

## Nature Designations on Waterways: Why Bother?

*Paddy Mackey*



**Ducks at Wineport**

SACs, SPAs, NHAs: there's a conversation stopper or three! Most of us are confused by the alphabet soup of the different designations that exist to protect natural habitats. Like all systems devised by bureaucracy, they tend not to be user-friendly and can often leave people wondering what all the fuss is about and why we have them in the first place.

But picture this, a fine summer day as you guide your pride and joy along one of our inland waterways, blue skies, sunshine, all's well with the world. Around a bend and a kingfisher speeds from his perch on an overhanging tree; over to the right a family of swans make their regal passage downstream; by the reed-fringed bank a water hen skulks secretively, almost out of view. Three very different species with very different habits and food sources, all co-existing, along with many others, in what you might have thought was a fairly non-descript stretch of river.

Stop and think — well, not literally, you want to be on a high stool in a riverside hostelry by six bells. But take time to reflect and ask yourself, as my cockney cousin might say, "What's occurring here?" Why are these birds, so many different species, living in this part of the river? The answer is that they have enough food and shelter to get their living and make their home. Home equals **habitat** and that in short is what designations like SAC, SPA or NHA really mean to our wildlife.

Put simply, habitat is the difference between life and death for wildlife. Enough of it and they live and thrive to produce more young to continue populating the area; too little and they just fade away. Some species adapt well to the presence of humans and changes in their environment; others can only get by when conditions are just so.

It's more or less the same for the flora, which is protected by some of the designations. You might think you don't know beauties like Butterfly Orchid or Ladies Bedstraw, but you probably have admired them and passed by without introduction. Again these plants grow and blossom in simple magnificence in the right conditions, without which they just fade away like a fond memory. While important in itself in botanical terms, the bankside vegetation also plays host to lots of creepy crawlies like butterflies and dragonflies. While not everyone's cup of tea (especially when they get into it!), insects play a very important part in the scheme of nature and are a vital link in the food chain.

When we **designate** certain areas, along the waterways or elsewhere, it's a bit like our social contract with nature. You might look on it as a sort of PPF for fauna and flora! Sounds fair and reasonable, I hear you say. Who could possibly be against giving a bit of benchmarking to our natural environment?

Farmers of course spring to mind in this regard. With their **Dúchas Keep Out** signs and somewhat strident approach to public relations, farmers are often misunderstood in the debate about nature designations. We might do well to remember that, when we are tucked up at home of a winter's night dreaming about a new GPS or VHF, they may be out trying to get fodder to flood-stranded cattle. They regard themselves as being at the sharp end of land management — and having to make it pay into the bargain. If, as a society, we want to keep our end of the bargain with nature, we need to make arrangements with the farmers that recognize and develop their role. There is a lot of understanding and goodwill towards nature in the farming community if we can just find a way to tap into it.

Another group that tends to be somewhat less than sympathetic towards nature's needs is property developers, many of whom think that those old bits of wet ground near the river-bank are just crying out for a bit of “tidying up.” Take a few hundred tons of hardcore filling, add a couple of bungalows with jetties and Bob the Builder is off planning his next “exclusive up-market” venture. The thing about development is that it never stops voluntarily and therefore needs to be controlled in the interest of the common good. Other countries with larger populations and less open space than us have long since realized that you can't regard every bit of ground as a development site. Balance and sustainability are the watchwords, which come up again and again when discussing development along rivers, lakes and canals. Sustainable development is described as being **that which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations.**

A little thought and some serious forward planning and we should be able to ensure that developers can make a fair profit without destroying the environment.

So, just for the record, Ireland's main nature protection designations are

SACs: Special Areas of Conservation

SPAs: Special Protection Areas

NHAs: Natural Heritage Areas.

But in a way you could almost see them as signposts which point the way to show us that there is a lot more going on in the rushy, reedy places along our inland waterways than we might have realized. More about the designations, and whether they work or not, in the next issue.

Interesting web sites:

[www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)

[www.birdwatchireland.ie](http://www.birdwatchireland.ie)

[www.ipcc.ie](http://www.ipcc.ie)