

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland
Cumann Uiscebhealaigh Intíre na h-Éireann

*The Inland Waterways
Association of Ireland*

A Submission to

the

**Sub-Committee on the River
Shannon Authority**

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1 Introduction

This document is submitted in response to a request from the Sub-Committee on the River Shannon Authority, seeking inputs on matters relating to the management of the River Shannon.

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland was founded in 1954 to promote the development, use and maintenance of Ireland's navigable rivers and canals. When the Shannon was almost totally underdeveloped for pleasure boating, the IWAI fought against the building of low bridges, thus ensuring the development of the river as a national asset. Later, the association successfully resisted the threatened closure of the Grand Canal in Dublin and has done much to instigate the improvement of the Barrow and to focus interest and activity on the restoration of the Royal Canal with our sister body the Royal Canal Amenity Group.

2 Executive Summary

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland

- welcomes the interest being shown by the Oireachtas in the Shannon
- supports the idea of a mechanism for contact and co-ordination between different interests
- supports Waterways Ireland, the cross-border implementation body, and fears that the draft bills are incompatible with its status and functions
- points to some further difficulties with the draft bills
- suggests a different approach to the promotion of contact and co-ordination.

3 The Draft Bills

We have read the three draft bills proposing a Shannon Authority or Shannon Council. Unfortunately we do not feel that IWAI can support any of them. It might be as well to state our reasons now, because they are relevant to our later comments and suggestions.

The draft bills look to us to be written to respond to the surprise that Shannon-based farmers expressed when they discovered that the Office of Public Works was no longer responsible for the Shannon. The main focus of the bills seems to be on civil engineering:

- "management of the waters" in the 1997 and 1998 bills
- "construction, maintenance and improvement works" in the 2000 bill.

While there is welcome attention to the environment and the prevention of pollution, the principal aim seems to be to provide services like those of the old Board of Works for the Shannon, while providing a mechanism whereby influence can be exerted on the ESB and the navigation authority.

This approach addresses a concern expressed, last winter, by farmers and others affected by flooding, and we recognise the validity of their concern. However, we feel that the proposed solution — at least as manifested in the draft bills — addresses only one aspect of the management of the Shannon; they omit, or give insufficient attention to, the increasingly important topic of the **use** of the Shannon.

4 Use of the Shannon

The Shannon is a resource. In the past, it was used for water transport; it is still used, in a small way, for the generation of electricity. Nowadays, its two main uses are for farming and farming-related activities and for a wide range of leisure and recreation activities.

In theory, this resource has always been available to all our citizens. In practice, however, its use was limited largely to those living nearby and to relatively well-to-do people. Thus the demands on the Shannon were limited, not by legislation or regulation but by tradition and by economic conditions.

Nowadays, both of the Shannon's main uses are placing increasing pressure on the Shannon:

- more intensive farming, and farm-related industries, are having an adverse impact on water quality: see, for instance, the reports of the Lough Derg & Lough Ree Catchment Monitoring and Management System
- increasing national wealth has enabled many more people to gain access to the Shannon for leisure activities, both afloat and along the shore.

There is potential for conflict between different categories of users. Indeed conflict already manifests itself in small ways, in small disputes between individual users over such issues as water quality, use of particular stretches of water, shoreline development, proposed charges for encroachment and so on.

Furthermore, the number of governmental and quasi-governmental bodies dealing with the Shannon is increasing. In recent years environmental agencies, the Department of the Marine and the Gardai have been added to the list of those with authority or responsibility over certain activities on the Shannon.

Within this wider context, the issue of winter flooding is but one amongst a whole range of issues affecting the Shannon and its use. The number of state agencies involved has grown: it is no longer just a matter of co-ordination between ESB and OPW. Similarly, there has been an increase in the number of interest groups — and in the numbers of individual users who are not members of any organised group: jetskiers, for instance, tend to fall into this category.

It is our view that a Shannon Authority or Shannon Council must be able to address the entire range of issues and to deal with all of the sets of regulations and the regulatory bodies, the interest groups and the individual users. We fear that an Authority or Council that has only a partial mandate, or that appears to be focused mainly on one set of issues, will not be able to deal with the important issues that are arising from more intensive use of the Shannon.

We support, in other words, the notion of catchment management, but we want it to be comprehensive rather than partial. We want it to take account of the current and developing issues along the Shannon — and we want it to provide for representation of the wide range of user interests, our own and others.

5 Waterways Ireland

Having expressed our support for a wide-ranging catchment management body, we must immediately enter a caveat.

