



# **Mid Shannon Wilderness Park**



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Future of the Longford Bogs.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1 Draft National Peatlands Strategy 2014 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2 Bord na Mona Bogs .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2.3 Corlea Archaeological Project .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3.0 Mid Shannon Wilderness Park .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>3.1 Amenity Potential of Mid Shannon Wilderness Park....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4.0 An Ecotourism Project.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4.1 Biodiversity .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4.2 Nature conservation and biodiversity corridors.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>5.0 Time Frame for Mid Shannon Wilderness Park.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Maps:</b>	
Map 1: BORD na MÓNA BOGS.....	6
Map 2: LANESBORO/ROSCOMMON BOGS.....	6
Map 3: MID SHANNON WILDERNESS PARK .....	11
Map 4: WALKING/CYCLING NETWORK MAP .....	12

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 MID SHANNON WILDERNESS PARK**

The Mid Shannon area of Longford in the Republic of Ireland is a little known lake, river, forest and bog area that supports a rich and diverse range of flora and fauna, archaeological monuments and traditional cultural practices. This report sets out a proposal to develop a Mid Shannon Wilderness Park in County Longford. The Park will be located between the Royal Canal and Lough Ree on the River Shannon. Much of the land involved is in State ownership. The development of such a large amenity park in Longford would provide the Midlands and Ireland with a major tourism attraction of international importance.

The development of a Mid Shannon Wilderness Park in Longford will combine existing natural amenity areas. These areas include Lough Ree, the Rivers Shannon, Inny and Camlin, the Royal Canal, Newcastle Wood and other forests and the future rehabilitated Bord na Móna bogs. All of these amenity areas are in very close proximity to each other and can be developed and combined to create the Wilderness Park. The Park would be developed in partnership between the various owners particularly Bord na Móna, local communities and Longford County Council.



**Pic 1: Mid Shannon Wilderness Park, Lough Ree from Athlone looking North.**

### **1.2 BORD NA MÓNA AND CUT AWAY BOGS.**

Over the next 15 years Bord na Móna will complete its peat extraction work on the Longford bogs and begin to plan for their future use. This will include carrying out rehabilitation work to create semi natural

landscapes which will produce potentially valuable amenity lands. It is now proposed for existing local communities and Longford County Council to partner with Bord na Móna and collaborate in developing new amenity uses for the cutaway bogs. This will not conflict with any future intention of Bord na Móna and its potential future use of the bogs. The amenity use of the rehabilitated bogs can be compatible with any future use for the bogs such as renewable energy projects.

### **1.3 TOURISM AND BIODIVERSITY**

The Mid Shannon Wilderness project aims to strengthen the integration of tourism and natural heritage, and to reconcile tourism development with conservation of biodiversity. It aims to secure environmental protection and sustainable visitor management through the creation of an innovative methodology that is of value to local communities. In European terms, the objective is to improve the environmental performance of the area and promote strategic integrated planning approaches for improving the use of land.

The aim of the project is to contribute to Ireland's and EU biodiversity objectives through the integration of tourism and biodiversity. The project will support the EU's promotion of sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism. The project will also stimulate a heritage community within its local partnership and enrich the heritage of the area. Finally, it will support the European landscape convention through the tourism conservation actions carried out on the fragile landscape of the area.



**No. 2 Typical Longford Mixed Bogland.**

**Pic.**

## 2. Future of the Longford Bogs.

### 2.1 Draft National Peatlands Strategy 2014

The recently published Draft National Peatlands Strategy 2014, produced by the National Parks and Wildlife Service advocates the following partnership approach:

‘NPS V 16 Responsible management of peatlands will require collaboration and partnership between land-owners, communities, public authorities, commercial organizations and non-governmental organizations. This Strategy aims to ensure that appropriate supports, structures, funding mechanisms and regulatory frameworks are in place to allow such partnership to develop.’



