Case Study

Old Irish Goat Project

Reviving Heritage for a Resilient Future

Reviving the Old Irish Goat: a community-led conservation project for climate resilience.

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Status

Ongoing. Officially recognised as a Native Breed at Risk (June 2022) and as an approved breed society to run the national breeding programme (10 May 2022).

Overview

Section	Key Info
Start Date	2007 (revived in 2011)
Lead Organisation	Old Irish Goat Society
Location	Mulranny, Co. Mayo
Focus Areas	Biodiversity, conservation of the Old Irish Goat, education/outreach via the Old Irish Goat Centre, climate adaptation
Key Actions	Breeding programme, visitor centre, conservation grazing
Recognitions	Native Breed at Risk (2022); Tier 1 ACRES scheme
Funding & Partnerships	LEADER delivered locally via South West Mayo Development Company (SWMDC); Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) — Genetic Resources & Rare Breeds; The Heritage Council; Mayo County Council — Local Agenda 21 (LA21, Community Environment Action Fund), Community Heritage, and Town & Village Renewal grants; Fáilte Ireland (mentorship).
Climate Action Link	Firebreak management, invasive species control, upland restoration
Policy Impact	Called for stronger protection of living heritage; influenced national strategy
Website	https://www.oldirishgoat.ie

Origins and Context

In the early 2000s, the Old Irish Goat had all but vanished from Ireland's cultural and ecological landscape. This once-common upland animal, affectionately known as *the poor man's cow*, had long supported rural subsistence, but shifts in agriculture, afforestation, and a lack of legal recognition led to indiscriminate culling and genetic dilution.

Historian Ray Werner, intrigued by archival references and field sightings, began investigating the possibility that remnants of this ancient breed still survived. His search led him to Mulranny, where wild goats retained the long-haired traits and browsing behaviours linked to the historical Irish landrace. A local movement emerged. In 2011, the Old Irish Goat Society was established to protect and revalue the breed through research, public awareness, and hands-on conservation.

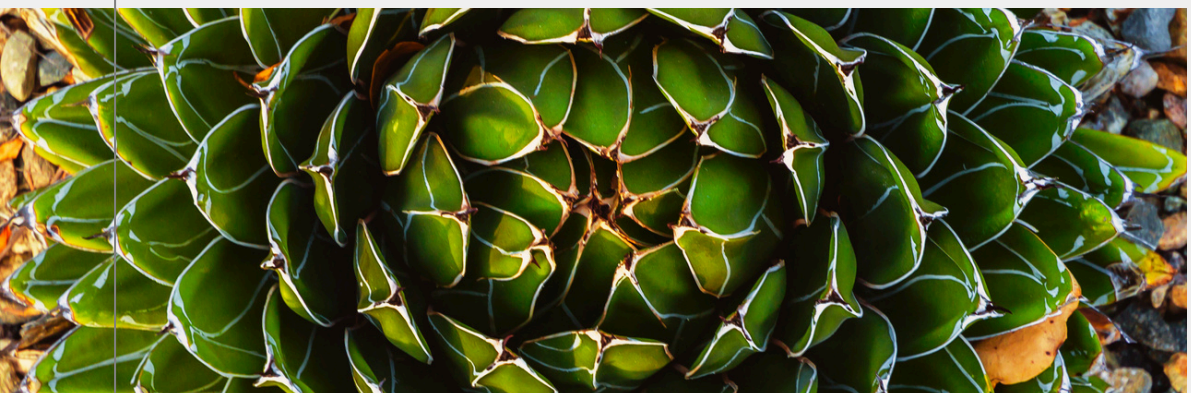
Key Actions and Interventions

Over more than a decade, the project has combined community engagement, scientific rigour, and landscape management:

1. **Breeding Programme** – A nationally recognised breeding programme was established, leading to the breed's formal classification as a Native Breed at Risk in 2022. The programme protects genetic integrity and facilitates responsible expansion.
2. **Old Irish Goat Centre** – Located in Mulranny, the centre serves as a cultural and educational hub, hosting visitors, school groups, and tourists interested in heritage biodiversity and regenerative land use.
3. **Conservation Grazing Trials** – Herds of Old Irish Goats have been deployed in Howth and Dun Laoghaire for targeted grazing. These trials have successfully demonstrated the goats' ability to manage fire-prone vegetation and control invasive species such as gorse and bracken.
4. **Invasive Species Management in Mayo** – In collaboration with Mayo County Council and Atlantic Technological University, goats have been used in pilot projects to suppress Gunnera Tinctoria through mobile, paddock-based grazing.
5. **Advocacy and Policy Engagement** – The Society has consistently raised awareness about gaps in Irish biodiversity law and the need to include genetic resources within national conservation strategies.