5.1 Waterways Ireland

Waterways Ireland was established as a cross-border implementation body under the Belfast Agreement to manage the inland waterways of Ireland, principally as a leisure and amenity resource. We support the idea of a cross-border body and we are anxious to ensure that Waterways Ireland is enabled to manage and expand our waterways network.

The lack of reference to Waterways Ireland in the 2000 bill has to be considered a fundamental flaw. To us, it seems that it would be difficult to set up a Shannon management body that would have authority over a cross-border institution set up under international treaty. However, we are not constitutional lawyers, so we simply bring that problem to the attention of the subcommittee.

5.2 Shannon -v- Other Waterways

We have a related concern. The draft bills would in effect separate the management of the Shannon system (for navigation and leisure purposes at any rate) from that of the remainder of the waterways, many of which are connected to it directly or indirectly. The creation of a single management body for most of the inland waterways under the OPW (and more recently Duchas Waterways) was viewed as a very positive development by IWAI. We believe any attempt to reverse this would be counterproductive; that raises questions about the relative balance of power between the proposed Shannon Authority or Council and the waterways management body.

6 A Different Approach

We are, as our earlier comments will have suggested, very conscious of the wide range of different interests at play on the Shannon. It is so wide that we do not think that any twenty-member authority or council, however constituted, can adequately represent it. For instance, in the field of leisure boating, rowers, anglers, sailors, cruiser-owners, jetskiers and waterskiers all have different, and often competing, interests — yet leisure boating is only one of many fields that, in our view, a Shannon Authority or Council should deal with.

It is our view, therefore, that if an Authority or Council is set up — and if our concerns about its relationship with Waterways Ireland can be resolved — the top-level twenty-member board itself should be only one part of a wider representative and consultative structure. In other words, there should be mechanisms for consulting and involving all the diverse users, all along the Shannon. We urge the subcommittee to promote the ideas of inclusiveness, involvement and the sharing of responsibility; indeed the application of the principle of subsidiarity might be useful.

6.1 The Process

We suggest that the subcommittee should see itself as engaged in a long-term process in developing structures for the management of the Shannon catchment. We have some suggestions to make about the process of developing such structures.

We are conscious of a lack of reliable information about activities on the Shannon: for instance, the Department of the Marine's Action Group on Small Powered Recreational

Craft had difficulty in assessing the number of speedboats and jetskis on the Shannon and other waters.

We suggest, therefore, that your consultants should be asked to begin by gathering adequate, accurate data about the patterns of usage and the interests of all the communities involved with the river. That data should be published before the consultants proceed to make recommendations; it would provide the basis for a deeper understanding of the full range and level of activities and interests that are represented on the Shannon system.

We suggest that, at that stage, you might hold a number of regional forums (along the lines of those conducted recently by the Heritage Council) to reveal the range of different interests and to start a process of bringing users and service-providers together. IWAI would be prepared to assist with this process using our network of branches and also our website www.iwai.ie and our newsletter.

We also suggest that the results of the pilot catchment-management schemes on the Erne and elsewhere should be taken into consideration.

6.2 Water Level Management

6.2.1 Shannon Flooding

It will be apparent from our earlier comments that we fear that the question of Shannon flooding has had too much attention in the drafting of the three bills. We say that not to dismiss the issue but because, as we have shown, that there is a very wide range of other issues that need to be considered.

We would like to point out that the Shannon is a very slow-flowing river with a large number of natural obstacles that cause the bulk of the flooding problem. The man-made artefacts along the river have only a very minor effect on the flooding problem: most of it results from natural features in the river. The Shannon has flooded since the earliest times and the flood plain around it is a natural consequence of this.

Any project to reduce the level of flooding would be enormously expensive (as the 1950s study showed) and would benefit only a relatively small number of farmers in the area. While a certain acreage of farm-land is flooded regularly, the number of dwelling houses affected is, we understand, relatively small

Any drainage project on the Shannon that would make any significant difference to the flood levels would be unlikely to meet sustainability criteria. And because a significant and thriving leisure sector has been built up around the Shannon system over the last thirty years, any project that had a significant effect on the flooding problem could have disastrous consequences for this important, growing industry.

It has been suggested that it might be more cost effective for the state to simply buy out the worst affected areas, incorporate them in a Shannon Wetlands National Park and simply allow nature to take it's course.

