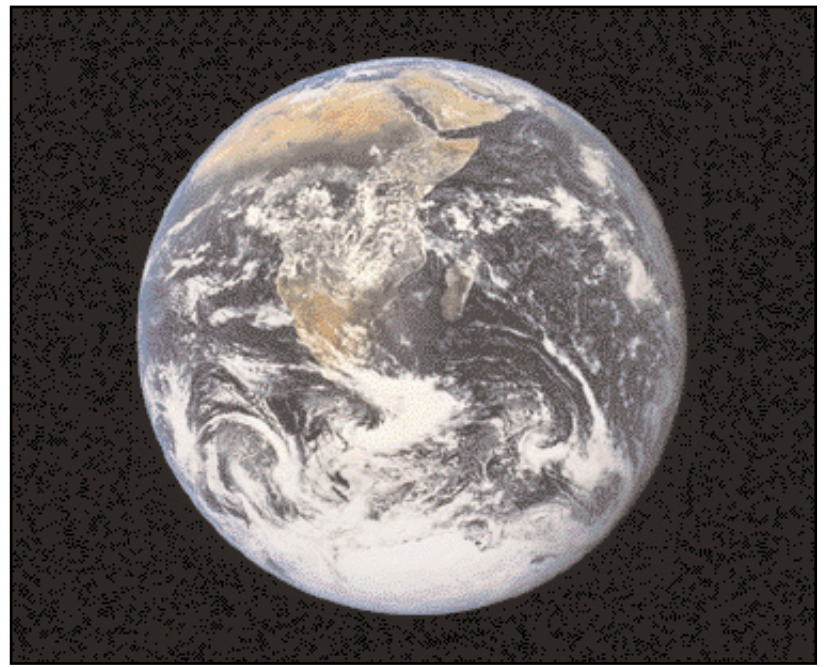


FRIENDS *of the* earth

Northern Ireland

NEWSLETTER

Issue 1 Summer 2000



Railways in Crisis

The prospect of spending £183m over ten years to ensure the safety of Northern Ireland's railways is proving too much for the Government and it has threatened the network with at least partial closure. Adam Ingram MP, the Minister responsible, has announced a joint task force of civil servants and public transport executives to examine all the options for the future of the railways. He has emphasised that there will be no new money made available. Meanwhile our railways are literally falling apart with Translink staff struggling to keep services going as the ancient rolling stock breaks down on a regular basis.

Friends of the Earth is demanding that Secretary of State, Peter Mandelson MP, accepts responsibility for rejuvenating our railways: successive direct-rule administrations have presided over chronic under-investment in our railways compared with those in Great Britain where

Railtrack says it plans to invest £52bn; the Irish Government plans to invest £8bn in public transport in the Dublin area alone; the Treasury has reclaimed £25m of Translink's own money rather than allow the company to re-invest; Government subsidies to rail in Northern Ireland are seven times lower than in GB which in turn are only a fraction of the European average; the Government's own policy is to reduce dependence on the private car and encourage the use of public transport.

It is expected that the Government will announce a huge new investment in public transport in Great Britain this summer. Northern Ireland is likely to receive its share but watch out for civil servants who will try to divert the money elsewhere, not least to road building.

Friends of the Earth believes that this crisis is actually an opportunity to map out an



exciting future for our railways, to offer a first class alternative to a car-centred society.

How our trains might look if Translink was allowed to invest in new rolling stock.



The communities sacrificed to the Westlink, remembered at the launch of the campaign to stop further widening of the road.

Westlink Review

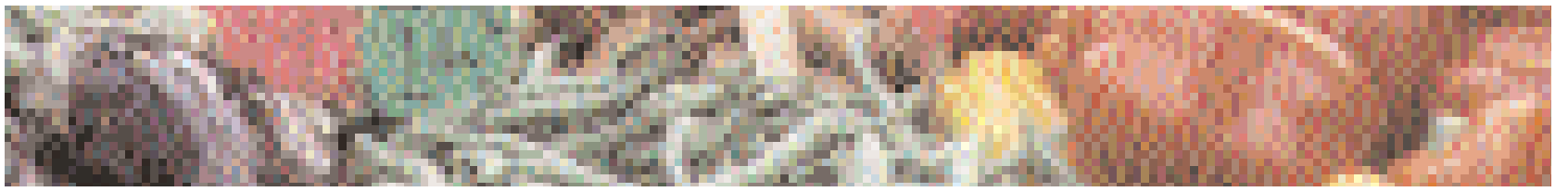
There was good news and not so good news for the M1/Westlink campaign last month. Roads Service agreed to review their £40m plans which are based on building flyovers and extra lanes. The review would use up-to-date methods which take account of the role of public transport in solving traffic problems, now common practice in Scotland, England and Wales.

