

# Unregulated sand extraction 'ruining Lough Neagh'



Lough Neagh is owned by the Earl of Shaftesbury, right

## Jonathan Leake

THE Earl of Shaftesbury has been accused of damaging the ecology of Ireland's largest lough and nature reserve by extracting millions of tons of sand for sale to construction firms – without planning permission.

Nick Ashley-Cooper, the 12th earl, and the five sand extraction firms he has licensed, are stripping 1.5m tons of sand a year from Lough Neagh, the lake that dominates Northern Ireland and whose entire bed, plus the shooting and fishing rights, was gifted to his family in the 17th century.

The sand is sucked from the lake by 15 large barges equipped with giant pumps.

The sand is used mainly in construction. The extraction started six decades ago and has been allowed to continue, even though it was never had planning permission.

Over that period the lough has gained the "protection" of the UK's and Europe's highest conservation designations. These include a listing under the global Wetlands Convention since 1976 and designation as an EU Birds Directive Special Protection Area since 1998.

Despite these moves, there was no official attempt to halt the extraction or scientifically assess the damage it might be doing. The sand extraction has never been monitored because Northern Ireland is unique in the UK in having no independent

agency to protect wildlife or the environment. This job is left to the environment department, which environmental groups say has been too slow to act.

James Orr, of Friends of the Earth Northern Ireland, said: "Lough Neagh is meant to be afforded the strictest protection. It is inconceivable that this would be allowed in Loch Lomond in Scotland, or England's Lake Windermere."

Earlier this year, months after being told that neither Shaftesbury Estates, the earl's firm, or the sand traders, had planning permission for sand extraction, Northern Ireland's environment department issued a notice ordering them to stop. However, the earl and

the sand traders lodged an appeal which, under Northern Irish law, means they can continue until it is heard. They say the extraction supports 800 jobs and does little harm.

The extraction reflects a wider failure to manage Lough Neagh. The lake is 20 miles long and nine miles wide. It supplies 40% of the province's water but also receives much of its treated sewage. This, plus agricultural run-off from farms, means it also suffers pollution, threatening its fish.

A recent study by Northern Ireland's Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation Science, found Lough Neagh's ecosystem is crashing, with a huge decline in

the numbers of insects on its bed and a 75% decline in the number of ducks spending winter there – as there is no longer anything for them to feed on.

Despite the lough's potential for generating tourism income, Northern Ireland's faction-ridden government has

never been able to agree on how to manage it, meaning almost every activity, including boating and fishing, as well as sand extraction, is unregulated.

Ashley-Cooper confirmed he was appealing against the ban on sand extraction and had commissioned environmental impact studies which he believed would show the harm to be minimal. He called on the government to devise a strategy for the whole lough.

He said: "Lough Neagh is a wonderful asset that must be managed in the best interests of the environment... [but] we also must take into account the Northern Ireland economy and the people who depend on sand extraction for their living."



FERGAL PHILLIPS

## Brewery caught in craft beer row

### Colin Coyle

AN INDEPENDENT brewing company has been targeted by critics claiming it is not a genuine craft producer. Stickers have been attached to McGargles beer selling in Waterford claiming it is "an insult to Irish craft beer" and calling for a boycott of the brand.

McGargles has also been subject to criticism on social media and online beer forums where it has been labelled an "astroturf" producer, a label used to describe multinationals that set up small, independent microbreweries to cash in on the craft beer phenomenon. Others have criticised the branding, with each beer based on a member of a fictional family called the McGargles, as "paddywhackery".

Alex Lawes, head brewer of Rye River Brewing Company in Kildare, which makes McGargles, took to beoir.org, an online forum for craft beer drinkers, to defend the beer. Lawes criticised those behind the sticker campaign, which was brought to the company's attention by an off-licence in Dungan.

"What on earth gives this person the motivation to go to the effort of getting this printed, going down to the shops and putting this on a basket that I packed by hand and sent out into the world?" Lawes said.