Pic. 3 Bord na Móna Bog

The following after use principles for cut away bogs are set down by the Draft Strategy:

NPS P 13 Bord na Móna will continue to assess and evaluate the potential of the company’s land bank, using a land use review system. The assessment will help prepare a set of evidence based management plans for the various areas of peatland. These plans will also inform its cutaway bog rehabilitation programme.

NPS P 14 The policy of Bord na Móna is not to open up any undrained new bogs for peat production.

NPS P 15 Lands identified by Bord na Móna as having high biodiversity value and/or priority habitats will be reserved for these purposes as the principal future land use.

NPS P 16 Generally, Bord na Móna cutaway bogs that flood naturally will be permitted to flood unless there is a clear environmental and/or economic case to maintain pumped drainage.

NPS P 17 An examination of all publicly owned lands and privately owned cutaway will be undertaken with a view to identifying appropriate uses, which will aim to harness their potential to contribute to Ireland’s environmental, ecological and economic wealth, with particular emphasis on mitigating carbon losses.

NPS P 18 In deciding on the most appropriate afteruse of cutaway peatlands, consideration shall be given to encouraging, where possible, the return to a natural functioning peatland ecosystem. This will require re-wetting of the cutaway peatlands which may lead in time to the restoration of the peatland ecosystem.

NPS P 19 Environmentally, socially and economically viable options should be analysed to plan the future use of industrial cutaway peatlands, in conjunction with limiting factors as outlined in Bord na Móna's *Strategic Framework for the Future Use of Peatlands*.

NPS P 22 The work of Bord na Móna, Coillte and the Irish Peatlands Conservation Council in developing ecologically rich futures for cutaway and formerly forested bogs will be developed. Such areas can bring new tourism and recreation attractions to the midlands and the west.

The use of the Longford Bogs for amenity purposes as part of the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park among other potential uses clearly ties in with the above principles.

## 2.2 BORD NA MONA BOGS

Longford contains a large portion of bogs many of which are owned by Bord Na Mona.



Map 1 Bord na Móna Bogs.



Map 2: Longford/Roscommon Bogs and Shannon

It is envisaged that overtime as the cutaway bogs are worked out one of the options under consideration by Bord na Mona is that certain bog areas would return to a natural type environment. These natural environment areas could then, in association with Lough Ree and the Shannon, the Royal Canal, and River Inny etc, form part of a proposed Mid Shannon Wilderness Park. The use of the bogs for other purposes such as renewable energy can be achieved in a compatible manner. The large national resource that the Bord na Mona Bogs are can continue to be developed to provide employment and wealth creation opportunities in the national and local interest including for tourism and amenity purposes.



**Pic 4: Rehabilitated and re-colonised bog.**

As well as the rehabilitated bogs, rivers and lakes, existing facilities and attractions can be utilized to enhance the attractiveness of the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park. Facilities such as the Corlea Visitors Centre, the ISPCA Animal Refuge, Commons North Park at Lanesboro, Barley Harbor, Newcastle House and wood, Clondra Harbor and Strokestown House etc. already exist and only require a minor amount of refocusing to fit into the broader picture of presenting and creating the Park.

As the Nation Peatland Strategy has recommended the future responsible management of peatlands will require collaboration and partnership between land-owners, communities, public authorities, commercial organizations and non-governmental organizations. The Mid Shannon Wilderness Park aims to ensure that the involvement and co-operation of local communities, Longford County Council and Bord na Mona are in place to allow such partnership to develop.

### **2.3 Corlea Archaeological Project**

There is now a proposal to develop a new Corlea Archaeological and Biodiversity Project. This can be added to in time with the Royal Canal Walking/Cycling Route and the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park to provide the various communities and villages of South Longford with wonderful amenity facilities and tourism infrastructure. It will also encourage visitors to the area especially of the walking and cycling variety. This will help the area to build a more sustainable ecotourism base which will in turn provide economic benefits to the area.



**Pic. 5 Corlea Visitor Centre.**

Keenagh Community Group now has the agreement of Bord na Móna to develop approximately 12 acres of cutaway bog near Corlea Centre for a recreated Archaeological Iron age type settlement and to present the developing Biodiversity of a rehabilitated cutaway bog. This area has its own existing car park and shall be initially linked back to the centre and Keenagh by a dedicated walking route along the public road. This project will be developed in 2014/5. An important aspect of the proposal is that it be delivered in a very cost effective manner requiring minimal resources in input from the various bodies involved.

