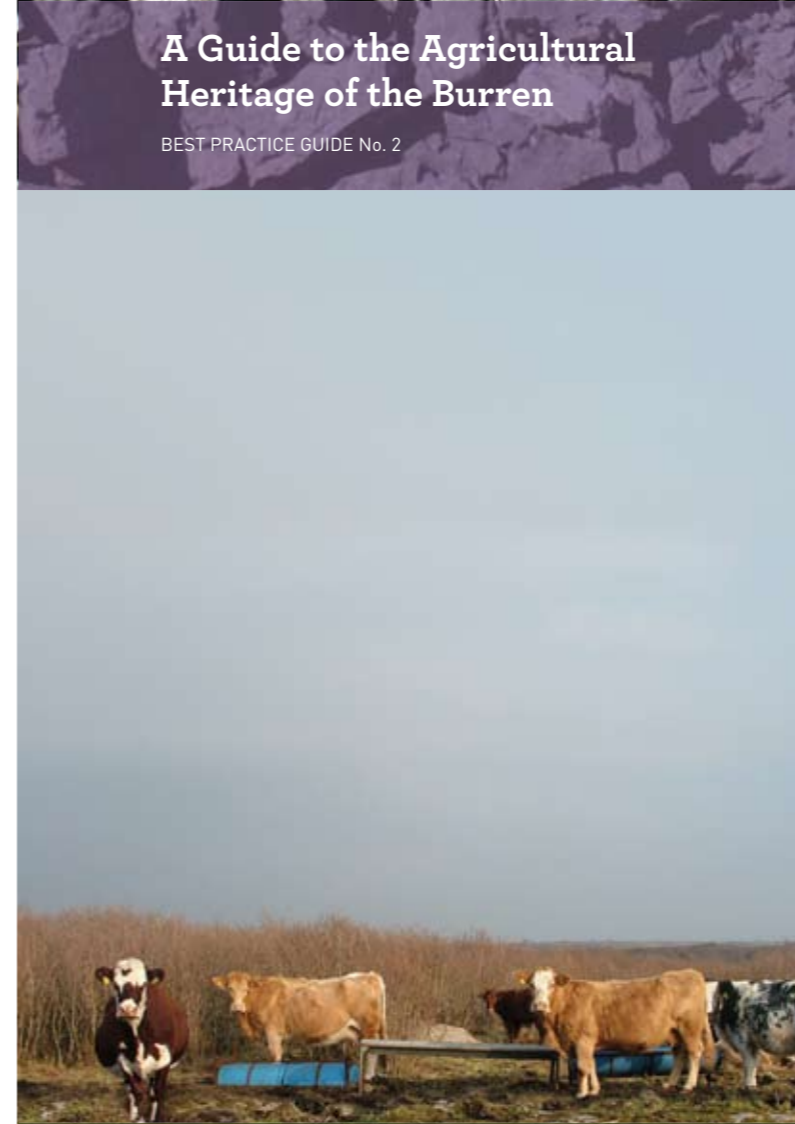
A Guide to the Agricultural Heritage of the Burren

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE No. 2



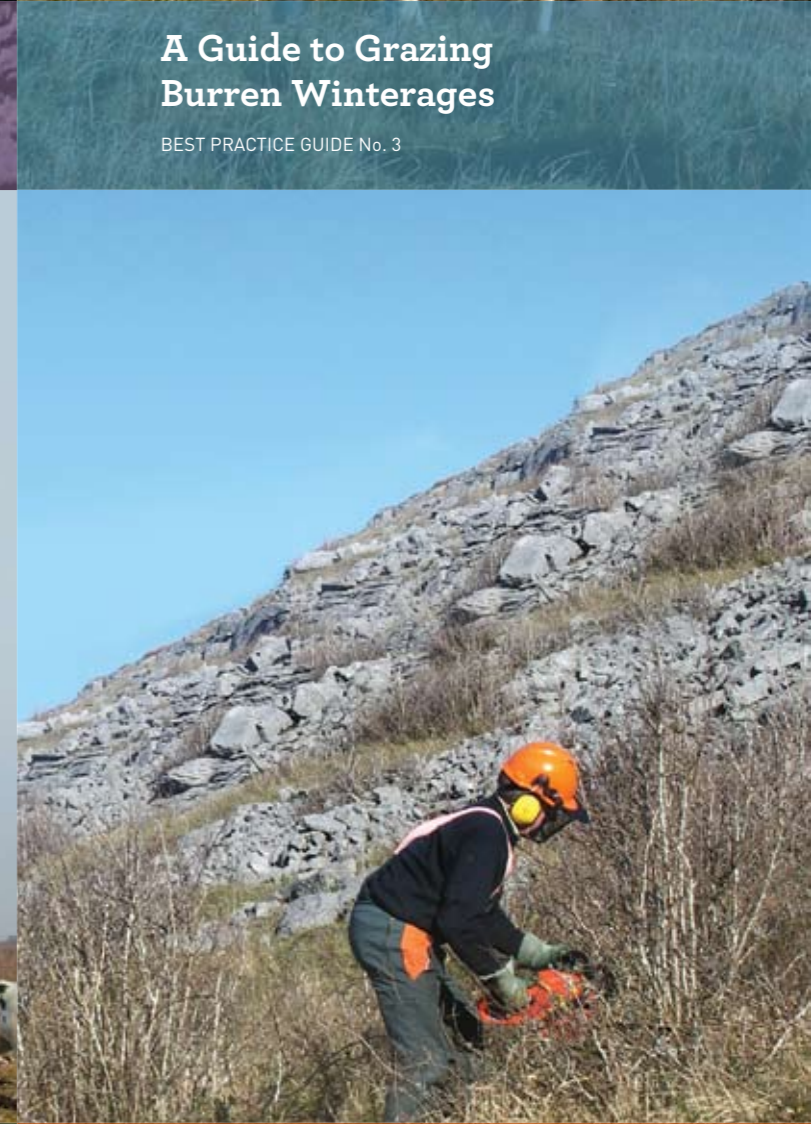
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BEST PRACTICE GUIDE No. 5