The not so good news is that a meeting with the Chief Executive of Roads Service revealed that the review would be limited to a few weeks' work by one person, a far cry from the kind of in-depth 'multi-modal' study which is being demanded by Friends of the Earth, the West Belfast Partnership Board, Transport

2000, politicians from all our main political parties and local residents.

But the campaign continues. Friends of the Earth has decided that if Roads Service won't do its job properly then it will have to be done for them. Consultants are being engaged to draw up an alternative solution to congestion by providing priority for freight traffic and moving commuter traffic from cars onto massively improved rail and bus services, and all for the same cost as the car-based scheme currently proposed.

For more information about this important campaign, contact us for a free copy of our Westlink briefing or visit our website at www.foe.co.uk/local/pdf/westlink_briefing.pdf



PROFILE

Sharon Morrow

The woman who helped stop Magheramorne quarry become one of Europe's largest landfill sites also dyes her hair purple but insists she is not a radical. Lisa Fagan talked to Sharon Morrow of Larne Friends of the Earth. . .

Sharon has done a great deal of environmental campaigning since she and others celebrated their victory over Haul Waste in July 1997. The waste company had applied for planning permission to convert Magheramorne quarry near Larne into a huge landfill site but environmentalists fought the public inquiry, and won. It was the culmination of a four year campaign which had cost more than £85,000.

Sharon cut her campaigning teeth back in 1994 when she was asked to speak about Magheramorne at Friends of the Earth's Local Groups' Conference. She'd spent the two days before the conference picketing Haul Waste's exhibition about the dump, and then she was off to address three hundred people at Conference. She describes those few days as the best in her activist career. Larne is a very conservative town but that experience has emboldened her, so now she thinks nothing of getting FOE's message across by pushing a wheelie bin around the town on a Saturday morning dressed in a black bin liner!

She lives by the sea and has always been interested in the environment but she credits



Sharon Morrow (far right) and members of Islandmagee and District Conservation Society celebrating the defeat of the Magheramorne super-dump

former Friends of the Earth director Jonathan Porritt with inspiring her to join her local group. Since Magheramorne, she has worked on GM food, wildlife protection, a marina proposal, sewage pollution of Larne Lough, contaminated land at Ballylumford, the regional planning strategy and much more. Recently her concern for Larne Lough led her to establish Friends of Larne Lough, a partnership of stakeholders with an interest in this European wildlife site.

Her husband John is a marine engineer and spends six months of the year at sea, leaving Sharon feeling 'like a single mother sometimes'. She gave up a career as a social worker to go

to sea with John before their sons Ciaran and Conor were born. These days she is a full-time mother, part-time yoga teacher and tireless Friends of the Earth activist. She also enjoys gardening, especially growing her own vegetables.

It's hard not to notice that purple is Sharon's favourite colour - she even dyes her hair purple - but her character is colourful too. Although she is modest about her achievements, she is extravagant about life. An afternoon in Sharon's company is as good as a holiday. Hers is a very sunny personality. She radiates energy and optimism to everyone she meets, she is a truly inspirational woman.

A bright future for farming



Belfast Farmers' Market.

Headlines in recent years have been dominated by food safety stories such as BSE, genetic modification (GM), salmonella, E. coli and pesticide residues. With agriculture in crisis, farmland birds in decline and food scares rarely out of the news, clearly there is something wrong with the way our food is produced.

The Government recently announced its intention to add a GM variety of fodder maize to the National Seed List. Once listed, the seed can be sold and the crop grown commercially anywhere in the UK, including Northern Ireland. This decision has been made prematurely since the Government's farm-scale field trials in England and Scotland don't end until 2003. The trials, which Friends of the Earth opposes, are designed to examine the impact of GM crops on farmland wildlife.

