

SPEECH BY

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MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

AT THE

LAUNCH OF THE MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR WICKLOW MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

2005 – 2009

AND

THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF HIS DEPARTMENT'S NEW HEADQUARTER OFFICES FOR

THE WICKLOW MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK AT KILAFIN, COUNTY WICKLOW.

FRIDAY, 29 APRIL, 2005.

Chairman and members of the Wicklow Mountains National Park Council.

Representatives from the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my own Department.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here in Kilafin today for two reasons:

- to launch the Wicklow Mountains National Park Management Plan 2005-9 and, using this same important event,
- to officially open this fine headquarters building of my Department for the Wicklow Mountains National Park.

The Wicklow Mountains National Park Management Plan 2005-9 has been the product of a lengthy but highly constructive process of engagement.

From the outset, I would like to highly commend all those who have been involved in this process. In particular, I would like to extend my congratulations and sincere thanks to the Wicklow Mountains National Park Council. I warmly welcome the Council Chairman, Mr. Tom Gregan, and all his fellow Council members – dedicated people who have made an invaluable contribution to the elaboration of the Plan and who gave so much of their time voluntarily and tirelessly to work in tandem with the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department to reach this goal. These Council members represent many various stakeholders, such as farmers and recreational users, with a very keen interest in how this gem of our natural heritage is managed. Their sterling work, which was carried out in close consultation with my Department, has resulted in the publication of the strategic document which I am launching here this evening.

As many of you here today will know, the establishment of this area of the country as a National Park is a relatively recent event. Indeed, it was only in 1991 that an initial core of 3,700 hectares formed the first manifestation of the

National Park, comprising the statutory Nature Reserves of the Glendalough Woods, the Glenealo Valley, as well as lands that were transferred from the Forest Service and lands which were purchased from the Powerscourt Estate. We are extremely fortunate that, through acquisition of further lands from Coillte and the judicious purchase of private lands, we have now in our charge a Park encompassing some 17,000 hectares. It comprises a wonderful and varied landscape, including areas of blanket bog and heath; woodlands; exposed rock; lakes and rivers, within which are found a number of notable plant and animal species. It also borders upon one of the country's great early Christian monastic sites and one of the showpieces of our built heritage at Glendalough, which is also held in care by the State on behalf of the people of Ireland.

Wicklow Mountains National Park is, by any standards, an important recreational resource for a large catchment area, including the prospering towns of Wicklow and the greater Dublin area. Its beauty is renowned the world over, and as such, it attracts many visitors from further afield. Therefore it is vital that the balance between the conservation imperative and visitor use be developed and fairly struck. Wicklow Mountains National Park is a worthy example of how a National Park can meet the needs of visitors, while simultaneously conserving our natural resources. It represents a wonderful and cherished inheritance, providing strong links to our history; providing children and families with strong and lasting connections to our heritage; and, through an attractive range of educational programmes, serves as a living classroom to school children and other educational consumers.

Some time ago, my Department announced an exciting new strategy to put in place the first ever management planning process for the country's six National Parks. This was in recognition of the fact that our natural heritage can only be secured for future generations if it is effectively conserved, protected and efficiently managed by this generation. In order to achieve this key objective, an inclusive management approach which incorporates all stakeholders is called for.

The Wicklow Mountains National Park Management Plan 2005-9 is the first Plan to emerge under my Department's new management planning strategy. As the Minister responsible for this Park and Dail representative for Wicklow, it gives me particular pleasure that this Park is in the lead of this important new strategy for our National Parks. I have every confidence that it will serve as an excellent template for the management planning that will apply to all of Ireland's National Parks over the coming years. And here I should record that an important element of the strategy has been the putting out of the draft Plan to a period of public consultation after it had been signed off by the Park Council. This final public consultation phase attracted a number of submissions on the draft plan and I am pleased to say that it has informed and enhanced the final version of the Plan which I am launching here to-day. Indeed, some of those who made submissions on the Plan are here to-day and I welcome them also to this event.

This Management Plan provides a platform for the introduction of strategies which have a strong emphasis on the conservation of our natural heritage while encouraging public appreciation of that heritage. It encourages sustainable recreational and educational use of the Park. It provides information and facilities for visitors that will increase awareness of our natural heritage. And, it also facilitates the research which is essential in achieving our commitments to conservation.

Critically, however, this Plan also builds upon some very solid achievements in this Park in recent years. For example, due to the impact of erosion arising from extensive hill walking and visitor usage, significant remedial work has been carried out on upland pathways; some very successful boardwalking works have been carried out in areas of the National Park e.g. at Spink and at Whitehill; and extensive path restoration and drainage works were completed at Djouce Mountain in co-operation with *Mountain Meitheal*, a local voluntary group. As you will be aware, these works have greatly enhanced the mountain experience, and have made access possible for many people who would not have been able to attain their objective of enjoying these spaces because of the difficult terrain.

In addition, 9 way-marked trails were established in 2003/4 around Glendalough. These are of varying grades and also vary in distance from 1.7 Km to 11 km. They utilise existing tracks and paths and a number of information panels located around the Valley provide information on the routes. In addition, a very informative guide and map of these routes has been produced.

