



Peatlands at risk, academics claim

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Peatlands at risk, says Trinity paper

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CLIMATE CHANGE will lead to the loss of up to 40 per cent of the suitable climatic areas for Irish peatlands by 2075, an international conference on botany in Dublin will be told this week.

A paper to be presented by four academics from Trinity College Dublin on the impact of climate change on biodiversity of Ireland reveals the threat posed by global warming to a habitat that is particularly identified with Ireland.

According to the group from the Botany Department at TCD, led by Professor Mike Jones, recent assessments predict the loss of almost half the suitable areas for peatlands within 60 years.

The three-day *International Conference on Climate Change and Systematics*, which begins today, will also hear that the native Irish hare may also be at risk from the European hare, which already comprises over half the population in some parts of mid-Ulster.

The paper's authors, QUB biological scientist Neil Reid and Ian Montgomery predict that global warming is "likely to favour the expansion of European hares at the expense of the native Irish hare". They cite warmer and drier conditions that will make the country more suitable for arable farming.

Similarly, changing climatic conditions may also have repercussions for the native Irish ash, especially since grants were made available in the early 1990s on for the widespread planting of hybrid alien ash.

Meanwhile, the sixth scientific statement of the Royal Irish Academy's Irish Committee on Climate Change to be launched at the conference today, says that even small changes in summer water balance – such as the recent heavy flooding – may be enough to threaten our

peatlands.

"The recent flooding and landslide in the Smearlagh and Feale river areas have decimated the salmon and sea-trout stocks in the area – the full impact of which is not yet known – highlighting the unpredictability of current weather," it will say.

The statement highlights recent studies showing that the life cycle of birds and plants in Ireland is changing as spring temperatures increase, with migrating birds arriving up to a week earlier than 35 years ago.

A number of species have been observed breeding here for the first time, it noted.

Today's seminar, hosted by Trinity College Dublin and featuring almost 30 presentations, will hear some of the strongest collective evidence to date on the extent of the impact global warming will have on the planet's estimated four million species.

One of the conference organisers, Dr Trevor Hodkinson from the Department of Botany at TCD said it was the first time that systemists have come together and looked at the climate change issue collectively.

"Climate change has always occurred, but is now being accelerated by the actions of humans. There are so many factors leading to extinction. There is land-use change which includes the destruction of forests and prime habitats in farming.

"While such habitat loss is the main factor, climate change is becoming more and more important, here in Ireland also. The rate of change is unprecedented in a historical context. We will get a better idea of that by the end of the week," said Dr Hodkinson.

Threat to diversity: Dublin conference assesses damage