

# Wild Nephin

## IRELAND'S FIRST WILDERNESS PROJECT

To those devoid of imagination, a blank place on the map is a useless waste, to others the most valuable part.

*Aldo Leopold*

The concept of a dedicated wilderness area is new to an Irish audience, but is an accepted part of the recreation and conservation landscapes in many countries throughout the world. The area around the Nephin Beg Range in North County Mayo is well suited to the creation of a Ireland's first wilderness. Despite the rapid encroachment of infrastructure in many areas in recent years, here we can still draw on large expanses of unpopulated land where it's truly possible to make a complete break with 21st century development.

Wild Nephin will be Ireland's first such wilderness. It's an ambitious and innovative project that aims to set aside an area of approximately **8,000 hectares** of forestland and national park lands in the heart of the Nephin Beg Range. Apart from its recreation potential, Wild Nephin will also protect a valuable and unique Irish landscape and enhance biodiversity and nature conservation for the enjoyment of future generations.

The project represents an exciting and challenging manifestation of the partners commitment to *sustain the earth's natural resources and attract people to nature*. For the first time, we will be setting aside a protected landscape that will be shaped not by man but by wild processes, free from human intrusions.

### The role of wilderness today

The 19th Century American naturalist and philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, famously said that *"in wildness is the preservation of the world"*. Thoreau was not arguing for a rejection of the modern world, but argued that society needed wild places as a balance to the modern world – places where the human spirit could be re-created.

And few places in Ireland fit the bill in this regard so perfectly as the area around the Nephin Beg range, described by the Irish naturalist, Robert Lloyd Praeger, as the *"loneliest place in Ireland"*. He qualified this comment by referring to it "not as depressing but inspiring. You are thrown at the same time back upon yourself and forward against the mystery and majesty of nature...". This is our vision for Wild Nephin – a landscape that can inspire and uplift the human spirit.

Wild Nephin is an extremely timely initiative in an increasingly developed and urbanised Ireland, where people need to sometimes step out of their daily modern lives into a wild environment where they can challenge themselves, experience nature in all its elements and move at a slower and more ancient pace. A place where nature is the dominant driving force, allowing plants, animals and natural habitats to develop in harmony.

## Where Nature Prevails

Wild Nephin will offer a safe sanctuary for plants and animals and will provide valuable biodiversity reserves in an otherwise increasingly managed national landscape. And over time, it will give us the opportunity to study natural processes, while also allowing the development of wild forest conditions and possibly old growth forests.

While wild places have an innate value, it is through human interaction that much of their value can be recognised and captured. Recreation is at the heart of this interaction, and it differentiates wilderness from other landscape or nature conservation areas. Mayo already prides itself as the adventure and wild capital of Ireland and Wild Nephin will take this on to the next level by providing visitors with the opportunity to experience wilderness on a number of levels. Wild Nephin will welcome recreation while recognising that man is simply a visitor to this wild environment.



*lean-to shelters and primitive campsites will accommodate multi day usage*

## Experiencing Wild Nephin

Wild Nephin will be accessed by the public in a number of ways – from a gentle introduction of an hour or two for the general visitor to a full wilderness experience lasting several days for the more experienced. To facilitate this, the area has been broken into a number of key zones – **developed natural**, **semi primitive** and the **primitive** zones (See map).

The **developed natural zone** is the area where human impact is at its most obvious with roads, forest operations, buildings etc. While the houses and roads in this zone will remain, they reduce the opportunity to experience the wildest elements of the landscape. This zone, however, will provide an ideal introduction to the casual and less experienced visitor who has limited time but wants a first taste of this magnificent wild landscape. Opportunities to learn about the rare plants and animals and the unique habitats of Wild Nephin will also be on offer here.

We will provide facilities in this area to guide visitors as they explore the edge of the primitive and semi-primitive zones - the core wilderness. The proposed facilities will include a main car park, an interpretative kiosk, composting toilets and an overnight caravan and camping area – “camp in the woods” style.

A stacked loop trail system will offer wilder and more challenging experiences as visitors explore further from

the centre. Sustainable trails will be constructed to bring walkers to vantage points that offer a glimpse to the primitive areas beyond. The main trail construction will be limited to the developed zone.

## Challenging Wilderness Experiences

The **primitive and semi-primitive zones** will encompass some **2,870ha** of forest land, and approximately another 3,000ha of national park land encompassing forest, mountain, lakes and bog. This will offer visitors a unique opportunity in Ireland to experience a two to three-day backpack or long-day hikes in remote and challenging country, free of vehicle traffic, houses, power lines and at night light pollution.