Meanwhile the agriculture sector is in deep crisis. Farm incomes are falling, debts are rising and farmers' average age is now almost sixty. Many farmers are experiencing depression, even despair. But there is one bright light on the horizon. Sales of organic food are growing at a rate of 40% a year, with 70% of the organic food bought in the UK being imported. Demand far

exceeds supply. Why not produce more organic food in Northern Ireland, to meet this growing demand? Here is an opportunity for farmers to secure their futures, and organic food is good news for human health and wildlife too. Friends of the Earth is about to commission research into the potential for organic production to secure farmers' livelihoods and create new jobs in Northern Ireland's rural economy.

Farmers' markets are another way to boost farm incomes. This type of 'producer retailing' allows farmers to get a fair price for their food by cutting out the supermarkets and selling directly to consumers. The Belfast Farmers' Market is held on the first and third Saturday of each month in St. George's Market and is well worth a visit. Unfortunately there isn't much organic produce but with support and encouragement this could change.

Other examples of what can be done to change the way food is produced and purchased include farm shops, vegetable box delivery schemes and home-grown food. Friends of the Earth would be interested to hear about other successful schemes in Northern Ireland so the information can be shared.

Fraser gobbles green-belt

Enler Valley Green-Belt Association was formed in response to plans by Fraser Homes to build 3000 houses on 310 acres of prime agricultural land in the green-belt near Comber. If given the go-ahead, the Fraser proposal would leave just half a mile of open countryside between Belfast and Comber. The project is at odds with planning policy and poses a real threat to wildlife, particularly to farmland birds whose numbers are rapidly declining. The development would generate thousands of extra car journeys every week

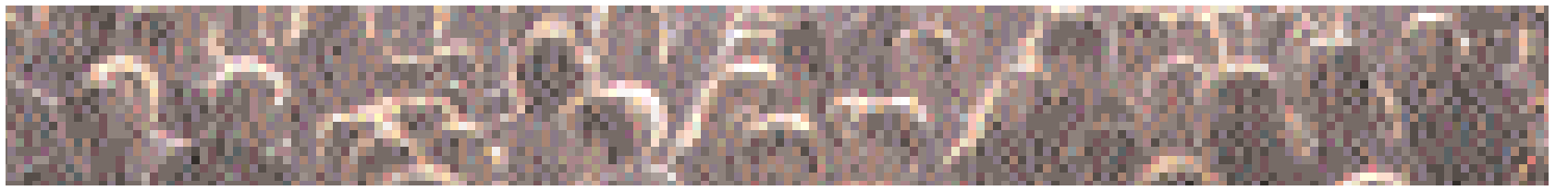
and would undermine existing settlements, particularly Belfast and Comber. Concreting over the countryside represents a wasted opportunity to bring about an 'urban renaissance' by building homes on 'brown-field' sites in towns and cities.

There is also a threat to Strangford Lough, just three miles away, since the Enler river, which runs through the site, flows into the Lough. The river may be subject to pollution from a 25-acre industrial estate included in the Fraser proposal.



Proposals to build the new town of 'Camperdown' threaten some of Northern Ireland's best farmland.

Pic courtesy Geray Sweeney



Waste Strategy Launched

Friends of the Earth gave a guarded welcome to Northern Ireland's long-awaited Waste Strategy, published in April by the Department of the Environment. The strategy sets out ambitious recycling targets for Northern Ireland's waste - 15% by 2005 and 25% by 2010 - and there are also plans to boost the market in recycled goods.

Cathy Maguire represented FOE on the group set up by the

Department to advise on the strategy. The advisory group made 106 recommendations, more than 90 of which were incorporated into the final strategy. Although disappointed that incineration was included, Friends of the Earth managed to secure conditions on its development. Any plan that includes incineration will have to demonstrate how it will meet the recycling targets.



Pic courtesy Ceanne Jansen/Friends of the Earth.

