R E P O R T

Green Foundation Ireland, along with the
NPWS, Glenveagh National Park, Leave No Trace
and Common Purpose, invite you to an
in-person evening talk

Restoring Our Native Irish Woodlands

Venue: **Glenveagh National Park**
Letterkenny, County Donegal

Thursday 21 May 2026 – 19:00

This event is part of the National Biodiversity Week 2026
organised by Irish Environmental Network

TALK: *"Restoring Our Native Irish Woodlands"*

THEME

As part of the **Le Chéile don Dúlra Festival** during Ireland's **National Biodiversity Week 2026**, Green Foundation Ireland, in collaboration with the **NPWS**, **Glenveagh National Park**, **Leave No Trace** and **Common Purpose**, supported and participated in this highly successful engagement event.

It was preceded by a **Leaders for Nature** Gathering, bringing together participants from the 2025/26 programme from NGOs as well as the public and private sector who are engaged in nature restoration. These participants then stayed on for our talk.

This event aimed to:

- Promote awareness of **native woodland restoration** in Ireland.
- Foster **collaboration and networking** among participants and stakeholders.
- Highlight **progress on nature restoration within National Parks**, particularly Glenveagh.
- Facilitate **open dialogue across sectors**, including farming and conservation.
- Encourage **long-term thinking** in environmental planning.

Around 70 participants reflected strong interest in woodland restoration, biodiversity, and sustainable land management.

This event was part of the National Biodiversity Week 2026
organised by Irish Environmental Network

and

Glenveagh's Biodiversity Festival Le Chéile don Dúlra – Together for Nature.

ABOUT THE EVENT

The evening was structured as a **blended programme** of networking, storytelling, cultural reflection, and expert discussion.

Programme Highlights

- **7:00pm – Welcome to Glenveagh**
  Opening remarks by **Emmett Johnson** (Park Manager) and **Clare Bromley** (NPWS) set the scene and highlighted the importance of Glenveagh as a restoration landscape.

- **7:10pm – Poetry Reading**
  Introduction to the work of the Donegal poet Francis Harvey was by **Brian Gormley** (Green Foundation Ireland), grounding the evening in cultural reflection and connection to place. Members of the Harvey family were present and read *Blessings*:

  ***Blessings* by Francis Harvey**

  Yesterday, for some reason I couldn't
  understand, I suddenly felt starved of
  tress and had to make tracks towards
  the beeches of Lough Eske to set my heart
  at ease and stand there slowly adjusting
  myself to the overwhelming presence of
  all those trees.

  It was like coming back among
  people again after living for ages
  alone and as I reached out and laid my
  right hand in blessing on the trunk of
  a beech that had the solidity but not
  the coldness of stone I knew it for
  the living thing it was under the palm
  of my hand as surely as I know the living
  sensuousness of flesh and bone and my
  blessing was returned a hundredfold
  before it was time for me to go home.

- **7:15pm – The Leaders for Nature Course**
  Maura Kiely (CEO of Leave No Trace) and **Megan Best** (CEO of Native Events) outlined the origins, impact, and future of the programme. GFI participated in the programme in 2025/26.

- **7:30pm – Participant Stories and Reflections**
  Contributions from:

  - Therese Kelly (NPWS – Offaly)
  - Cathy Fitzgerald (Haumea Ecoversity)
  - Clare Bromley (NPWS – Donegal)
  - Brian Gormley (Green Foundation Ireland)

These personal reflections highlighted leadership journeys and practical experiences in nature restoration and restoring native woodlands.

- **7:55pm – Poetry Reading**
  The Harvey family read two more short nature-focused poems, and reinforced the emotional and cultural dimension of environmental stewardship.
- **8:00pm – Panel Discussion: "Restoring Our Native Irish Woodlands"**
  Facilitated by **John Gormley** (Green Foundation Ireland) with panel members:
    - Ray Ó Foghú (**Hometree**)
    - Emmett Johnson (**NPWS**)
    - Sue Callaghan (**NPWS**)
    - Melinda Swann (**NPWS**)

  The session invited audience participation and open discussion. The discussion points are covered below in Key Themes and Discussion Points

The panel discussion finished at 9pm, but there was continued discussion, with food, music, and networking until 11pm which strengthened relationships and deepened dialogue.