We feel that there are many misunderstandings about Shannon flooding and, for instance, the ability of the ESB to reduce the water level. We suggest that you commission and publish a full study of the problem from a competent firm of consultants, with public discussion at forums like those we suggested earlier.

6.2.2 Low Water Levels

There is another aspect to the water levels that receives rather less attention in the media. For a number of years our association has had cause to complain to the

navigation authority and the ESB about the lowering of water levels, especially toward the end of the boating season.

We understand that water levels especially north of Athlone are lowered partly to keep up the level in Lough Derg to provide optimum head for power generation and also in an attempt to provide some additional capacity to absorb winter floods.

Our sense is that the impact on the latter is only minor at best. On the other hand, the impact on the boating community north of Athlone can be quite significant with groundings being a regular occurrence. (It should be noted that this problem is more pronounced among the private boating community because hire craft tend to be shallower draft.)

The problem is not confined to the northern section however or indeed to the autumn period. A number of years ago, Lough Derg was lowered to the extent that a number of vessels were grounded at their moorings when the lake was lowered below normal summer levels. (The association acknowledges that the ESB has a statutory right to raise and lower levels within a very wide range however we believe it is another example where the needs of ALL users of the system need to be examined and balanced)

6.3 Our Vision

A number of years ago the Association adopted the following Vision Statement:

The Inland Waterways of Ireland, a key part of our national heritage, will be protected, preserved and sensitively developed for the use and enjoyment of all the people of Ireland.

An integrated management structure will exist to manage the waterways and their environs, in close co-operation with an equivalent structure in Northern Ireland, with the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland acting in a consultative role.

We are committed to the use of best practice approaches for the management of the Shannon and all the waterways of this island. However, we suggest that there may be difficulties with the relationship with Waterways Ireland. We would like any management structure to take account of the full range of activities on and uses of the Shannon. And we are firmly of the opinion that there must be provision for strong user involvement.

We would be very happy to meet with the committee at some mutually convenient time to discuss our ideas in more detail.

In the final two sections of this document, we provide

- comments on some specific points in the draft bills
- information about the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland.

7 The Draft Bills: Some Minor Comments

7.1 Introduction

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland believes that the three bills (***Shannon River Council Bill 1997***, ***Shannon River Council Bill 1998*** and ***Shannon River Authority Bill 2000***) do not take sufficient account of the current uses being made of the Shannon.

We also have comments about some small points in the bills.

7.2 Wildlife

While reference is made to fish and bird life, no reference is made to animal, insect or plant life.

7.3 Leisure Activities

The bills do not take into account the range of leisure activities that take place on and around the Shannon. While the contribution of the hire-boat industry receives attention in the media, there is a vast array of other leisure activity that takes place including walking, cycling, swimming, fishing, diving, water-skiing, bird-watching, day tripping etc.

7.4 Commercial Activities

The bills do not take into account the range of commercial and economic activities that take place in and around the Shannon and are affected by it or dependent on it or have the capacity to affect it. This list includes farming, commercial fishing, power generation, food processing, boat rental, boat trips, property development, marina and boat maintenance operation, pubs, restaurants and shops and manufacturing. We feel that these activities must be recognised.

7.5 Heritage

The Shannon navigation is not an entirely natural feature. It contains many important historical artefacts including the various navigation structures built in times past. Preservation and conservation of these artefacts is important for a variety of reasons. The bills do not adequately acknowledge this aspect.

7.6 Geographic Scope

The geographic scope of the 1997 & 1998 bills could be read to include the Grand and Royal canals, the rivers Liffey, Barrow, Nore and Suir and a host of other lakes, rivers and streams connected thereto. This seems inappropriate.

All three bills include a substantial area of tidal estuarine water without making any reference to the additional issues raised by this inclusion such as deep-sea freight, commercial fishing, pilotage and harbour authorities.

8 IWAI

In response to your Clerk's request, we include here an account of IWAI itself.

8.1 Background

The Inland Waterways Association of Ireland was founded in 1954 to promote the development, use and maintenance of Ireland's navigable rivers and canals. When the Shannon was almost totally underdeveloped for pleasure boating, the IWAI fought against the building of low bridges, thus ensuring the development of the river as a national asset. Later, the association successfully resisted the threatened closure of the Grand Canal in Dublin and has done much to instigate the improvement of the Barrow and to focus interest and activity on the restoration of the Royal Canal with our sister body the Royal Canal Amenity Group.

IWAI is itself a cross-border body, having members north and south of the border.

