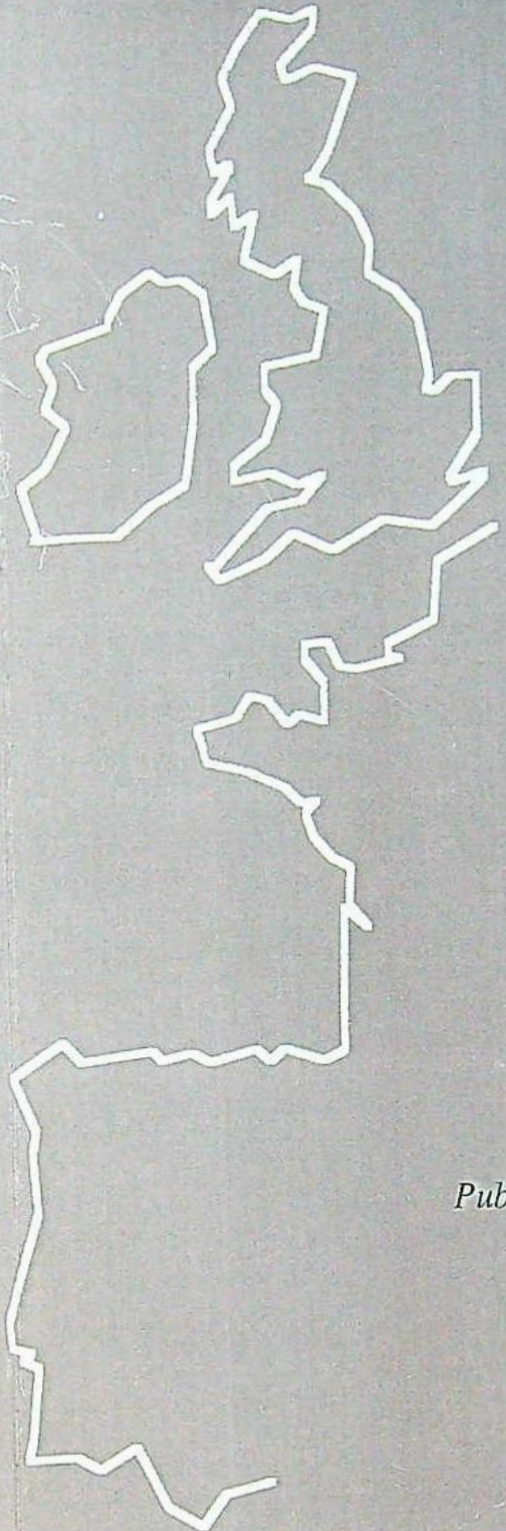


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LES NOUVEAUX ESPACES RURAUX DE L'EUROPE ATLANTIQUE

Hommage
au Professeur Roger Bêteille

Publication coordonnée par Jean Soumagne

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The Transformation of Marginal Areas in Atlantic Europe Incendiarism in Iberia and Overgrazing in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Many upland areas of Atlantic Europe are in the process of being transformed through the medium of new stresses which have provoked various kinds of degradation. In Atlantic Iberia, incendiarism has afflicted many upland areas while on some uplands in Ireland overgrazing has caused a welter of difficulties for some upland communities. Employing a broad political economy approach there is an attempt in this paper to interpret these developments so as to establish whether they can be explained within their context as a manifestation of ecocide.

RÉSUMÉ

Un bon nombre de zones de haut plateau en Europe Atlantique sont en passe d'être transformées, un nouveau « stress » ayant provoqué plusieurs sortes de dégradations. En Iberie Atlantique les incendies provoqués ont sévèrement dégradé certaines régions de hauts plateaux et sur les plateaux d'Irlande le surpâturage a causé de multiples difficultés aux quelques communautés qui y vivent. A l'aide d'une approche autant politique qu'économique, cet essai tente d'interpréter ces phénomènes, de déterminer si ils peuvent être expliqués dans leur contexte comme une manifestation d'un « écocide ».