Key Themes and Discussion Points

1. A Hopeful Outlook for Woodland Restoration

The panel discussion was notably **positive and forward-looking**.

Speakers highlighted **real progress in Ireland's National Parks**, particularly since increased funding and resources in the past five years. This has facilitated progress in:

- The **eradication of invasive species such as rhododendron, and the management of deer numbers**.
- Active **restoration of native woodland habitats**.
- Increasing ecological expertise and monitoring.

Glenveagh National Park itself was presented as a **living example of restoration in action**, demonstrating what sustained commitment can achieve. One area that was highlighted was the clear-felling of an area of lodgepole pine, which is now being planted with native tree species, but will look unsightly for a number of years which requires engagement with the public to explain what is happening.

2. The Role and Perspective of Farmers

A significant theme was the evolving experience of farmers, which was discussed at length by Ray Ó Foghlú of **Hometree** which operate a number of schemes with landowners and farmers.

- Many farmers expressed concern that they are now being **criticised for implementing past government policies**.

- Historically, they were encouraged to **increase productivity**, including converting "bad land" into "good land".
- There is now pressure in some cases to **reverse these changes**, creating uncertainty and a feeling that they are undoing good work done by their predecessors.

These issues and themes have also been explored by **Pat Brereton** in his recent book ***Farming in Ireland: Climate and Crisis*** *(Wordwell Books, 2026)* and have highlighted a need for:

- **Clearer policy alignment**.
- Recognition of historical context.
- **Practical and fair transition pathways** toward sustainable land use.

3. Thinking Long-Term: A 100-Year Perspective

A powerful message throughout the evening was the importance of **long-term thinking** – for example, moving from 5-year planning cycles to **100-year visions**.

Participants recognised that:

- Woodland restoration is inherently **intergenerational**.
- Ecological systems require **decades to mature and the need for a speedy financial return creates a conflict with longer term planning**.
- Policy and investment must reflect these timelines.

4. Balancing Access and Conservation

Glenveagh also illustrated a key challenge facing protected areas:

- Encouraging **public access and appreciation of nature**.
- Preventing **environmental degradation caused by visitor pressure**.

Discussions focused on:

- Responsible visitor management.
- Sustainable infrastructure design.
- Public education on protecting biodiversity.

Outcomes and Impact

The event delivered strong outcomes:

- **Deepened collaboration** among **Leaders for Nature** participants.
- Increased awareness of **woodland restoration challenges and successes**.
- Constructive cross-sector dialogue, particularly between **conservationists and farmers**.
- Reinforcement of the importance of **long-term ecological planning**.

Importantly, the tone of the evening was one of **hope, realism, and shared responsibility**.

Key Takeaways

- Ireland is making **meaningful progress** in restoring native woodlands.
- National Parks play a critical role as **demonstration landscapes**.
- Farmers must be supported as **key partners in land stewardship**.
- Long-term (100-year) thinking is essential for ecological success.
- Managing the **balance between access and conservation** remains crucial.
- Collaboration and dialogue are central to delivering sustainable solutions.

Conclusion

The Glenveagh event exemplified the power of **bringing people together in place-based dialogue**.

By combining storytelling, science, policy discussion, and cultural reflection, the event created a **rich and hopeful conversation about Ireland's ecological future**.

As part of the **Le Chéile don Dúlra Festival**, it demonstrated that **restoring nature is not only a technical challenge, but also a social and cultural one**, requiring leadership, collaboration, and long-term commitment.

Green Foundation Ireland is proud to have contributed to this important gathering and looks forward to supporting continued progress in **restoring Ireland's native woodlands and biodiversity**. The event strengthened our links with staff from **NPWS**, from **BIM**, and from **Atlantic Technological University**, as well as leaders from other environmental NGOs such as **Hometree** and **Haumea Ecoversity**. Several potential future collaborations were identified. It was also important to host a GFI event in Ulster as we aim to strengthen our presence and activities on an all-island basis.

You can see photos of our event here.

Green Foundation Ireland ***25 May 2026***