Program Lifecycle (Delivery Pipeline)

1. **Recognition & governance.** Secure formal recognition (Native Breed at Risk; approved breed society) and define roles, decision rights and welfare standards for field work.
2. **Conservation breeding.** Stabilise and improve the genetic base; maintain a transparent studbook and breeding objectives aligned with conservation targets.
3. **Demonstration pilots.** Run conservation-grazing trials in agreed sites (e.g., Howth Head, Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown) to reduce fuel loads, manage scrub, and evidence ecological effects.
4. **Education & Centre.** Use the Old Irish Goat Centre to host schools, guided visits, and training—linking field practice to public engagement and curriculum.
5. **Scale to new sites.** Extend to additional counties/landowners where the habitat need exists (including invasive species control such as *Gunnera*).
6. **Policy & funding consolidation.** Convert successful pilots into multi-annual agreements; align with local, regional and national plans; embed monitoring and reporting.

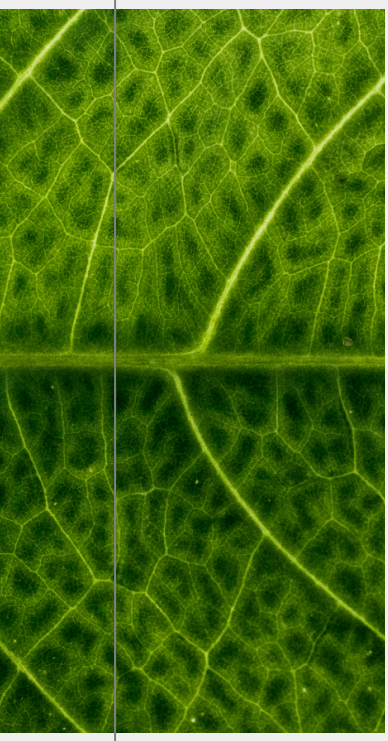


Results and Impact

- In May 2022, the Department of Agriculture officially recognised the Old Irish Goat Society as a breed society, under EU Regulation 2016/1012.
- The breed was granted Tier 1 priority under Ireland's ACRES scheme, offering crucial support for farmers involved in its conservation.
- Grazing trials in Howth received international acclaim, including coverage by the World Economic Forum.
- The goats' browsing effectively reduced wildfire fuel loads and enhanced habitat conditions for invertebrates, birds and heathland species.
- The project spurred local pride in Mulranny, revitalising cultural narratives around self-sufficiency and ecological stewardship.

Metrics / KPIs

- **External pilot sites active:** 2 — **Howth Head** and **Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown**.
- **Media reach:** RTÉ *Ear to the Ground* feature on Howth — **most-watched episode in a decade**, **>438,000** viewers.
- **Formal recognitions:** 3 — **Native Breed at Risk** (2022); **Approved Breed Society** (2022); **ACRES Tier 1** priority.
- **Funding sources identified/used:** 5+



New-Site Rollout (Scale & Replication)

Preconditions to grow: multi-annual framework agreements with local authorities/park bodies; a dedicated budget and field capacity (breeding/handlers, mobile fencing/handling, transport, vet support); clear welfare/biosecurity SOPs and public-safety signage; a light monitoring backbone (mapping, fixed photo-points, 3–5 indicators); and a simple legal/policy enablement for “living heritage.”

Implementation Process (what was done)

Roll-out steps for a new site:

1. **Assess and map** habitat needs (fuel loads, scrub, invasives) and constraints.
2. **Co-design objective**s and success measures with the landowner/authority; sign a short MoU.
3. **Prepare the site** (rotational paddocks, temporary fencing, water, signage).
4. **Deploy a small trained herd** with a seasonal plan aligned to habitat goals.
5. **Monitor** hectares treated, cost/ha, fuel-load reduction, regrowth, and a couple of biodiversity indicators; log incidents.
6. **Report visually** (before/after, dashboard) and host at least one public/education session; review and, if targets are met, convert pilots to multi-year agreements and extend to additional sites (e.g., invasive *Gunnera* control).

