APPENDIX No. 17

Outline of Grazing Management at Mweeloon by Dr. John Conaghan

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Outline of grazing at Mweeloon

In the west of Ireland saltmarsh areas have traditionally been grazed by a range of livestock (Sheehy Skeffington and Wymer, 1991). Grazing is an important management tool which, if properly planned and managed, can increase the plant species diversity of the sward over time (Dijkema, 1984). If grazing is not properly managed however it can lead to deterioration in habitat quality and loss of diversity. Grazing should be closely monitored as the overstocking of saltmarsh areas can supress the flowering of plant species and lead to the erosion of soft saltmarsh soils. In general it has been advised that areas of saltmarsh habitat should be lightly grazed between the growing season, i.e. between April and October, at an intensity of 0.5 livestock units per hectare (Frid and Evans, 1995). It must be noted however that all sites are different and that some degree of fine-tuning may be required in order to determine the optimal grazing levels.

At Mweeloon the saltmarsh habitat occurs in mosaic with dry grassland on shallow limestone soils and livestock (both cattle and horses) are able to access and graze both habitats. These dry grassland areas can sustain a higher grazing intensity than the adjoining saltmarsh areas. The salt-marsh habitat at Mweeloon directly adjoins areas of vegetated stony bank habitat. Since these areas of habitat are continuous it is proposed to manage areas of vegetated stony bank habitat in a similar manner to that of the salt-marsh, i.e. subject to a light grazing regime between the months of April and October.

In recent years at Mweeloon livestock have been grazed and fed during the wetter Winter/Spring months and this has lead to the localized poaching of saltmarsh habitat, especially in the east of the site. As part of future management it is proposed to limit grazing to the drier growing season, i.e. April to October. This will result in lower levels of poaching damage and will also reduce the requirement for supplementary feeding which causes localized poaching damage. The cessation of supplementary feeding will result in a reduction in the nutrient loading on the site which will also reduce levels of nutrient runoff to the adjacent lagoon waters. The cessation of supplementary feeding of livestock will also eliminate the introduction of material such as non-native seeds into the SAC. The regular monitoring of the habitat in order to record its condition/recovery and the recording of related management with regard to start and end of grazing, stocking density and weather conditions will provide a valuable guide to the future management of this and other sites in the west of Ireland. The monitoring of this site will be independently reviewed and the management fine-tuned in order to achieve optimal habitat conditions. There is much to be learned from the site as there are differing proportions of salt-marsh habitat in the various fields/plots (see Figure 1).

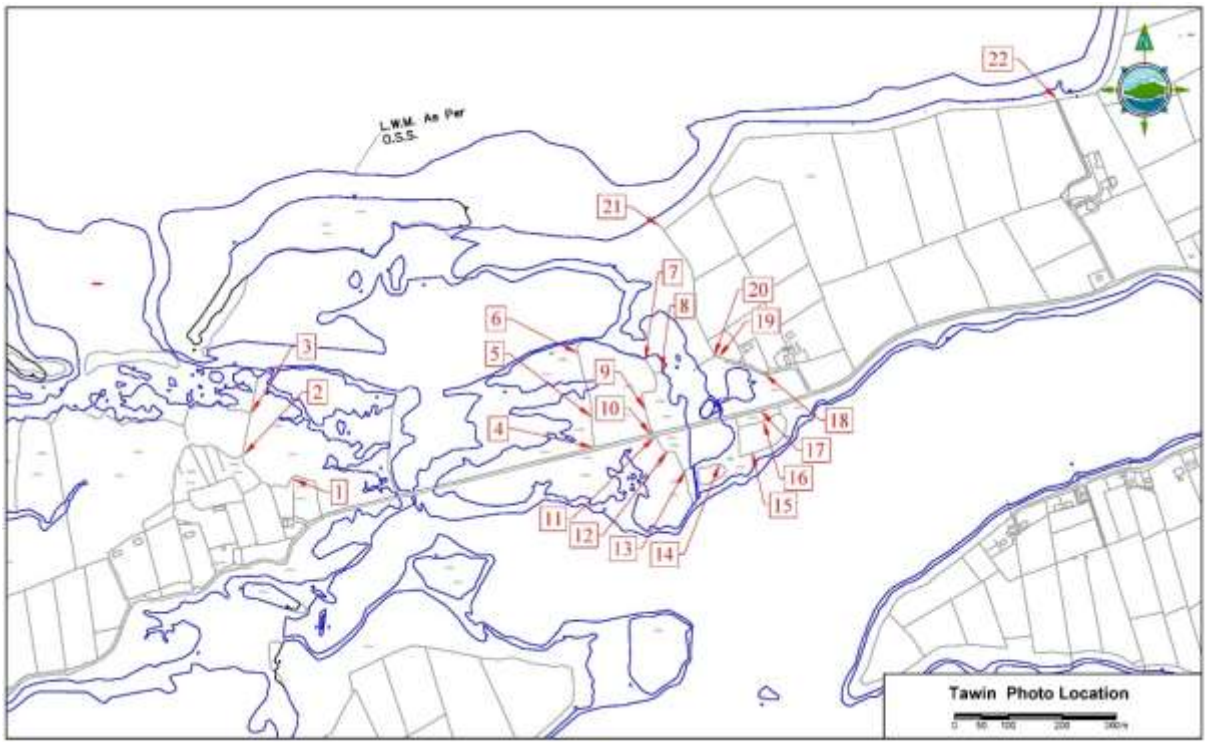

Fig. 1 – Gate Locations and Wall Repairs

The Mweeloon site contains a network of old limestone walls which are broken down in places (Photograph 1). It is proposed to repair these walls and insert gates (Photograph 2) at a number of locations (Figure 1) and see Appendix 14. This wall network will divide up the area and make the grazing of the site easier to manage and control.

Photograph 1. Typical gap in limestone wall

Photograph 2. Example of makeshift gate in wall which will be replaced by functional gate.

References

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