THE BENEFITS OF FARMING FOR CONSERVATION

OUR HERITAGE, OUR LEGACY

The heritage of the Burren – plants and animals, monuments and landscapes – has been handed down to us by countless generations that have gone before. It is only right and fair that the coming generations should inherit this legacy in optimal condition and it is up to this generation to play its role in ensuring that they will.

CREATING EMPLOYMENT

Farming for conservation creates local employment for farmers and others working on scrub control, wall building, water provision, herding and feeding stock. Most of this money stays in the area. This work will help encourage tourism which can create local jobs and support a range of local businesses such as shops, hotels, pubs and cafes.

MEETING OUR OBLIGATIONS

Under a range of EU Directives, Ireland has a legal obligation to protect many of the habitats and species of the Burren, and to maintain a high standard of water quality. Failure to do so may lead to heavy financial penalties which will be borne by the taxpayer. The BurrenLIFE model helps us to meet our obligations by promoting best practice with regard to the management of the land and water-based habitats of the Burren.

CREATING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Farming for conservation offers a range of new opportunities to the people of the Burren. These include producing and marketing high quality, conservation grade beef, lamb and other products. Developing farm-based heritage tourism enterprises to highlight the role of farming in conservation is one of many other examples

INVESTING IN OUR COMMUNITY

Farming for conservation supports education and training within the local community, the custodians of our landscape. By acquiring new knowledge and skills, a range of new income, employment and social opportunities will be created which will help to sustain the communities of the Burren into the future.

SOCIETAL BENEFITS

Many people, from all over the world, hold the Burren in very high esteem. They want to see it well looked after and are willing to pay to ensure that it is. Farming for conservation helps reassure European taxpayers that their expectations will be met and ensures their taxes will be well spent, both now and in future.

LEADING THE WAY

Farming for conservation puts farmers in the central role and allows them the chance to shape their own destiny. 'BurrenLIFE farming for conservation' is a pioneering approach to the conservation of our countryside and this partnership-based approach is leading the way for agri-environment schemes elsewhere in Ireland and beyond.

FARMING FOR CONSERVATION - YOUR ROLE AS FARMER

IDENTIFYING

As a farmer, you have a broader and deeper knowledge of your farm than anyone else. You know your land, its management and its heritage, through the seasons, the years and the generations. Your role in identifying important features of the land, from monuments to habitats, sites of folklore to sacred places, is vitally important. Please keep a record of any such information.

INFORMING

Information on traditional management practices is of huge importance. For example, most Burren fields were known in terms of having 'the grazing of X cows' – this missing number is a magic number in terms of identifying suitable stocking levels for sustainable future management. Please keep a record of any such information.

PLANNING

You, as the farmer, are the expert in managing your land but as well as producing quality stock, we now need you to produce a quality heritage and landscape. You should think about what small changes need to take place on the farm in order to achieve this and decide which are the priorities. This information will form the basis of the 'farming for conservation' plan drawn up by you and your professional advisor

DELIVERING

You, the farmer, and your family are best placed to do much of the work required for farming for conservation. Your knowledge of the farm and well-honed skills, combined with your stake in its future, means that the work will be done to the highest standard. Trained contractors are available if you cannot do the work yourself but even then, it is important that you direct and manage these contractors when they are working on your land.

MONITORING

When farming, you see your land and stock every day so you can play an important role in monitoring how 'farming for conservation' works are going: from scrub control to water provision. You are also best placed to assess the grazing levels on winterages and judge the condition of your stock. This farm-level monitoring and feedback is very important in refining your farming for conservation practices.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION

We all have a lot to learn from each other with regard to farming for conservation. Peer learning between farmers and via farm walks and talks are important ways in building up a 'farming for conservation' knowledge base around the Burren – all farmers can contribute towards this as well as benefit from it.

PROMOTING

Farmers must take ownership of the 'farming for conservation' agenda if it is to be successful. Tell your friends and neighbours, visitors and acquaintances about farming for conservation and the need for their support. This is your scheme, you are the one who stands to benefit most from it, *so take ownership of it* and help spread the word.





BurrenLIFE - Farming for Conservation in the Burren

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