RESUMEN

Muchas zonas de montana de la Europa Atlantica estan siendo transformando por nuevas procesos que han provocado diversas formas de degradacion. En Iberia Atlantica el inceniarismo ha afectado muchas zonas de montana, mientras en algunas tierras altas de Irlanda un exceso de capa ovina ha ocasionado serias dificultades en algunas de estas comunidades. A traves de la economia politica intentamos analizar en este tarabajo estos procesos para establecer si puedan ser explicados en su contexto como una forma de ecocido.

Upland areas of Atlantic Europe, long believed to be marginal areas in permanent decline have, in recent decades, been the arena within which a series of new pressures have reached crises levels. One of the many consequences of these developments has been the general depletion of the overall resource base of many of these uplands for all its stakeholders and

consumers. Although two highly contrasting instances of change have been selected for scrutiny here, it is evident that both reflect different prisms of the same malaise. Over the past two decades throughout Atlantic Iberia forest and scrub fires have consumed vast swathes of territory putting their rehabilitation in jeopardy; in upland western Ireland overgrazing of upland moors, chiefly by sheep has provoked the removal of the brittle and scanty vegetative cover and has culminated in soil erosion. Here a political economy approach is invoked as means, not simply of detailing the complexity of causation and of transformation, but as an aid to potential explanation within a discourse of ecocide (Feshbach, 1992; Komarov, 1980).

Atlantic Europe as a region defies a definition that can win general acceptance. Traditional views have portrayed its unity stemming from a mixture of physical characteristics and cultural anachronisms. A more recent attempt to institutionally categorise the region omits Scandinavia and Iceland (CEC, 1994). A further complication is evident from conditions in Ireland where uplands can begin at a much lower level than in Atlantic Iberia to judge from the fact that arable crops are rarely visible above 200 metres in the west and permanent settlement seldom breaches the 300 metres level.

Throughout Atlantic Europe upland areas have been in continuous economic decline for most of this century and the rate of decline has generally accelerated in the past forty years if one is to instance population decrease as a diagnostic variable. But Ireland's uplands share other critical features. Most of their margins were settled permanently (where it was feasible) only two centuries ago and this was in the main as a consequence of population pressure. Many of their margins were enclosed for the first time in that period and common unenclosed property remains a hallmark of many such areas. Given their poor or reduced resource base, upland areas have been able to sustain only a narrow range of enterprises upon which mainly local stakeholders have relied on for their survival and where pluriactivities rather than specialised enterprises have always been dominant. The Scottish Highlands however stand out as a critical exception in as much as external stakeholders have exercised a paramount influence as the so-called clearances made way for sheep ranches and, in many cases subsequently, for great sporting estates (Devine, 1988; Withers, 1988).

As in other rural areas there is also a delicate relationship between society and the land mediated through the complex connections between population pressure, land-holding and land-use. Such a delicate symmetry can be distorted or entirely subverted if stresses on the uplands, engendered by internal or external pressures, become unsustainable. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth century colonizations of these lands in Ireland, for instance, by desperate communities led to their rapid exhaustion and abandonment (Andrews, 1987). Here the remains of relict enclosures are a stark reminder of a hopeless battle for survival which was bitterly contested and rapidly lost.

Today, traditional management practises can often no longer be sustained due to labour shortages and both enclosed and unenclosed areas are no longer husbanded as grass is being replaced by plants whose presence betokens abandonment. Most traditional upland communities in Atlantic Europe sustained themselves by multiple enterprise systems and where also seasonal emigration and remittances often played a pivotal role. Arable crops were invariably subservient to pastoral activities and throughout most of southern Atlantic Iberia small scale agro-forestry was also a vital component.

Outmigration, especially of the young, an increasingly ageing population and a disproportionate number of holdings without direct heirs have reduced the capacity of communities in these upland contexts to sustain themselves without external support. This has prompted many to sell their holdings and rights to common lands to other locals or outside interests. A consequence of these changes, in some areas, has been both an increasing involvement of outside stakeholders in the management and exploitation of the uplands, a reduction in the range of land uses but often their intensification reflected especially in expanded forestry and higher sheep numbers. In a word, intensive monocultures are replacing more varied and extensive uses and uncomplicated technologies are being replaced by expensive and sophisticated ones (Buttimer and McGauran, 1994). Tourism of various kinds is impacting on some areas and the designation of swathes of land as parks or protected areas is « freezing » development. This in the perceptions of locals has reduced their capacity to react to new circumstances as many feel that their role of stewardship has been curtailed. In this way these perceptions have sharpened when the new stakeholders may be, as in the case of forestry, remote insurance and investment companies.