Challenges / Risks

- **Legal protection gap.** The breed lacks explicit in-situ protection; there is residual pressure from trophy hunting in some contexts.
- **Funding and capacity.** Chronic under-funding and reliance on volunteers limit continuity, data collection and response time.
- **Evidence requirements.** Need robust comparative data on cost-effectiveness versus mechanical or chemical methods (cost/ha, fuel-load reduction, biodiversity outcomes).
- **Operational risks.** Biosecurity, animal welfare, access and public safety must be managed with clear protocols and site signage.
- **Stakeholder alignment.** Grazing timings and locations can conflict with recreation or other land uses without agreed schedules and communication.

Insights and Lessons Learned

- **Conservation needs both people and policy.** While grassroots activism initiated the project, sustainable results only became possible through legal and institutional recognition.
- **Heritage breeds are functional assets.** Beyond symbolic value, Old Irish Goats provide low-impact solutions for managing vegetation and preventing wildfires.
- **Legal frameworks are incomplete.** The goats still lack full protection under Irish wildlife law, despite their endangered status.
- **Citizen science matters.** This project illustrates how non-specialists can drive significant research, documentation, and change.
- **Public storytelling works.** High-profile media coverage helped broaden the project's appeal and build alliances across sectors.

Link to Climate Action and SDGs

The Old Irish Goat Project demonstrates how cultural heritage and biodiversity conservation can become tools for climate action and rural resilience. Through targeted grazing, habitat management, and community engagement, the project contributes to multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by integrating ecological knowledge with contemporary needs.

SDG Links:

- **SDG 13: Climate Action** – Conservation grazing reduces fire risk, restores ecological balance, and increases climate resilience in fire-prone areas like Howth and Dun Laoghaire.
- **SDG 15: Life on Land** – Protects native genetic resources and helps maintain species-rich heathlands, supporting ecological integrity.
- **SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities** – Strengthens rural-urban connections by linking biodiversity action with community pride and sustainable tourism.
- **SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production** – Promotes low-input, land-based approaches to sustainability through traditional livestock systems.
- **SDG 17: Partnerships for the Goals** – Brings together public authorities, researchers, local communities, and volunteers in a coordinated conservation effort.
- **SDG 4: Quality Education** – The visitor centre and outreach efforts support awareness-building and place-based environmental education.

The project also aligns with Ireland's **Decarbonising Zones** and the **EU Green Deal**, providing scalable, nature-based solutions grounded in rural experience and traditional ecological knowledge.

Legacy and Future Relevance

After pulling the Old Irish Goat back from the brink of extinction, the next challenge is to ensure its long-term role in ecological and cultural resilience. Conservation grazing offers one of the clearest paths forward — a role to which this ancient breed is uniquely adapted.

Today, the Old Irish Goat Society pairs this traditional form of land management with modern tools like virtual paddock systems. This allows herds to be strategically managed, targeting specific ecological goals such as fire prevention or habitat restoration. This low-impact approach not only draws from the past, but actively contributes to climate resilience and habitat restoration.

Looking ahead, the future of wild Old Irish Goats remains an open and evolving chapter — one the community continues to advocate for. To support ongoing conservation efforts, the Society encourages the public to sign the petition here: https://oldirishgoat.ie/our-project-to-save-the-old-irish-goats/

Endnotes

Meitheal — The Beautiful Idea (TUD).
Climate Connected Podcast (2025) — Seán Carolan. Climate Connected (University of Galway): Climate Connected
SEAI "180 Degrees" Podcast (2021) — Season 2, Episode 5: "Becoming a Sustainable Energy Community" (Mulranny SEC). Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
Feasibility / Scoping Study: UNESCO Man & Biosphere (2024).
Mulranny Towards 2030 — Huddle Report (20 Feb 2025).

Get Involved. Take action.

If you're inspired to contribute to this initiative—or to start something similar—use the contacts below to get started:

Mulranny Community Futures - Mulranny, Co. Mayo
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For more details, visit **climateconnected.ie** or contact **a.alexandrov1@universityofgalway.ie**