LETTERS

Please send your letters to the Editor, Friends of the Earth Newsletter, 40 Wellington Park, Belfast BT9 6DN; or by fax on 028 9066 0727; or e-mail to lisaf@foe.co.uk

Letters should be kept as short as possible and the editor reserves the right to edit letters unless specifically asked not to. Although it may not be possible to publish all the letters we receive, we look forward to hearing your views.

Orimulsion for Kilroot?

Friends of the Earth is insisting that NIGEN must invest in 'gasification' technology if it is to go ahead with plans to convert Kilroot power station to orimulsion fuel. Management at Kilroot near Carrickfergus announced plans to switch fuels in December 1998. Currently the plant is coal-fired. Orimulsion is a Venezuelan fuel made from bitumen. Although the fuel conversion would reduce emissions of some pollutants, Friends of the Earth is concerned about the release of ultra-fine dust particles which

are harmful to human health; the production of toxic waste ash; the marine impact of an orimulsion spill; and the reluctance of NIGEN to use the Best Available Technology, gasification, to minimise environmental impacts.

In Wales, Friends of the Earth successfully fought a difficult six year campaign against plans by National Power to convert Pembroke power station to orimulsion, and also helped a local action group in Florida to defeat a similar proposal there.

COMMENT

New Beginnings



There's a great deal of 'newness' around at the moment. It seems like only yesterday that we had a New Year and the new millennium. The New Northern Ireland Assembly gave us cause to hope of new politics but old problems have returned anew and direct rule is back, at least for the time being, under New Labour.

And Friends of the Earth has not been immune to things new. A new senior staff post was created to head up Friends of the Earth (Northern Ireland) at the end of last year. This is recognition by our London head office of the pace of political and social change in this part of the world. Just as Northern Ireland struggles to come to terms with being responsible for its own government, so Friends of the Earth faces the huge challenge of influencing our new institutions towards development which is sustainable - protecting our environment, encouraging the right kinds of economic activity and improving the quality of people's lives.

So for me, the job of taking FOE(NI) forward into a new era is a really exciting challenge. We have a terrific, if often unsung, track record to build on. In my own memory the campaign to prevent peat extraction at Ballynahone Bog near Magherafelt stands out, as does Larne FOE's victory over plans to convert Maghermorne quarry into a rubbish tip. And then there have been the sustained campaigns against waste incinerators in Belfast and the toxic waste site at Mullaghglass near Lisburn.

A good deal of time over the past few months has been spent devising a strategy - deciding what work will take priority. Our office currently has only two full-time staff and some dedicated volunteers so we need to be pretty ruthless about where we place our energies. Discussions with our local groups, supporters and colleagues in England and Wales have led to establishing three priority campaigns. These will be transport; sustainable agriculture and the food we eat; and green-belt housing development. Assuming the Assembly is re-established, another major area of activity will be influencing the Programme for Government. (The Good Friday Agreement requires the Executive to agree its policies and plans).

But above all I want Friends of the Earth to present a compelling vision of what Northern Ireland can really be like. Wouldn't it be great if... car-use was declining and people chose to walk, cycle and use a first rate public transport system; our agriculture was to experience a renaissance based on organic production; if new jobs were created recycling our waste; and if small local companies providing for local needs were growing at the expense of transnational corporations investing only for the short term? And wouldn't it be great if our neighbours in Scotland, Wales, England and the Republic of Ireland looked to us as the European region which was furthest down the road to a sustainable future?

If we are going to make real progress towards this vision Friends of the Earth needs to make a quantum leap in terms of our membership, our local groups, our allies, our volunteers, our staff and our media profile. I hope this newsletter will help enable you to be part of our shared vision for the new Northern Ireland.