In addition other outside interests are reappraising the « value » and utility of uplands. The extraction of water and aggregates, the development of turbine-driven wind farms underline new resource appraisals. The use of uplands for tracking stations and telecommunications masts is leading to an excess of antanaefication and a concomitant reduction in amenity value and scenic quality.

The commodification of uplands has already been mentioned in the instance of parks and various types of protected amenity areas and this process has taken a step further by the growing demands for access to and preservation of these areas by tourists and visitors. Interest groups representing leisure constituencies tend to favour open access and the preservation of the status quo to sustain their consumption of what they believe to be unspoilt areas. This often puts them at loggerheads with both local and external stakeholders who wish to promote the intensification of upland utilization (Hogan and Phillips, 1996). The rise of environmental concerns within Europe and their acute politicization, especially amongst younger voters, are also pertinent as they relate to what are perceived to be threats to the quality of life and landscape precipitated by agricultural intensification and artificial agriculture (Hoggart, 1995, p. 235).

Further collisions of interest and intent are evident in recent EU policies designed to assist less favoured areas such as the uplands of Atlantic Europe. As will be demonstrated, an over-reliance on one scheme for the immediate economic salvation of these types of areas, namely Headage payments for sheep owners in the west of Ireland has provoked serious repercussions of all kinds. Run in tandem with the sheep production scheme has been the REPS programme in which many of its seventeen principal measures are completely counter - in terms of aspiration - to those policies which seek to increase stocking densities (Gillmor, this volume). Viewed through a prism in which the agencies and actors of the various interest groups whose aspirations focus on the development of uplands, it is evident that the local stakeholder group is no longer homogeneous as it used to be. Many local people act as surrogates for outside agencies. Few upland communities can mobilise or sustain any form of solidarity to enable them to formulate a common position in relation to development, besides parish councils and single issue protest movements, such as the controversy surrounding proposed opencast gold mining on Croagh Patrick, county Mayo.

In Ireland, at least, state agencies have a disproportionate influence on uplands areas, but as has been already demonstrated in the case of EU policies these agencies may often have conflicting goals : there are no formal mechanisms in place to facilitate consulting upland residents. However recent activities by the Irish Heritage Council augur for positive changes in this respect (Johnson, 1998).

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In Atlantic Iberia uplands form a discontinuous zone beginning with the mountains of Algarve and Monchique, then there is a gap which mainly corresponds to Portuguese Alentejo, up to the mountains of Central and northern Portugal and from then on there is an almost continuous arc of mountains as far as Funturrabia in Guipuzcoa. There is no need to dwell on the broad characteristics of this zone as they are well known. It is a zone of varying dimensions which reaches its maximum height in the Picos de Europa. Settlement is discontinuous but where population densities (if they are based on ratios of productive land) are often extremely high given the weaknesses of the resource base. It is a zone of general decline (Black, 1992 ; O'Neill, 1987 ; Rodriguez Campos, 1990 ; Torres Luna, 1993). Many sectors of these uplands are well wooded and Galicia, for instance, has close to thirty per cent of its territory covered by woods. In addition large swathes of territory are covered by scrubland referred to as *monte* which is a term that we will have cause to revisit. Much of the less productive upland areas of the vast zone remain as common lands which are held and managed under various vernacular and venerable arrangements and practices (Balboa, 1990 ; Fernandez Leiceaga, 1991). Over the last two decades fire has been one of the principal agents which has not only transformed the appearance of many upland areas but it

has had other implications not least of which has been physical degradation which has undermined the resource base of many upland communities. It needs to be emphasised that these fires have also afflicted lowland areas as well but here it is argued that the overall ramifications of these fires are far more durable and severe in these upland contexts.

Rural life throughout most of upland Atlantic Iberia is, for the most part enmeshed within a small fragmented farm context with increasing links to local and distant markets (O'Flanagan, 1996 ; Rodriguez Campos, 1990). These and other authors have precisely defined its economic and social characteristics. Farming is based upon a restricted range of activities which include very limited arable agriculture due to environmental constraints ; extensive pastoral farming on the common lands unusually referred to as *monte* and finally on forestry. All of these activities are intricately interrelated. Remittances, seasonal migration, pluriactivities and female involvement in artesanal textile production are further avenues through which household capital is generated.

