

**September 19<sup>th</sup> 2023**

**Chair of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, Dr Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin, opening statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action**

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A Chathaoirleach, a Theachtaí Dálaí, a Sheanadóirí, a dhaoine uaisle go léir. Go raibh míle maith agaibh as ucht an deis bheith libh inniu chun labhair faoin obair tábhachtach atá déanta ag an Tionól Saoránach ar Laghdú Bithéagsúlacht.

Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland have, since their commencement with the Constitutional Convention, asked the people to work on behalf of their fellow country men and women to put forward solutions to large, societal problems. This Citizens' Assembly was tasked by the Oireachtas to examine and consider how the State can improve its response to the crisis of biodiversity loss declared by Dáil Éireann in 2019. In this, the State provided its citizens with a voice on how they/we want Nature to be managed, now and into the future.

20,000 people were invited to take part in this Citizens' Assembly and over 2,300 of those responded positively to the invitation, with 99 members then invited to take part in this deliberative democracy process as a representative snap-shot of society. As Chair, I would like to again thank each of these members for their participation in this civic duty and for giving so generously of their time in considering this complex problem. It was a powerful example of community and a wonderful depiction of a 'meitheal' in contributing to our societal and policy landscape. It has been my privilege to be part of this process and to

experience how Ireland is in a unique international spotlight when it comes to the work and, most importantly, outcomes of our Citizens' Assemblies.

I would like to also thank all of those who submitted to the Assembly. Over 600 submissions from individuals, volunteer groups, industry and communities across Ireland and the world made valuable contributions to this, the world's first national Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss.

Nature can, at times, seem inconvenient to us. But, fundamentally, we as humans are only one part of Nature and we rely solely on it to provide for us and to protect us. At the heart of the work of this Citizens' Assembly was a realisation that a breakdown between humanity and the natural world – such as we are seeing today - puts us all at risk.

Over the course of 10 months, the Assembly participated in an evidence-based work programme, which also highlighted and incorporated valuable and varied input of voices from the ground and from communities affected by or working with our environment. The 159 recommendations agreed and voted on by members were parsed into the various policy, industry and voluntary sectors across the whole of society that impact on and are impacted by biodiversity. The recommendations and the wording therein were carefully deliberated and discussed by the Assembly, and I encourage anyone watching proceedings today to read through them in the first chapter of the report that is available online and which you have before you today.

We are incredibly lucky in Ireland to have such a wealth of environment and natural heritage. We are also lucky that we have a society that trusts in scientific processes and research. The first element of our work was to consider the devastating problem of biodiversity loss that we are in. In doing so, it was both surprising and depressing to learn of the poor state of our freshwater, our marine environment, our grasslands, peatlands, forestry, hedgerows and wildlife.

I believe, however, that we are now witnessing a sea change in how people are considering, valuing and looking after the environment around them and that the outcomes of this Assembly speak to this.

People in Ireland care about Nature.

As someone who proudly comes from rural Ireland, a small townland in Co. Mayo, I am delighted to note that over 60% of the Assembly membership was from rural Ireland. While we hear much rhetoric on the 'urban/rural' divide in terms of care of the environment, no such divide was apparent in the room. This mirrors research findings from the ESRI, which has previously been presented to this Committee, that people both young and old and from rural and urban areas are worried about our environment and want more to be done. Yes, in our Assembly meetings there were differences of opinion and differences in experiences, but through respectful listening, dialogue and engagement, powerful tools of deliberative democracy, the Assembly came to overwhelming majority agreement on nearly all of the recommendations you see before you today.

The first section of recommendations made by this Assembly emphasises the need for urgent action to be taken by the State. Figures outlining our biodiversity loss are stark with many plant, animal and bird species in danger of extinction, almost 30% of our semi-natural grasslands have disappeared, less than half of our marine environment is in a healthy state and almost 50% of our freshwater systems are in unsatisfactory condition – where we once had over 500 pristine rivers, we now have on 32.