The above proposed walking trails and the Corlea Centre have the potential to be linked with the adjoining Royal Canal in the period 2014/15. This will facilitate boating, walking and cycling visitors coming from Dublin and the East and travelling to the West via Longford and the Shannon to visit both Longford and the Corlea Centre.



**Pic. 6+ 7: Boating, Walking and Cycling on the Royal Canal.**

As the portion of bog immediately adjoining the Corlea Project site is worked out and re-habilitated by Bord na Móna it is hoped to develop an additional area of bog with a direct link back to the Corlea



Centre. This would provide dedicated walking trails through the bog presenting the developing biodiversity. It is expected that a portion of the low lying bog shall be re-watered and colonized with appropriate native plants, birds and fish. The timetable for this portion of the project to be achieved is expected to be between 2020-2025.



**Pic. 7:**

### **Biodiversity of a Bog.**

### **3.0 Mid Shannon Wilderness Park - Major Tourism Initiative.**

The project has a wide ranging scope, benefiting visitors to the area, local communities, schools as well as improving the wider tourism attractions of Longford and the Midlands. The Corlea proposal is a stand alone project that represents a first step in a broader development proposal for the gradual conversion of parts of the cutaway bogs in Longford to Biodiversity Parks. These emerging Biodiversity Parks could then be linked with the Shannon, Lough Ree and the Royal Canal to create a Mid Shannon Wilderness Park.



**Pic. 8: Lough Ree wilderness.**

When the bogs have been worked out by Bord na Móna over the next 10/20 years one of the options under consideration is that they be used as Nature and Biodiversity locations. The existing bog rail tracks could then be utilized as additional walking/cycling tracks to increase the network through the emerging Mid Shannon Wilderness Park (See below) linking with the ISPCA Animal Refuge at Derryglogher and on to Lough Ree at Lanesboro and Newtowncashel. Indeed it may also be possible to link a walking/cycling route from Dublin through Longford and across the Shannon to Strokestown, Roosky and on to Westport and Sligo.



**Pic. 9: Bord Na Móna bridge at Lanesboro.**

### **3.1 Amenity Potential of Mid Shannon Wilderness Park**

The development of the Royal Canal as a primary Walking/Cycling route from Dublin through Longford to the West can connect in with routes across the cutaway bogs and the Shannon to the Mayo and Sligo roads. The crossing of the Shannon could use the existing Bord Na Móna rail bridge at Lanesboro which would provide a traffic free crossing point. Indeed it is possible to Link Dublin through to Roscommon via the Royal Canal in a completely vehicular traffic free environment. This would create a major piece of amenity infrastructure across the Midlands of international importance.