Our principal concerns revolve around the damage and destruction to *monte* and woodlands caused by fire. Agro-forestry remains one of the critical enterprises on these small farms. The background to its assumption of this role is unknown. In recent decades the amount of land under tress has expanded dramatically largely due to increased demands of the wood processing and transformation industry. Also, this expansion has been accompanied by a radical change in the tree cover. In the uplands pines, especially *pinus pinaster*, account for most of the land under trees. In more favoured places eucalyptus trees have become fashionable. At the same time there has been a huge reduction in the cover of what are considered to be native species such as beech, chestnut, oak and willow although in parts of the Ancares and O Caurel there are some isolated sotobosques. Most of these new woods are privately owned and in some areas so intense has been their expansion that in areas of severe depopulation plots of common lands have been planted by both resident and absentee inhabitants. Also the appearance of many rural landscapes has been modified by the fact that many of the more recent plantings have been laid out in geometric arrangements replacing the traditional more shapeless dispositions of indigenous trees. It needs also to be stressed that many of these new stands of trees do not form continuous forests or woods in the accepted sense. Many are isolated stands interdigitated by limited swathes of arable land and permanent pastures and much more extensive zones of scrubland or *monte*.

Monte is a much more problematic term to address. It carries a plethora of meanings one of which is essentially a biogeographic categorisation of a specific range of plant associations in particular topographic contexts. In popular perception two kinds of *monte* are recognised (where elevation is the indicative variable), namely *monte alto* and *monte bajo*. Usually *monte* furnishes bedding for stock and they function as rough grazing land besides supplying firewood and water. Up to the recent past many were

episodically ploughed for arable crops such as oats and rye and also for potato production (Villanueva, 1984).

Monte however cannot simply be regarded as land under common management arrangements. Some areas of it have always been privately owned and managed and in the nineteenth century when timber production was less commercialised the incidence of *monte* was more extensive.

In Portugal, for instance, under Salazar's Estado Novo, common lands were legally abolished and many were planted by state agencies on behalf of local corporate institutions such as districtos. These kinds of actions, which also transpired in Spain, were viewed with great hostility and these actions had the effect of alienating local residents from the state and several of its organizations. The reasons for the emergence of such attitudes can be readily understood as local vernacular practices were undermined and more critically, one of the essential supports of agriculture, namely the rough grazing lands, were no longer available to local residents (Balboa, 1990). The broad effects of these actions were to subvert the economic foundations of a finely-tuned agricultural complex (Brouwer, 1993). In 1974, after the revolution in Portugal, most baldios or common lands were returned to their communities. The net result was to engender deep suspicions amongst local communities in relation to the activities of most state agencies. Over the same period, in Spain, attempts were made to acquire large areas of *monte* by local municipal authorities whose efforts were supported by the Francoist state. Similar outcomes occurred (Rico Boquete, 1995). Incendiarism was one means of registering a protest (Alvarez Sousa, 1992).

Massive problems arise in relation to the prosecution of research on woodland and scrub fires. The available data are limited and of variable quality and reliability. It is often anecdotal and impressionistic. Different autonomous areas in Atlantic Spain employ discrete recording systems for these fires. There is not, for instance, an accepted definition of what actually constitutes a forest fire or a scrub fire. Does a certain threshold of hectares have to be burnt or does the fire have to exceed a specific time limit? Multiple foci fires may have been recorded as one or several instances. Newspapers, reported court prosecutions and convictions for incendiarism (and there are few of these) and interviews with staff in the fire services, personal observations and discussions with a wide range of people provide a wide spectrum of evidence upon which this section of the research is based.