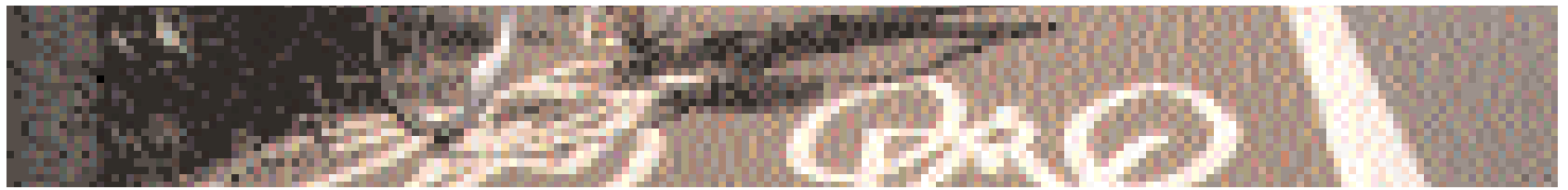
John Woods,
Head of Campaigns & Development

Help needed

Look out for the Friends of the Earth stand at this year's Green Living Fair at Castle Espie near Comber on 24 and 25 June, and Wildlife 2000 at Oxford Island near Craigavon on 26 and 27 August. If you would be willing to help with membership recruitment at these and other events, please contact Lisa Fagan whose details are on the back cover.

John Woods was formerly a Research Associate with Democratic Dialogue and Director of New Agenda. He has also worked for NICVA prior to which he was Friends of the Earth Scotland's Senior Campaigner. A native of Holywood, Co Down, John graduated BA and MSc from Edinburgh University





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School of Straw

A classroom made from straw in the County Down village of Crossgar is setting the standard in green building design and prompting a revival in the use of straw for construction. The classroom at Cedar Integrated Primary School is nearing completion under the direction of Professor Tom Woolley of Queen's University School of Architecture.

Straw has many environmental benefits over conventional building materials:

- It is a renewable resource, allowing builders to avoid quarry products.
- It is a low-energy material to produce, unlike cement for instance.
- There is no need for heating because straw is such a good insulator.
- It can be sourced locally.

Although there are straw buildings in Nebraska, USA

which are still standing after almost one hundred years, it's only in the last fifteen years that people around the world have been rediscovering this simple, affordable, healthy and environmentally beneficial method of construction.

Cedar Integrated Primary School opened in 1995 and children were being taught in mobile classrooms until a new school could be built. Following discussions with parents, teachers and governors it was decided to build a model green classroom to demonstrate what might be done with the new school. Tom Woolley became involved in two capacities, as a parent and local resident and also as the project researcher, designer and manager. He had previous experience of straw bale construction.

The classroom was built by volunteers - parents, teachers and friends. First a concrete



Pic courtesy Tom Woolley.

foundation was laid, then the straw bales were stacked on this and held in place with steel pins and hazel reinforcing rods. Next the walls were plastered and a roof constructed. Now that it is nearly complete, the performance of the classroom is being regularly monitored by Queen's to check for dampness or structural problems.

The project has brought the community together and introduced children to the idea

of ecological buildings. It has also acted as a catalyst for other straw bale projects, and is being considered for a design award.

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What future for Sellafield?

Despite British Nuclear Fuel's disastrous recent history, the UK Government is ignoring demands being made by the Irish Government for Sellafield to close. News that safety data for plutonium fuel have been falsified over a four year period has jeopardised reprocessing contracts. BNFL initially claimed that all fuel with falsified safety data remained at Sellafield but later admitted that fuel with falsified checks had gone to Japan, Germany and Switzerland. Meanwhile the Government still has to decide whether to open a new full-size plutonium fuel plant which Friends of the Earth argues will be uneconomic.

In February a report claimed there was an unacceptable

backlog of liquid high level waste awaiting vitrification (solidifying as a glassy substance). Whether BNFL can reduce the backlog is questionable since the vitrification plants had not been working properly even before a saboteur cut the cables of a remote control arm on maintenance equipment. The high level waste tanks require constant management, and a power cut of longer than twelve hours would allow the waste to boil, releasing potentially fatal radioactive pollution into the atmosphere which would contaminate either the north of England or Ireland depending on the wind direction. Another damning report claimed that safety at the plant was 'only just tolerable'.

In March, insiders appeared to acknowledge that the future of nuclear reprocessing was in doubt, and privatisation of the plant has been postponed at least until 2002.

Sellafield will continue to come under attack from customer countries wishing to terminate their reprocessing contracts early, and from nations who receive sea and airborne radiation from the Cumbrian plant. But Friends of the Earth insists that Sellafield has a future if it stops reprocessing and concentrates instead on decommissioning and nuclear waste clean-up.

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