**Pic. 9: Boating on the Royal Canal.**



**Pic. 10: Fishing and Horse riding.**

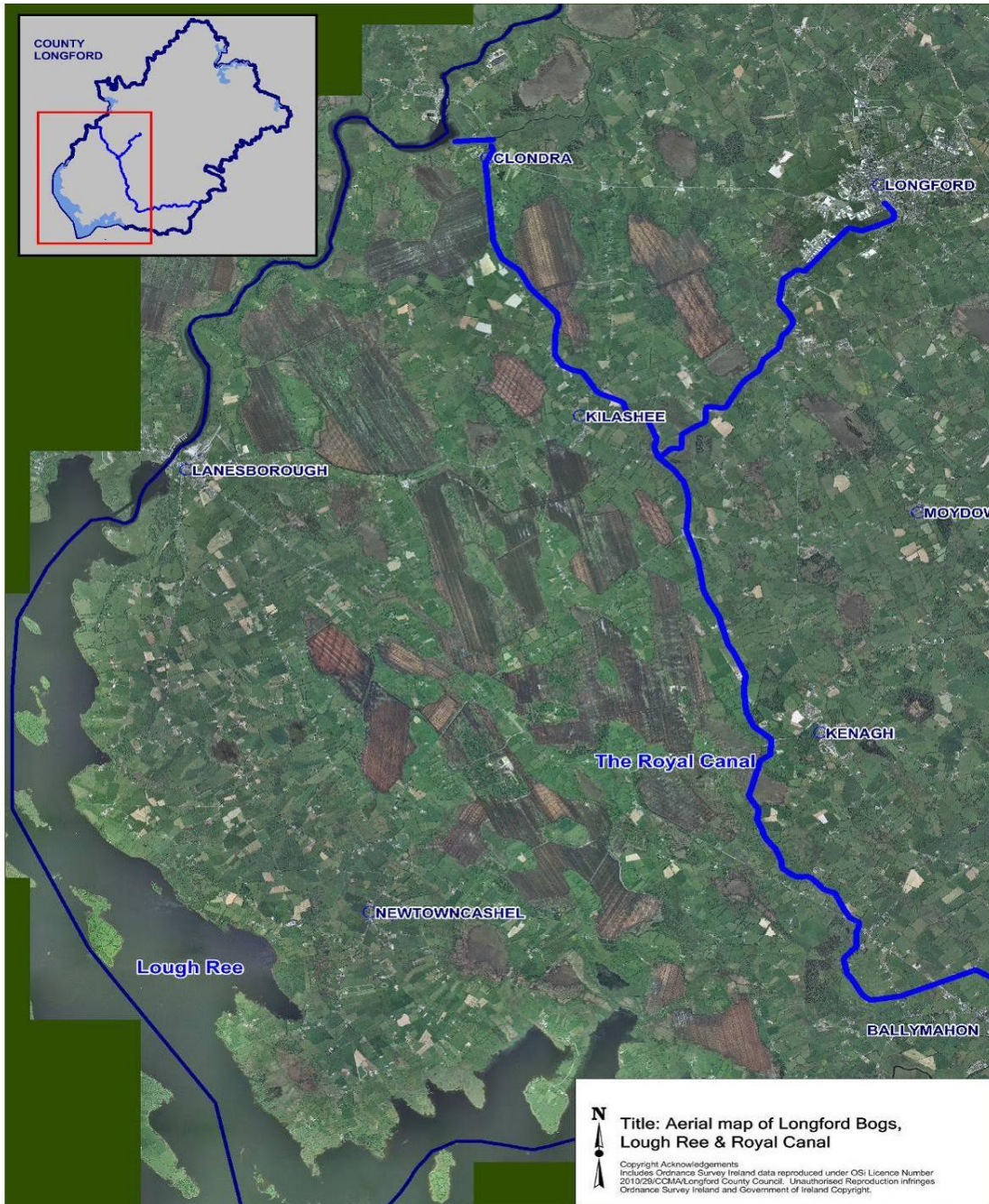


**Pic. 11: Walking on the bogs and boating on Lough Ree.**

The opening up and development of the Mid Shannon area as proposed above would facilitate the promotion of Tourism and Recreation activities in the area. The usage of the beautiful natural amenities of the area such as lake, river, wood and bog would increase. The level of activity and visitors to the area would increase and this in turn would create local enterprises and additional employment in South Longford.

