

# DESIGNATION OF SITES FOR FISH UNDER THE EU HABITATS DIRECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

The EU Habitats Directive requires protection of species and habitats of European importance in Ireland. Six fish species will be given priority protection, together with other aquatic organisms. This paper outlines the relevance of this directive to Ireland's fish fauna, describes the process involved and sets out the position in Ireland regarding designation under this directive as of September 2003.

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## INTRODUCTION

The EU Habitats Directive of 1992 requires member states to designate Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) for a number of fish species. Five species of fish listed in Annex II of the Habitats Directive occur and breed in Ireland. These are twaite shad *Alosa fallax fallax* L. (including the freshwater Killarney shad or 'goureen' *A. f. killamensis* Tate Regan), brook lamprey *Lampetra planeri* (Bloch), river lamprey *L. fluviatilis* (L.), sea lamprey *Petromyzon marinus* (L.) and Atlantic salmon *Salmo salar* (L.). In addition, Allis shad *Alosa alosa* Lacépède is found in small numbers in some Irish rivers but so far is not known to breed here, and the sturgeon *Acipenser sturio* is considered a vagrant.

Other aquatic species listed in Annex II include freshwater pearl mussel *Margaritifera margaritifera*, white-clawed crayfish *Austropotamobius pallipes* (Lereboullet) and otter *Lutra lutra*.

## SELECTION CRITERIA FOR SACs

The site selection process is governed by Annex III of the Habitats Directive. The criteria for sites for species are as follows:

1. Size and density of the population of the species present at the site in relation to the populations present within the national territory.
2. Degree of conservation of the features of the habitat that are important for the species.
3. Degree of isolation of the population present at the site in relation to the natural range of the species.

4. Global assessment of the value of the site for the species concerned.

## RELEVANT SITE SELECTION ISSUES

Relatively little research has been carried out on shad and lamprey in Ireland, and knowledge on populations and ecological requirements is deficient from the point of view of site designation. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) commissioned reports to summarise current knowledge of the distribution of shad and lamprey (Kurz and Costello 1996a; 1996b; 1998). These reports, which were based on both literature searches and interviews with people with relevant knowledge, formed the basis for the selection of SACs for these species. NPWS has funded ongoing survey work on shad and lamprey by the Central Fisheries Board (CFB) on a number of large river systems, particularly in the south of the country. SACs were selected for designation for multiple interests of habitats and/or species listed in Annex II and Annex III, rather than on the basis of a single species.

Despite its economic importance, there was a significant lack of relevant scientific data for the Atlantic salmon to facilitate site designation. This may in some cases lead to the omission of sites, at least in the short term, from the Irish SAC list.

Designation of SACs for freshwater fish may have significant implication for owners of lands and rights along rivers. This means that many landowners are involved in the process, which greatly increases the amount of consultation and negotiation necessary to achieve conservation goals in the long term.

SPECIAL AREAS OF CONSERVATION  
SELECTION FOR SHAD AND LAMPREY

Selection of SACs for lamprey and shad is essentially complete. The sites and lamprey special qualifying interest are presented in Table 1.

SELECTION OF SITES FOR ATLANTIC SALMON

Annex II of the Directive refers to Atlantic salmon in freshwater only. The SAC will therefore normally include the areas important for spawning and the river channel, down as far as the high water mark in the estuary, although many estuaries are also designated for other habitats and species.

In addition to the criteria above, sites with important populations of salmon (including spring salmon) and adequate water quality and physical conditions that contribute to geographic range have been considered as SACs by the NPWS because they include other habitats or species listed in Annex II and Annex III.

In addition to the criteria above, NPWS shortlisted as potential SACs those sites that

- have important populations of salmon, including spring salmon
- have adequate water quality and physical condition
- contribute to the geographic range of the Atlantic salmon
- qualify because they include other habitats or species listed in Annex II and Annex III.

The Central Fisheries Board and Regional Fisheries Board, the Loughs Agency, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Marine Institute provided information on site selection. Other groups and individuals have also contributed to the list of potential SACs.

The following salmon waters are in the process of SAC designation and have legal protection. They

are listed geographically, starting on the east coast and moving clockwise around the country. The main rivers, along with many of their tributaries, are the Boyne/Blackwater Slaney, Barrow, Nore, Suir, Munster Blackwater, Laune/Lough Leane, Caragh, Lough Currane, Kerry Blackwater, Feale, Mulkear Lough Corrib/River Corrib, Erriff, Owenriff, Clifden River, Owenduff, Garavogue/Lough Gill/Bonet, Ballysadare/Unshin, Owenea, Bundrowes/Lough Melvin, Eske/Lough Eske, Gweebarra and Owencarrow.

Other rivers, largely undesignated to date, are now being examined as potential SACs. These are the River Finn (Donegal), River Moy and River Boyne/River Blackwater.

NEXT STEPS IN THE PROCESS TO  
PROTECT SACs

Negotiations are underway with the farming organisations as to the precise landward boundary that should be applied to river SACs. It will be necessary to draw up a prescription for farming along rivers in SACs. Agreement between farmers and relevant government departments needs to be made on this prescription with regard to the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive and other regulations that may also apply. Site designation will require that any proposed development (commercial, municipal, road infrastructure, etc.), activity (e.g., recreational pursuits) or discharge must be assessed to ensure that it will not impact negatively on the site.

The EU Commission will deliver a verdict on the sufficiency of Ireland's proposals for SACs and may require additional sites if not satisfied that they meet the requirements of the directive.

**Table 1—Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).**

<i>Site code</i>	<i>Site name</i>	<i>Species</i>
2171	Bandon River	<i>L. planeri</i>
2170	Blackwater River (Cork/Waterford)	<i>L. planeri</i> , <i>L. fluviatilis</i> , <i>P. marinus</i>
0365	Killarney National Park, MacGillycuddy's Reeks and Caragh River Catchment	<i>A. f. killarmensis</i> , <i>L. planeri</i> , <i>P. marinus</i>
0297	Lough Corrib	<i>P. marinus</i>
1976	Lough Gill	<i>L. planeri</i> , <i>L. fluviatilis</i> , <i>P. marinus</i>
2165	Lower River Shannon	<i>L. planeri</i> , <i>L. fluviatilis</i> , <i>P. marinus</i>
2137	Lower River Suir	<i>A. f. fallax</i> , <i>L. planeri</i> , <i>L. fluviatilis</i> , <i>P. marinus</i>
2162	River Barrow and River Nore	<i>A. f. fallax</i> , <i>L. planeri</i> , <i>L. fluviatilis</i> , <i>P. marinus</i>
0781	Slaney River Valley	<i>A. f. fallax</i> , <i>L. planeri</i> , <i>L. fluviatilis</i> , <i>P. marinus</i>

CONCLUSION

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SAC designation is a legal obligation under Irish and European law. It will not solve all the problems facing salmon and other fish species in Ireland. SAC status will, however, confer some improvement in control of river and riverbank exploitation and diffuse pollution. Catchment management is widely regarded as the most effective way forward for these issues.

Designation will give additional status to rivers and lakes when state and local authorities are considering planning permissions and other forms of licensing.

The principal responsibility for, and expertise in, fisheries management and protection will continue to lie with the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources (including the Fisheries Boards, the Marine Institute and, in some instances, the Electricity Supply Board and the Loughs Agency).

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