I particularly salute the fact that Park staff have completed a boardwalk around the lower lake at Glendalough, offering those with physical disabilities, in particular, easy access to the lower lake area and between the Visitor Centre and the Upper Lake.

Building on these sound achievements of the past, it is my responsibility as Minister to ensure that Wicklow Mountains National Park is developed as a protected habitat for wildlife and an amenity of the highest international standards for the residents of Wicklow, for all our visitors and for our generations to come. I am most pleased, therefore, to see that the Plan addresses all the principal issues and challenges of conservation management of our natural habitats and landscapes.

I am confident that this Plan, whose implementation has already commenced this year, will stand the test of time and that the targets and strategies which it sets out for a period of five years can and will be achieved.

In the current year, 2005, among the many targets which are and will be addressed here are:

- the continuation of pathworks and the completion of stone pitching of the White Route at Glendalough, which is an extension of the boardwalking works carried out at Spink;
- as a critical first phase in the delineation of the Park's boundaries, the mapping, checking and auditing of access points and boundaries;

- the carrying out of an access audit of the Park for visitors with disabilities or limited mobility, coupled with some works to enhance disability access and to promote a disabled nature trail;
- the commencement of preparation of a Vegetation Map of the Park;
- the completion of the review of the Education Programme for the Park together with decisions on future orientations;
- the completion of the wonderful sensory garden at the Glendalough Information Office;
- construction of a replacement bridge near the Coronation plantation at Joseph's Cottage, further underpinning the Plan's commitment to the provision of greater access;
- the identification of further lands to be transferred to the Park from Coillte and agreement on a schedule for this transfer;
- the launch of a Wild Camping Code for the Park in conjunction with the Irish Mountaineering Council and some other user groups; and
- the preparation of a Hydrology Report for Shranamuck, otherwise known as the cut-over area of the Liffey Head Bog, with a view to restoring the habitat to its previous pre-cutting state.

I hope that the foregoing provides you with a flavour of the types of focussed interventions which can be achieved by way of a management planning process for this Park. To enable me to implement the Plan, I should mention that I have at my disposal some 18 personnel based in the Park and a total budget of €1.75 million for the Park this year. Compared with a total budget of € 1.05 million for 2004, this represents a 67% increase in the budget for 2005, and is an earnest of my commitment to implement this Plan.

It is my sincere wish that the fruitful partnership between the members of the Park Council and the personnel of the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department will continue in the monitoring and review of progress of this Plan in order to achieve the strategies and targets laid out therein.

The other important element of my presence here today with you is to mark the official opening of my Department's fine new headquarters for the Wicklow Mountains National Park here at Kilafin. Indeed, apart from being the Park headquarters, it will also be the new "home" for the Wicklow Mountains National Park Council as they oversee the implementation of the Management Plan for the next five years.

When the Park was established in 1991, the administrative headquarters was temporarily housed in rented accommodation near Glendalough. In 1996, a cottage and outbuildings with 2 acres was purchased here at Kilafin, and a further 12 acres of mature Sitka spruce woodland surrounding this property was purchased from Coillte Teoranta.

The first phase of building consisted of a timber-frame construction adjoining the cottage, and included a large open plan office for Conservation Rangers, individual offices, canteen and storage facilities. The second phase of building development here involved raising the roof level of a coachhouse which was adjacent to the cottage residence. This renovation work provides an excellent and spacious conference room, library, upstairs disabled access and a large office and reception hall. Incorporated into this section is a glazed observation tower containing a wooden staircase which is testimony to the skills of Irish craftsmen. Elsewhere down the site a little, a large storage facility has also been constructed for securing machinery and equipment. Additional facilities, such as a drying room, tea-room, were also provided in this building for the Park maintenance team.

The Office of Public Works is to be congratulated for the quality, design and project management of the work here at Kilafin. I would like to pay tribute to the OPW design team of Brian Hamilton, Michael Hennebry and Finbar Murphy. They and the building contractors, Redmond Brothers of Arklow, have provided buildings for us that are both practical and aesthetically pleasing. The entire office building is timber-frame clad with cedar, for which tribute must be paid to John O'Halloran of the local firm, Wood Industries, from Rathdrum. This blends in very suitably with the rural and wooded

landscape. Moreover, the small landscape garden outside here, with its water features and dry stone walls, mirrors the features of the locality very well.

While Wicklow Mountains National Park goes from strength to strength, this would not be possible without a team of my Department's dedicated National Parks and Wildlife Service personnel on the ground. In particular, I would like to extend my warm appreciation to Sean Casey, the Divisional Manager, and all his team here, as well as to Monica Byrne, the office administrator for these headquarters. This wonderful reception organised by them and their colleagues this evening is a mere token example of the high standards they apply to their work at all times.

To conclude, I wish to thank you all for your time and attention and I invite you to partake of the refreshments that have been provided. Enjoy the rest of the evening – what better way to start a Bank Holiday weekend!