Boost for conservation of Ireland’s oldest species of mussel

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The HLF-awarded Ballinderry Fish Hatchery Limited a first-round pass for their ambitious plans to prevent the extinction of the Freshwater Pearl Mussel, preserving the species for future generations and preventing the loss of an important part of the river’s ecosystem. A development grant of £30,200 was also awarded to enable more detailed proposals to be prepared, including the further development of the scientific plans for the rescue of the Mussels and a programme of outreach activities and events, in order to secure the full £362,400 HLF grant.

The Freshwater Pearl Mussel, an ancient relic from the Ice Age over 10,000 years ago, is thought to be one of Ireland’s oldest species. The microscopic larvae of the Mussels attach to the gills of young trout or salmon and develop into juveniles before falling off and burrowing into the river gravel. As filter feeders they purify the water, improving the quality of the river environment, and are therefore of huge ecological importance to the river. They are a UK priority species and the Upper Ballinderry River is designated as a Special Area of Conservation due to their presence there.

The new Ballinderry Freshwater Pearl Mussel Rescue Project aims to save the species from extinction, which is believed to be likely in just 30 years time if the current decline is left unchallenged. Efforts will focus on improving the habitat and the reintroduction of the Pearl Mussels via the establishment of a breeding programme in the wild based at a newly created sanctuary site on the main river.

A series of events will be held to encourage local people to get involved in activities to conserve the river, contribute to the success of the rescue programme and learn more about the rare and precious resource.

Announcing the award, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: “This fantastic conservation project aims to save the Freshwater Pearl Mussel from extinction and improve the water quality of the Ballinderry River, and is hugely important in terms of preserving our natural heritage for future generations. Participation will also be at the heart of the project through a series of outreach and educational activities, ensuring the local community has plenty of opportunities to get involved throughout the process. We are delighted to have offered our initial support to the proposals and look forward to receiving the fully developed plans in due course.”

Physical works to be undertaken include the preparation of the river tributary management plans to improve water quality and reduce silt build up, and the preparation of the sanctuary site. Conservation efforts aim to establish a sustainable population of Mussels within the sanctuary site. The sanctuary site will bring together wild adult Mussels currently unable to breed due to their isolation and hatchery reared juvenile Mussels. The Mussels should then be able to breed in their natural habitat of the river.

A programme of volunteering opportunities and learning activities will also be developed to encourage and involve local schools, community groups and businesses in the project. A dedicated activity plan will include activities such as lectures and talks, a summer scheme and engagement with local rural networks and interests.

Welcoming the announcement, Alan Keys from Ballinderry Fish Hatchery Limited, said: “We designed this new project around exactly what the Ballinderry pearl mussels need now, and into the future. Our funders, HLF and the Northern

Ireland Environment Agency, also recognise that we must now build on our successful fifteen year old breeding and rearing project at the hatchery. Along with this funding, many others have already shown support for the new mussel project. Organisations like Cookstown District Council, the National Trust, WWF NI and the NI Quarry Products Association and, most important of all, a cross section of the landowners in the Upper Ballinderry have agreed to help us deliver this project, preventing this globally endangered species becoming extinct."

Commenting on the funding Graham Seymour, Director of Natural Heritage, Northern Ireland Environment Agency said: "NIEA is pleased to be able to contribute £74,287 to this project to compliment the funding allocated by HLF. NIEA recognises that Ballinderry Fish Hatchery is leading the way in Northern Ireland in conserving the Freshwater Pearl Mussel populations of the Upper Ballinderry River, and has been providing funds to support the Hatchery's work to protect and conserve this endangered species since 2000. This project will enable this invaluable work to continue."

Note to editors

Since 1994 the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £146million to projects across Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is an Agency that is part of the Department of the Environment. NIEA administers the Natural Heritage Grants Programme to support projects in Northern Ireland to encourage the conservation and enhancement of key elements of the environment and its wildlife, and the provision of facilities which help as wide a range of people as possible to enjoy and appreciate our natural heritage.

Further information

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