The parts of Atlantic Iberia which have been most afflicted by fires include the Algarve (Fig. 1), Central Portugal and Galicia (Fig. 2) and the available date for Galicia remains the most long-running and satisfactory. Between 1975 and 1983 there were some 20,000 recorded fires in Galicia and the incidence of fires dramatically increased until the early 1990s falling back slightly after that and more dramatically over the last three years. For instance in 1989 alone, some 200,000 hectares of scrub and trees were burnt in Galicia (Alvarez Sousa, 1992). Over the 1980s the

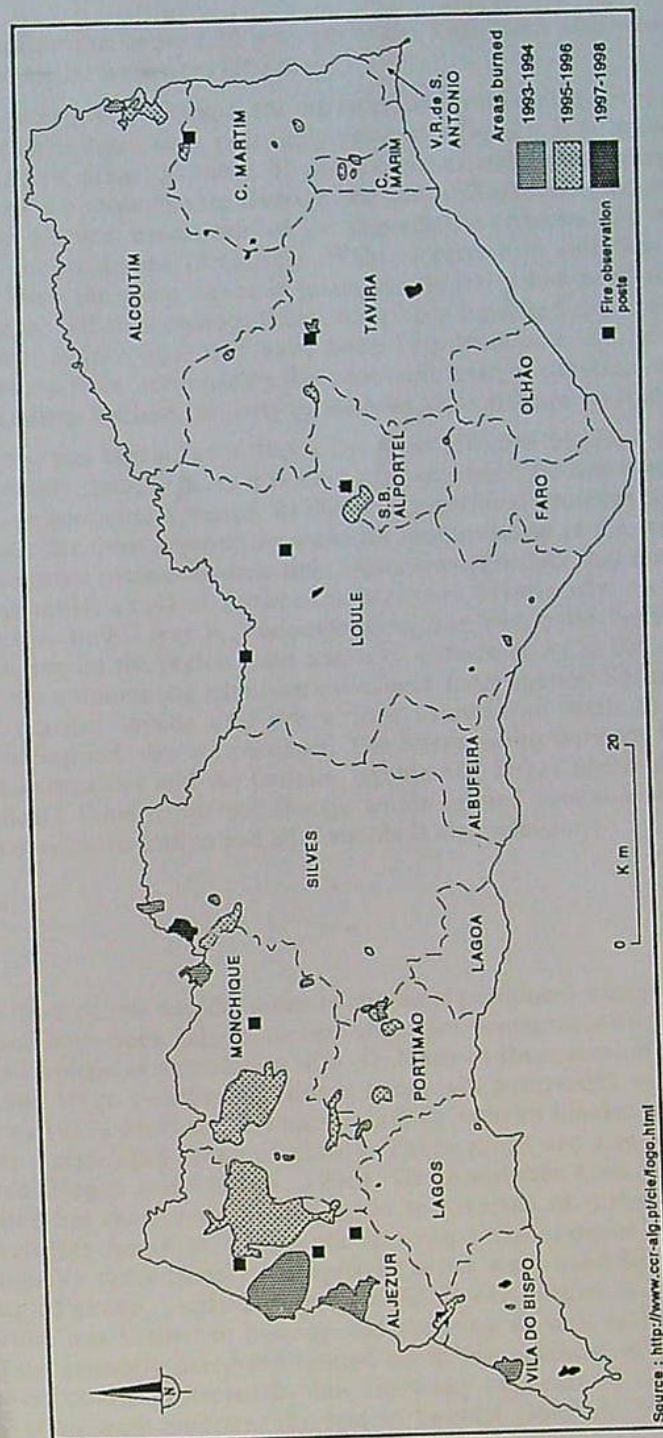


FIG. 1. — Algarve: Forest Fires 1993-1998.