### Mid Shannon Wilderness Park

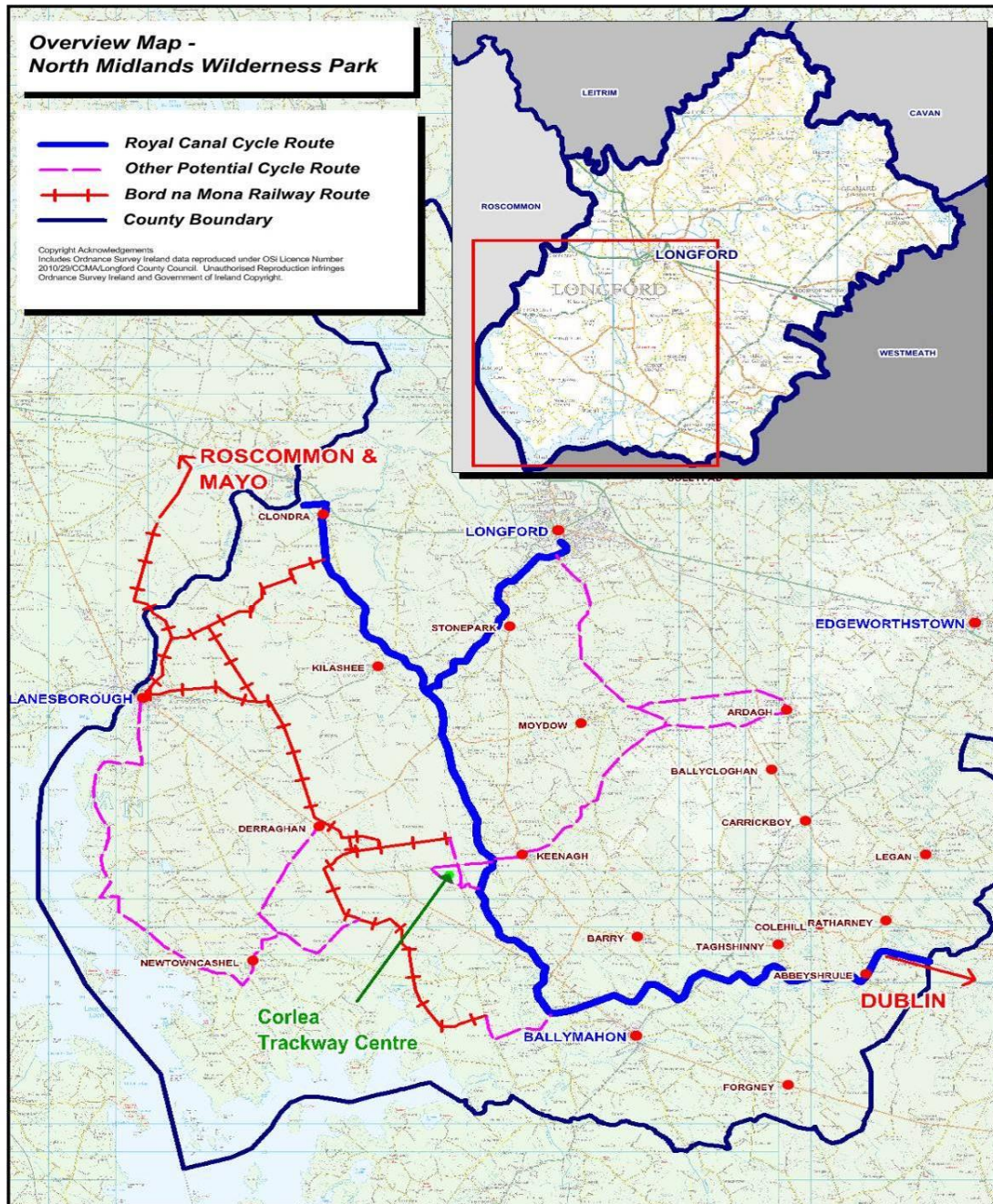
Mid Shannon Wilderness Park including Lough Ree, the Shannon, the Bogs and the Royal Canal.



Map 3: Potential Mid Shannon Wilderness Park

## Mid Shannon Wilderness Park

Walking/cycling network within the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park.



Map 4: Potential Walking Cycling Routes in Mid Shannon Wilderness Park.

The development of the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park in Longford would provide a major amenity and tourism facilities for the Midlands. The plans for the Park and the Corlea project will be sympathetic with any future uses and the conservation and biodiversity action plan of Bord na Móna. It is also intended to develop these projects in a sustainable manner bearing in mind the rich cultural and natural heritage resources of the area. The principles of Ecotourism providing for a destination with a set of standards based on sound environmental practices highlighting all that the region and its people has to offer will guide the development of the project.