Members of the Assembly wanted to highlight and emphasise the vital role the State has in creating an informed and enabling environment for action across the whole of society. A recurring theme across the work of the Assembly was the failure of the State to implement its own laws with regards to Nature and members emphasised the progress that can be made by enacting current legislation and policies. Members noted the key roles of local communities, local authorities, NGOs and the National Parks & Wildlife Service in addressing the biodiversity crisis and highlighted the need to properly resource these to enact national legislation.

As Chair and on behalf of members of this Citizens' Assembly I would like to pay tribute to farmers. From hedgerows in Tipperary to the hills of Donegal; from commonage in Connemara to clover pastures in Cork; from vegetable growers in Dublin to organic farmers in Clare, we respect and value their work, expertise and knowledge. Farmers are the custodians of almost 70% of the Irish landscape, producing food for us while also mindful of

the Nature and wildlife living on their land. The members of this Assembly, many of whom were members of farming communities, recommend, ask and encourage the State to acknowledge and reward farmers accordingly for this vital work.

The Assembly want farmers to be included as key actors in discussions required around changes necessary to policy and recognise their key role in solving the problem of biodiversity loss. The work of the Assembly points towards the fact that we can no longer focus solely on maximising production outputs from farming, but optimising farm practices within environmental bounds. Farmers who addressed the Assembly emphasised the fact that farmers will respond to changes in policy, but these need to be meaningful, widely available and of sufficient duration to make it worthwhile to significantly realign their practice.

As we saw with the recent EU Nature Restoration Law, which was supported by this Citizens' Assembly, policymakers and states can often come under siege by lobbyists and vested interests. We are reminded, however, that there are no thriving industries or economies on a planet where Nature has gone beyond a point of repair. In this, members of this Assembly have recommended that the agri-food and other industries must contribute to the conservation and restoration of the environment, from which their shareholders benefit. Members of the Assembly want to highlight that the economy is a subset of Nature. We can strengthen our economy by valuing the eco-system services Nature provides, as well as building our reputation as a country which authentically values its land and wildlife.

I would like to draw the attention of this committee to the fact that members of the Assembly recommended that Ireland adopt the UN human right to a clean, healthy, safe environment as a fundamental part of our constitution. This is, perhaps, something we have taken for granted in this beautiful country of ours but, unfortunately, we can no longer presume it will be here for us to enjoy without protecting it. In this, our members have also aligned with other countries in recommending that Nature have a right to exist without being irreparably damaged by humans. A key message that underpinned the work of this Assembly was that *'we should be good ancestors in considering those coming after us'* and leaving this land in as good a condition as possible for future generations - our grandchildren, great-great grandchildren and beyond. This is something we all bear responsibility for.

From urban planning, to peatlands, from invasive species to the ocean, the members of this Assembly have carefully considered the balance between economy, society and Nature in their recommendations and return these now to the Oireachtas as a package of measures suggesting how we can attempt to address this fundamental crisis we find ourselves in. The number of recommendations reflect the breadth and depth of the issue that we face, but with political will, public awareness and actions of public authorities we can turn the direction of biodiversity loss towards biodiversity conservation and biodiversity gain. I would encourage individuals, groups, businesses, and councils to reference the recommendations in seeing what they themselves can do. However, from the perspective of this Committee, it is the structural and policy changes that will have a positive and lasting legacy for this State.

This can become the era where significant change is witnessed, where we can be good ancestors. We can restore and conserve Nature for our economic, societal, physical, mental, creative and community well-being.

From a personal perspective, and background in stargazing and physics, our planet is quite insignificant and Earth is nothing unless humanity works together. As our elected representatives, the cathedral thinking required for us to build structures and lasting policies on Nature for future generations to benefit from lies in your hands. The people are behind you on this.

Is féidir linn baint ceart le neart na dnúl – Mairtín Ó Direáin