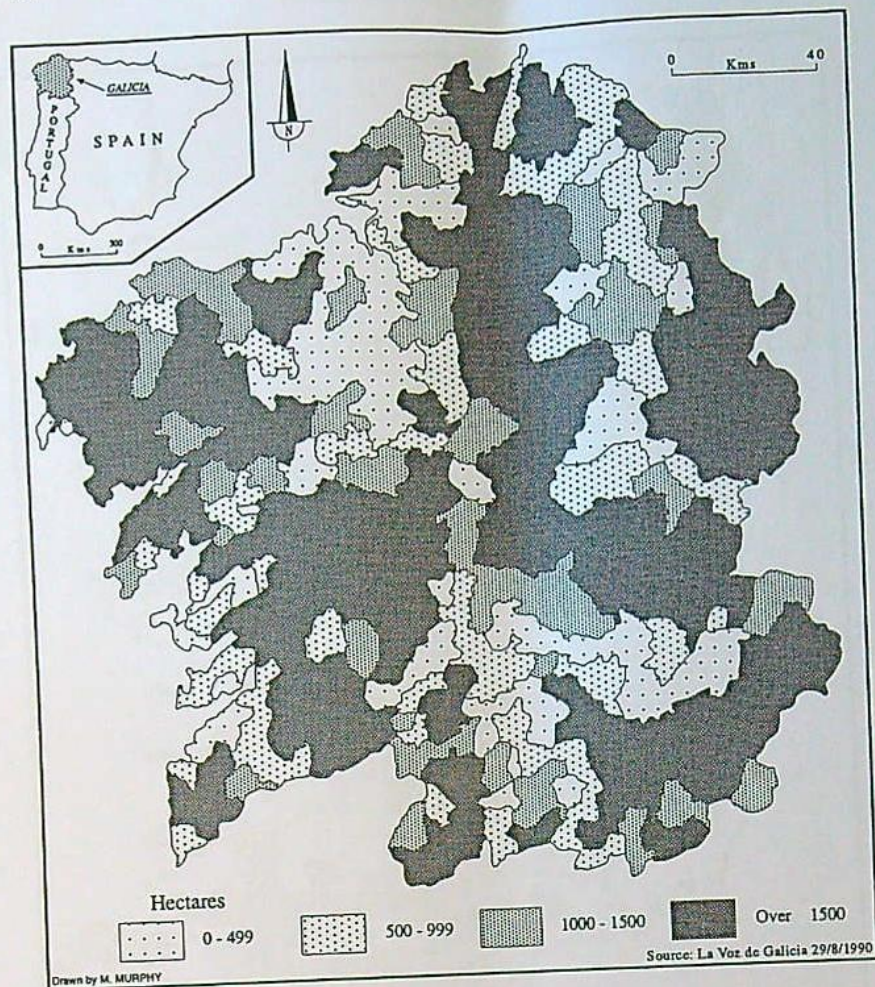


FIG. 2. — Total Area Burnt by Municipio (Monte and Woods), 1984-1989).

figures confirm that some c.55 per cent of the total burnt area were scrub and the remainder were trees (Fig. 2).

Nearly every part of Galicia, for instance has been beset by fires but the interior uplands have been especially ravaged (Fig. 2). It is argued that these kinds of areas, because of their context and topography, have experienced the most intense damage and harm. Regrettably no acute or meticulous physical assessment of the degradation provoked by the fires has been accomplished in Galicia. What is certain is soils have been removed once the plant cover is gone, biodiversity has been reduced, water quality and flow characteristics have been modified and it could be argued that scenic qualities have been compromised. All of these developments have accentuated the economic marginalization of many upland residents because formerly productive areas are now unproductive.

Given the fact that Atlantic Iberia has been afflicted by these types of fires for nearly three decades it is evident that, over time and space, their causes have enormously varied. In this way a political economy approach may furnish the most appropriate arena for interpretation in the context of recent extensive socio-economic transformations. The fact that many fires began as multi-centred outbreaks stresses criminally motivated incendiaryism. In this way it is possible to engage with those forces which are impinging on the region from above or outside of it, as for instance, EU and the autonomous administrations and their agents. Secondly the role of market forces and the actors associated with the wood transformation industry are pertinent. The relationships between the local upland communities and the policies, agents and actors noted above are also critical. Finally, internal change within upland communities which has provoked outmigration and all it entails is also relevant.

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Over the past two decades some of the most prominent western uplands in Ireland have been subject to new intensive pressures which has also provoked a phase of degradation (Fig. 3). Many of these areas are common lands and large swathes of these areas are internally unenclosed (Andrews, 1987). Most of these uplands are covered by blanket bogs which support a restricted range of plants. These areas are a major scenic resource (Hogan and Phillips, 1996). These uplands have never been inhabited but their margins are home to a series of mainly farming communities many of which are in long term economic decline. Traditionally these largely unimproved areas were used for extensive grazing of sheep, cattle foraged on the lower slopes. Recreational utilization was limited to hunting and shooting as well as hillwalking. Given the generally perceived limited economic potential of these areas they were poorly protected by law from any excesses of exploitation. These areas were amongst the last to benefit from the fruits of EU membership.