8.2 Objectives of IWAI

The main objects for which the Association was formed are:

- *To promote the use maintenance and development of the inland waterways of Ireland, and in particular, to advocate and promote the restoration to good order, and maintenance in good order of every navigable waterways and the fullest use of every navigable waterway by both commercial and pleasure traffic provided such is not injurious to the environmental health of the waterways and the surrounding areas*
- *To support any proposal may be calculated to maintain or improve Irish waterways and also to improve navigation, lay moorings and carry out other works of improvement on and adjacent to the waterways.*

8.3 Membership and Structure

The association currently has approximately 1500 "members" throughout the island of Ireland of with most of the memberships actually being a family unit. Members are organised into branches of which there are currently 14, including 2 in Northern Ireland.

Each of the branches is represented on a national council and the national AGM elects a President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and Membership Secretary each year. In addition the AGM elects twelve ordinary members to Council.

IWAI is an entirely voluntary association and has no paid officials.

Membership of IWAI is open to all those interested in the inland waterways upon payment of the appropriate membership fee (currently £20.00 a year).

Boat ownership is not a pre-requisite for membership. IWAI does not maintain records of boat ownership among its members but it is estimated that perhaps half the members do own a boat of some sort. Boats range from small open rowing boats to large cruisers and barges.

8.4 Linkages

8.4.1 Voluntary bodies

The association works closely with the Royal Canal Amenity Group, the Ulster Waterways Group (a lobby group in Northern Ireland which focuses on the development of the Ulster Waterways as an economic asset) and Inland Waterways

International (an international organisation for people and organisations interested in inland waterways).

The association also enjoys good relations with a number of canal and boating organisations in the UK, US, Canada, Australia and a number of other countries.

The association works with the Irish Sailing Association in a number of areas but particularly in relation to the training of boat users.

At a branch level, the association enjoys good relationships with sailing, fishing boating and heritage organisations.

8.4.2 Public Bodies

The association has enjoyed a good working relationship with Duchas - Waterways for the past number of years and with the Rivers Agency of Dept. of Agriculture Northern Ireland. We expect these good relationships to continue with the new body established under the Belfast Agreement, Waterways Ireland.

At a branch level, the association is represented on a number of local authority strategic policy committees.

The association is also represented on the Lough Erne users forum.

The association has been consulted in recent times by the Dept. of the Marine, especially in relation to boat safety issues.

The association has participated extensively in the development of the Policy Document on Inland Waterways published by the Heritage Council.

8.4.3 Commercial Organisations

The association has enjoyed generally good relations with the Irish Boat Rental Association and more recently the Erne Charter Boat Association.

At a local level, members are regularly called upon to assist hire craft in difficulties and are also called upon to assist the civil authorities in search and rescue activities from time to time.

8.5 Publications

The association publishes its own newsletter ***Inland Waterways News*** four times per year. The newsletter is circulated free to members and is also circulated to other bodies interested in the waterways.

The association has established an Internet website www.iwai.ie which is intended to be a resource for anyone interested in the inland waterways of this island. In conjunction with the website the association also operates an Internet discussion group.

For many years, the association has published, in conjunction with others maps and charts of various navigations and a variety of other special publications, often associated with specific events.

The association is also a regular contributor to RTE's ***Seascapes*** radio programme.

8.6 Major Activities

8.6.1 Representation

The association engages in dialogue, both formal and informal, with a wide variety of bodies to represent the interests of its members.

It is an active participant in a wide variety of forums and discussion groups organised by state and local authorities on topics related to the waterways.

8.6.2 Restoration

As well as lobbying state and local bodies on the restoration and development of waterways, IWAI members take a direct part in conservation and restoration activities on local projects around the country.

8.6.3 Land-Based Activities

The association organises regular meetings for its members and the general public. The topics can include waterways history, heritage awareness, water safety, boat maintenance etc. The association also organises a range of purely social events. The association also organises walks and visits to sites of interest to waterways enthusiasts around the country.

8.6.4 Water-Based Activities

The association organises regular outings for its members either as small Cruise-in-Company events or as larger Rallies.

The larger events usually include a variety of competitions, often with a safety theme.

8.6.5 Training

The association operates (in conjunction with ISA) a training scheme for boat operators especially adapted to inland waterways.

The association also runs courses on boat maintenance, VHF Radio Usage, First Aid etc on an ad-hoc basis.

8.6.6 World Canal Conference 2001

IWAI is working with Waterways Ireland to organise the 2001 **World Canals Conference** in Dublin, Belfast and Lisburn in May of next year.