To deliver on this promise, it is proposed to close the forest roads at Letterkeen, and to re-engineer the forest roads at the northern end as trails over the course of the 15 year conversion. New routes and trails will be laid out with limited way marking to provide an authentic recreation experience. No public roads will be affected.

A number of designated overnight campsites (see potential locations on map) will also be provided, with the provision of primitive shelters, tent platforms, fire rings and privies. A new trail will link the forest via Scardaun Loughs to the Bangor Trail by a sustainable route.

Car parking (for 6-8 vehicles) and trailheads will also be provided at the northern end of the forest to allow access to important fishing lakes and access (on foot only) to Nephin Beg and Corslieve.



*Trails will provide sustainable but challenging access for recreation users*

## A landscape driven by natural processes

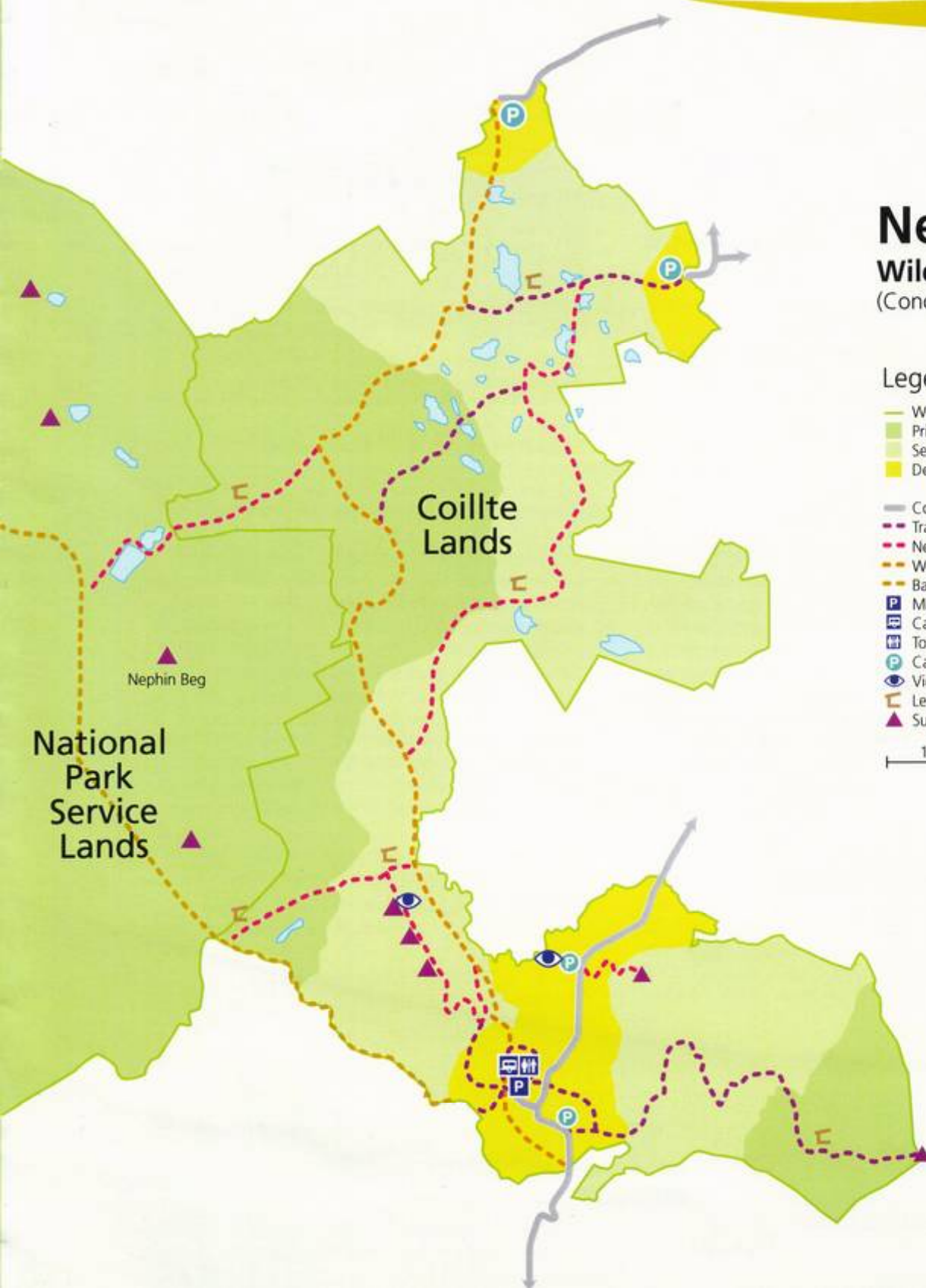
The landscape around Nephin Beg is one of the most unique areas in Ireland – an area without habitation, county roads or built human infrastructure. Wild Nephin envisages a wilderness area of approximately **8,000 ha**. This will involve both Coillte and NPWS lands, managed under a partnership agreement.