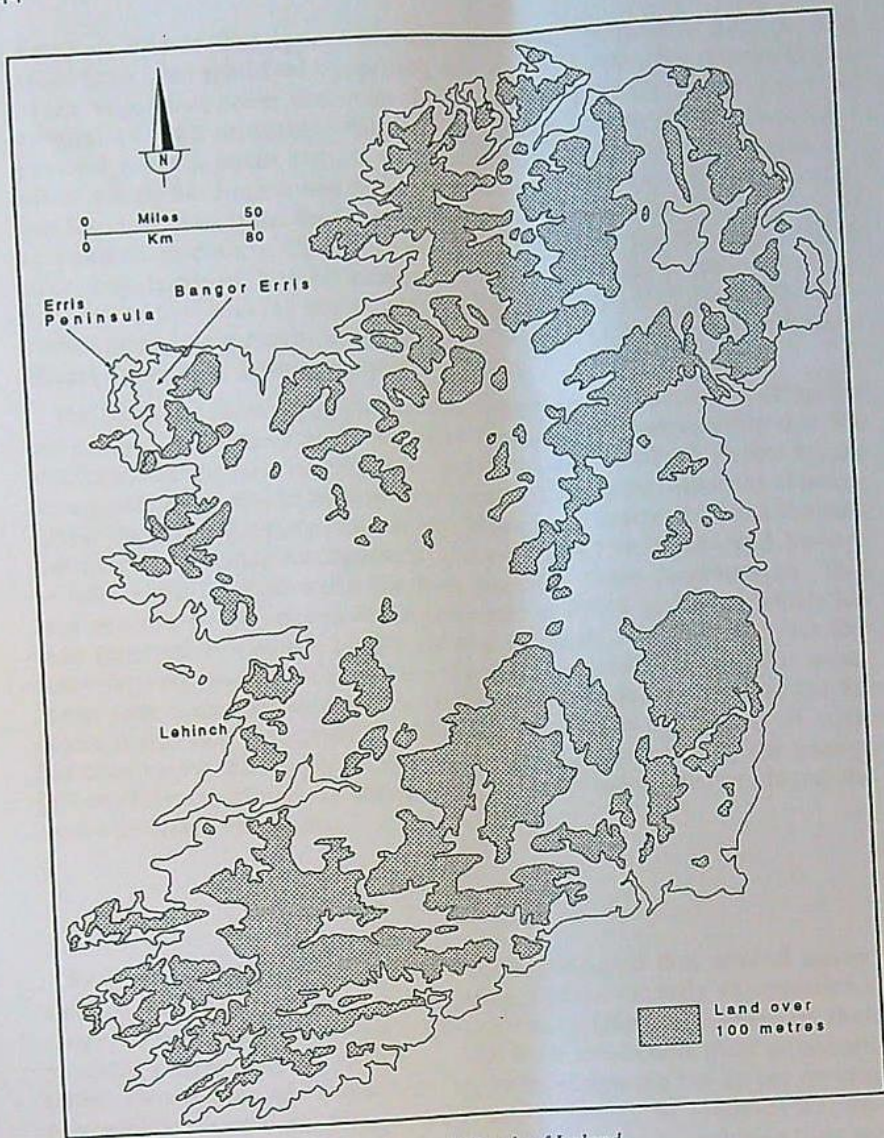


FIG. 3. — Uplands of Ireland.

These conditions radically altered in the 1980s when many of the residents of these uplands could claim support from the EU Less Favoured Areas Programme. The general purpose of this scheme was to render assistance to traditional agriculture and to support farming communities in marginal areas. One of the main instruments of this policy was a subsidy for each stock unit which came to be known as a Headage payment. More recently as a counterbalance to this, the so-called Rural Environment Protection Scheme, better known by its acronym REPS, has been applied with some success to these kinds of areas.