**Pic. 12: Forest Walks**

#### **4.0 An Ecotourism Project**

It is intended to use the principles of Ecotourism in the development of the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park and the Corlea Project. There is an established criterion which must be met in order to qualify for the ecotourism label. These cover a wide range of practices in eight key components of ecotourism as follows:

- Environmentally sustainable practices
- Natural area focus
- Interpretation and Education
- Contributing to Conservation
- Benefiting local Communities
- Visitor Satisfaction

- Responsible Marketing and Communication
- Cultural Awareness and Respect

The Mid Shannon Wilderness Park and the Corlea Project will incorporate these principles. By meeting and possibly exceeding the above, the project will indicate its dedication to educating the visitor and tourist about the native natural world and local culture. This environmentally innovative and socially responsible project will have a very positive impact on the environment and local communities.



**Pic. 13: Amenity Sign Boards for Wilderness Park**

#### **4.1 Biodiversity**

Biodiversity specifically relates to the diversity of habitats, species and genetic diversity of species in the world around us from insects in the soil, to extensive woodlands, to the animals that inhabit them. Since the 1990s, Bord na Móna has adopted a programme of enhancement of biodiversity which has become closely linked to the after-use and rehabilitation of cutaway bogs.

The Corlea proposal follows the Bord na Móna programme in utilizing this proposed portion of cutaway bog to allow for the rehabilitation and re-colonisation of the bog. Re-colonisation of the bogs following peat production leads to establishment of a mosaic of habitats and species, some of which are considered rare and restricted in distribution in Ireland. The Corlea Project shall present the history of the development of the bogs, the rehabilitation programme and the developing biodiversity resource as educational tours to the visiting public.





**Pic 14: Typical Bord na Móna rehabilitated and re-colonised Bogs.**

The proposed biodiversity trail will tell the story of Irish peatland's past, present and future possibilities. The cutaway bogs around Corlea which have been harvested by Bord na Móna for energy since the 1940s can be established as unique and welcoming habitats for a wide range of flora. The trail will also go through rejuvenating peat land and woodland areas of the Park and cover topics such as peat land formation, woodland ecology, native plants and animals, renewable energy and animal and plant identification.

Vital to enhancing our national biodiversity resource is the wise use and management of cutaway bogs and related lands, and creating awareness of the local, national and regional value of biodiversity of peatlands.



**Pic 15: Typical rehabilitated bogs with scrub, heather and rushes.**

#### *4.2 Nature conservation and biodiversity corridors*

In recent years Bord na Móna has been attempting to give due care to nature conservation and to retaining biodiversity corridors within their national bog network to sustain important refuges for peatland flora and fauna. This is a key requirement of Article 10 of the Habitats Directive. Rehabilitation of the cutaway bogs generally involves measures to accelerate re-vegetation, through activities such as drain blocking to create wetlands, and other targeted practices such as tree planting.





**Pic 16: Flora and Fauna**

Rehabilitation allows for the expansion of biodiversity back onto the bogs and the creation of diverse and valuable wildlife reserves. It is envisaged that, overtime, as the cutaway bogs are worked out that they will be properly managed to return to a natural type environment and may form part of a proposed Mid Shannon Wilderness Park.



**Pic 17: Re-watered cut away bog by Bord na Móna**

## 5.0 Time Frame for Mid Shannon Wilderness Park

The following time frame is proposed to deliver the various projects related to the development of the Mid Shannon Wilderness Park. Over the next ten years it is hoped to deliver various elements of the project building up to the final achievement

Table 1. Timeframe for projects.

2014	Corlea Visitor Centre existing. Lough Ree and Royal Canal existing.
2014/15	Corlea Archaeological & Biodiversity Project
2015/16	Corlea link with Royal Canal
2015/2020	Project Link across bog to Corlea Centre.
2015/2020	Local communities take responsibility for local area of Bog in association with Longford County Council.
2015/2018	Royal Canal walking/Cycling route Dublin to Clondra.
2015/2030	Mid Shannon Wilderness Park



'I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core. '

Lake Isle of Innisfree, W. B. Yeats.