Conifer forests, while not natural, represent an important landscape type in the west of Ireland. Wild Nephin will set aside and protect these as undisturbed examples and allow them to develop to their wild potential. Forest landscapes also have a high carrying capacity value for recreation and the protection of the forest landscape will enhance the recreation value of this landscape, and in particular, the adjacent National Park lands.

Over the course of the 15-year conversion plan, timber harvesting and reforestation will aim to improve the landscape and habitat qualities through landscape design.



*This varied landscape with forest, lake, bog and open mountain offer many opportunities for nature conservation and biodiversity enhancement*



# Nephin Wilderness Area

(Concept Plan)

## Legend

- Wilderness Boundary
- Primitive Area
- Semi Primitive Area
- Developed Natural Area
- County Roads
- Trail (Old Forest Road)
- New Trail
- Western Way
- Bangor Trail
- P Main Car Park
- P Camping Field
- P Toilets
- P Car Parks
- P Viewpoints
- P Lean To (Primitive Campsite)
- Summits/High points

1km

Forest removal will focus on opening vistas onto the mountainous terrain and lakes, improving the boundaries between forest and adjacent open land and preparing areas for bog and riparian zone restoration. Forest regeneration will aim to encourage natural regeneration and more "natural forest types". Any harvesting will fit within the objectives of improving landscape and habitat quality as a priority.



*Developing a matrix of habitats through selective harvesting and habitat restoration will be key to the longterm viability of the wilderness*

## Enhancing nature conservation and biodiversity

Wild Nephin presents very real opportunities to increase biodiversity and nature conservation values: both within the existing forest but also in the area of adjacent national park. The forest is bounded by Special Areas of Conservation, which overlap with the national park lands, and within the forest boundary there are areas of intact bog, open uplands, rivers, lakes and conifer plantations.

Nature conservation will be a key part of Wild Nephin and will range from activities such as bogland habitat restoration, improving riparian zones, potential species introductions (such as the red squirrel, black grouse) to the development of "old growth" naturalised forests through selective harvesting. Control of invasive alien species such as Rhododendron will be a key element in the southern part of the forest. If left unchecked these invasive species have the potential to significantly reduce the conservation values of Wild Nephin. The long term aim is to develop a matrix of wild habitats such as forest, bogland and other habitats that have the potential to sustain their existence without further human intervention and provide homes for some of Ireland's rarest species.

## A unique tourist site to support the local community

Over the last number of years, County Mayo has built a very strong tourism offering on its wild mountains,

forests, rivers and lakes, bogs and coast. The county has some of the wildest and most challenging landscapes in the country which will continue to attract tourists and recreation users seeking a different, more challenging and authentic experience.

Wild Nephin represents a unique opportunity to build on this tourism infrastructure already in place such as the Greenway and the Ballycroy Park Centre, offering a very different and exciting outdoor experience that will attract increased visitor numbers and strengthen County Mayo's tourism sector. It will provide an iconic landscape as a backdrop for adventure tourism and enhance County Mayo's reputation as Ireland's definitive wild destination.



*Simple and appropriate interpretation will be provided at the main car parks to inform and educate visitors*

## Management and timescale

Conversion of the forest area to a full wilderness is expected to take 15 years. Over that timeframe, selected areas will be harvested and converted to restored woodlands, bog lands and riparian zones. Recreation facilities will be developed on a phased basis, with the provision of designated camping facilities in the core area and visitor facilities in the developed natural zone a priority. Forest roads will be removed or re-engineered to trails as work is completed and the area moves to a "no-management regime" in a particular zone.

Once the conversion is complete, the management of the area will focus on managing human activities to ensure the protection of the environment and the recreation experience - and not on the management of the resource.

The conversion project will be overseen and managed by a Wild Nephin project team drawn from Coillte and its partners.