Spectacular results were attained by the Headage scheme in many upland areas in Ireland at least mirrored by a dramatic increase in sheep stocking numbers which rose by 270 percent in Ireland between 1981 and 1990 and specifically this growth was even most intense on the uplands. In one extreme example it was reported in the press that one flock of sheep numbered 10,000 animals. One interpretation of the striking growth in sheep numbers relates to the general decay of viability associated with many of the enterprises conducted on the uplands and their adjacent margins. For the first time many sheep owners could, with the financial support of the EU and with newly opened continental consumer markets, expand their flocks and enjoy enhanced earnings.

The consequences of the growth of the sheep flocks on the uplands were not universally positive (McKevit, 1992). Widespread and severe erosion of upland peat bogs was recorded in zones between 50 and 400 metres (climate and exposure in western Ireland can have the effects of endowing relatively low areas with upland characteristics). As yet, the detailed ecological and physical manifestations and consequences of these changes remain to be comprehensively investigated. Nevertheless it has been reported that a recurrent pattern of change is evident (Sheehy-Skeffington, 1996). To begin with, overgrazing, especially during the winter, has damaged the sparse vegetation and incessant rainfall has been able to remove the shallower upland peats. Mid-slope erosion has also been reported and the deeper peat vegetation near the valley floors has also been disturbed.

Work carried out earlier on upland peat erosion, presumably in the 1980s, confirmed that the scale of removal on the sites investigated damaged could not be attributed, neither directly nor indirectly, to grazing (McGee and Bradshaw, 1990). More recent research, albeit on a more restricted scale, indicates a totally different outcome; namely that anthropogenic activities, specifically sheep overgrazing, were responsible for the destruction of upland peats (Sheehy-Skeffington, 1996). In addition, results from this latter study showed that areas which were protected from sheep grazing and which were located contiguously to severely eroded areas displayed no evidence of damage.

At present research into nearly all aspects of the problems precipitated by overgrazing are in their infancy. As with the forest fires there is no precise assessment of the scale of the destruction and its long term consequences. What is clear however is that there have been a number of

knock-on effects. The appearance and the scenic qualities of some upland areas have been modified by gulling and in some cases the disappearance of the vegetative cover and even the soils thereby rendering an unknown amount of land unusable. Run-off has also increased and effects on lowland water regimes remain to be explored. A significant reduction in water quality for human and animal consumption has been reported in the last few summers in the local press for some important tourist resorts such as Lehigh in county Clare and for more remote areas such as Bangor Erris, county Mayo. The contamination of the water by severe downwash has resulted in several health alerts and substitution of water sources. Furthermore, the removal of the peat and its vegetation has had unknown effects on wildlife including aquatic animals.

The scale and intensity of the problems associated with overstocking has led general acceptance even amongst the farming communities that the Headage Scheme was creating more problems than it solved. Farmers have been given premiums to remove stock and reduce sheep densities (Phelan, 1996). There is a growing realization amongst the indigenous stakeholders that more sustainable management and production strategies will have to be introduced to underwrite the livelihoods of these communities. This may account for an increased involvement in REPS activities which has been reported. Resistance to this scheme is largely related to the fact that many farmers perceive it to offer a reduced standard of living. For some, sheep were a monoculture which could yield considerable profits, but for others it was one enterprise of many and in this way the impact of crisis has been varied. Sheep production also became undermined by the general failure of overseas markets thus leaving the most specialised producers the most vulnerable casualties.

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Reflections : This investigation has demonstrated that several upland areas of Atlantic Europe are experiencing, or have recently experienced, a range of new pressures which have acted to transform some of their physical characteristics which in turn have weakened their economic fabric. Degradation of various kinds have been reported but as yet we lack any precise measures of the scale and intensity of transformation. Applying a broad political economy approach, it is evident that in the case of Ireland policy led initiatives have contributed to the instigation of the problems. In the uplands of Atlantic Iberia complex outcomes related to previous state policies, locally perceived neglect, out migration, labour shortages and the disarticulation of traditional social institutions have transformed attitudes towards – and management practices on – the commons, and the woods. Both areas have been afflicted by processes which have led to a diminution of sustainable practice. Can these outcomes then be considered to be some form of ecocide ? In our examples, as in the Soviet Union, damage was not expected to be a by-product of policy implementation. But it has been demonstrated that both

economic and physical damage has been the direct or indirect result of the pressures brought to bear on these uplands in Atlantic Europe and in that sense we are addressing new forms of ecocide.

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