He dismissed speculation that the brewery was not genuinely independent. "There was speculation about whether the brewery was some kind of 'astroturf' brand set up by a multinational," he said. "It wasn't true. The guys setting it up left their jobs in corporate to set up an independent brewery, the same story as so many other Irish craft breweries."

Niall Phelan, co-founder of the brewery, said CCTV footage had been reviewed but the culprit was not identifiable because of the angle of the camera.

Beoir.org said that Rye River Brewing Company met both its and Revenue's definition of a microbrewery. "This act is nothing short of an attack on the Irish craft beer consumers and consumer choice," it said.

## Claire Scott

THE capital's traffic light boxes are getting a makeover, courtesy of a city council initiative and the combined efforts of scores of artists.

The project, known as Dublin Canvas, aims to make Dublin "a more beautiful place to live, work and visit", according to Dave Murtagh, who is managing the scheme on behalf of the council.

Grey traffic light boxes dotted around city streets are being used as blank canvases to create the art pieces, but the idea could expand to any unused public spaces in Dublin. Established and amateur artists are being encouraged to submit ideas to help "colour in the city".

Murtagh said he remembers backpacking around Brisbane, Australia, in 2006 and seeing street artists use the boxes there to create works of art. "I was blown away by how such a simple idea can have such a wide impact and I wanted to mirror the project in Dublin," he said.

Dublin Canvas began as a pilot project in 2013. A report on the project said it was designed "to solve an ongoing maintenance issue due to tagging, graffiti and sticking of traffic light boxes and the ongoing need to repaint them with associated costs".

The pilot study found that grey boxes are often vandalised within two months of being repainted by the council but the custom-designed boxes survived 18 months before needing wear-and-tear repairs.

The project has now begun, with 15 artists currently working on 15 boxes. The sites are distributed between Baggot Street, Camden Steet and the Rathmines area. As part of the upcoming Ranelagh Arts festival five boxes will be used as part of a street exhibition.

Kimberley Bale, a tattoo artist based in Dublin, was painting a traffic light box on

## Artists given green light to stop traffic

### Dublin's creative community join council signal box scheme to give pedestrian crossings a new and colourful lease of life



Hold Me Close by Anna Doran in Rathmines Road

Friday as passers-by stopped to ask her about the piece and to take photos. She posed beside her work for a woman who wanted a shot of the piece, which complemented some of Bale's own tattoos.

"I wanted to do something eye-catching to brighten up the place," Bale said. "I also wanted something that would flow really well, so I thought this kind of design would work."

"I really didn't think I'd be given a spot at all so I was shocked when [the council] got back to me. It's nice to get the opportunity to showcase your work in the middle of town."

Murtagh said the project is making a positive contribution to the Dublin art scene. "By using the traffic signal boxes as canvases the project is giving artists a new platform to exhibit

their work directly to the public. People naturally have to stop at traffic lights, which make these boxes unique."

An artist known as Morgan, who has done design work for U2, David Gray and PJ Harvey, will begin work on a piece for Dublin Canvas today outside the Bleeding Horse pub on Camden Street. He said the project is not only good for artists but also connects art with the Dublin community. "People can come down and engage with the artists while the painting is being done live," Morgan said. He added that art can be an isolating process so projects like Dublin Canvas allow artists to interact with each other and can often lead to bigger collaborations.

The council is offering artists €200 to complete the boxes and they also provide some paints and supplies. Bale warned, however, that the works need to be looked after. "There are some amazing pieces I've seen around town that have just been ruined by graffiti".

Dublin Canvas said some artists may be asked to retouch their work if damage has been caused but warned that if particular boxes are consistently targeted they will be



painted over and excluded from the project.

The organisers hope to have 40 boxes completed by November, spreading out from the south and city centre to the north of the city.

"The public seem to love the idea," said Murtagh. "These boxes were grey, ugly and covered in tags. Now they are beautiful works of art, what's not to love?"

Tattoo artist Bale has relished the chance to show her eye-catching designs to a wider audience; right, I'm Sticking With You by Ruan van Vliet



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