

**COMPASS INFORMATICS 2015**

**Conference and workshops**

**Thursday September 10<sup>th</sup>**

**Clyde Court Hotel**

**DUBLIN**

**Remarks from**

**MICHAEL STARRETT**

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE**

**The Heritage Council**

First of all, a real and genuine thank you to Gearoid and all his team for the opportunity to speak at today's conference.

To say that this is not the usual audience that I might have the opportunity to address is an understatement and it is an even more enticing opportunity as a result. When you look at the diversity of interests that there is amongst the over 200 people who have registered it really shows the importance of the conference to a really wide range of sectors, from environmental, to planning, to forestry to high tech and beyond. Compass has captured the significance of that diversity in all their operations. They do things differently.

There is an excellent Canadian singer songwriter called Bruce Cockburn who in a song entitled *Last Night of the World* asks a very relevant question

*"If this was the last night of the world what would I do that was different....."*

And today I hope I am going to do something that is different – at least for this conference and also maybe, just maybe persuade you to do something different, or at least make you aware of something you may not have heard of or if you did, didn't think it was relevant to you.

From my own point of view

- Firstly I am not going to use any technology ( that is easy) – for someone who as an undergraduate was punching cards to use computers
- Secondly I'm not going to bore you with a long treatise about the heritage council which for me is much more difficult although it will be necessary for me to give you some sense of what I mean by the term heritage
- And thirdly unless Gearoid has something up his sleeve I won't get the opportunity to do what Bruce Cockburn said he would do In response to his question which was to *"Drink Champagne with You"*

And talking of Champagne – the programme for this conference quite rightly identifies the fact that in July of 2015 the Heritage Council celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. In the current economic climate the champagne flowed only in the metaphorical sense (or as one well know and erstwhile politician may have said -the METAMORPHICAL sense) but we certainly did celebrate and were lucky enough to have the President of Ireland with us on the 6<sup>th</sup> June as the chief celebrant.

The President gave a rousing 40 minute speech and whilst it was important to celebrate 20 years of success and achievement (and indeed survival) the most significant message to me on the day was more about the future. The President stated;

*"It is important....to have an integrated approach that offers a connection between what people are trying to do and place. It offers benefits of enabling and empowering local communities to use heritage to improve their sense of wellbeing and quality of life".*

He went on to say

*"So influencing public policy must, in my view, become a central aim of the Heritage Council as it embarks on its third decade and carries on through other decades. And it may require a newly crafted relationship, not only with those departments and agencies directly involved with heritage policy, but also with those whose areas of responsibility have most impact on the future safeguarding of our heritage."*



The Chairman of the Heritage Council also looked to the future on the same occasion in stating

*"Communities the length and breadth of Ireland are turning to heritage to begin the process of self-healing, of bonding and regeneration after more than a decade of financial and social flux, particularly in rural Ireland where heritage always ranks high on the list of assets and strengths".*

*"Facilitating public participation in heritage and heritage stewardship is good social policy. Getting there is not just about resources; it's about attitudes. I recognise that some may fear the prospect of shared stewardship as an unwelcome intrusion of unqualified enthusiasts into the serious business of professional heritage management, but I feel that we should look on this as a massive opportunity for the heritage sector."*

So the Heritage I am talking about concerns people and place, nature and culture. It is about our surroundings and where we live, and work. Our towns, our villages, our rural landscapes. The Heritage I talk about is no longer the preserve of experts – it is about giving people back the sense of ownership of, and responsibility for, their heritage. The attachment of people to their place, their heritage is extraordinarily strong.

And this is where these few words begin I trust to demonstrate their relevance to you and to the work that you do. Just look at the programme in what many would consider as a technology conference and show me one presentation that is not about people and their place and trying to improve the quality of that place for everyone. So attitudes and approaches are constantly evolving and changing, in the heritage world as much as the technological world.

#### CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

For example attitudes towards open access to data and its availability and application are central to the world in which we all live in and operate.

The old adage that - it ain't what you do it's the way that you do it – has never been more true. And whilst all of us in our individual world may be doing an excellent job we have to remain open to the fact that excellent or not – it is or may be no longer relevant – or the way in which we do it may not be relevant.

Let us look at that from a heritage data management and a techie point of view. On this occasion I'll concentrate on natural heritage (or biodiversity in modern parlance)

When I returned to Ireland in 1996 after having escaped during the 80's recession it was at a time when the heritage world was dominated by “experts” and decisions were based on “informed opinion”. Fine up to a point (experts are) but when they are challenged by science and their “informed opinion” doesn't stand up to the most basis of scrutiny then it is time to question their relevance.

Not to dwell on the past, but helping us in the future by understanding the past, it has to be said that the first rounds of SAC designations suffered from this attitude and as a result rather than celebrate what was special in terms of our habitats we ended up in a “turf war” with the agricultural sector about boundaries, justification, management and compensation. The “agriculturists” were coming from an established scientific stand point. We were not – and are still paying the price – even though we have come a long way in the interim. Luckily the Heritage Council was not the executive body responsible for the malaise and through its role as a policy advisory body to government, as a solution for the future, it proposed the establishment of a Biological Records Centre, which was to become the NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY DATA CENTRE which we all know and love.

The establishment of the NBDC led to my first meeting with Gearoid and his team and the rest as they say is history. As per the last full year for which we have records 2014 the centre now boasts over three million records of more than 14.000 species from 105 data sets. And those records through its management board are made relevant to sectoral interests such as land use planning, agriculture and education. And ultimately a very much more well informed general public to keep all our standards high.

Beatrice Kelly will be talking later about the Heritage Maps initiative so in the last few minutes available to me I want to highlight a recent and related proposal placed before Government by the Heritage Council to establish a Land use and Habitat Mapping Programme.

In correspondence to the Minister the Chairman of the Heritage Council pointed out that the proposal has been developed and led by a group of government departments and agencies<sup>1</sup>, including the Departments of Agriculture and Environment and agencies under the aegis of the relevant Ministers such as TEAGASC and the EPA. It has been developed over a four year period, and the senior level group has secured the support of a wider group of departments and agencies and institutions. From a heritage perspective a national land cover and habitat mapping programme will support the delivery of the National Landscape Strategy, and importantly make the legal reporting on EU directives easier and more efficient. Its role in securing effective implementation of the National Landscape Strategy will be paramount and complementary to the proposed National Landscape Characterisation.

It can be noted that a national land cover and habitat mapping programme as proposed does not currently exist in Ireland. Current data collection in this area is fragmented and presents poor value for money. Ireland is one of the few remaining countries in Europe which does not have an integrated national programme for either landcover or habitat mapping.

Continuing the status quo impedes environmental management and reporting, and it creates potential delays in the planning and implementation of vital infrastructure projects. The ILCHM Programme would provide far greater value for money in providing for the use, re-use and novel use of data collected by various state agencies and improve the quality of decision making.

#### DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY

I also have to say that the same situation pertains within the cultural heritage data management provisions in the state – namely lack of standards, lack of access and hence some very poor decisions and an obvious degree of ‘ad hocism’. The state in fact needs a National Cultural Data Centre as much as it needs an NBDC (something we have been promoting in association with the Discovery Programme) and perhaps in the current public consultation on the development of a National Cultural Policy this is a point you could make – and make forcibly.

You are of course aware of the current public consultation on national cultural policy? I ask this somewhat tongue in cheek because your deafening silence confirms what I thought. If I ask how many of you knew of this consultation how many hands would be raised. As I suspected – none. The Minister and her Department have done a really good job of publicising it – obviously.

And yet if I were to ask how many of the 200 people present think that their culture is important how many hands would be raised – as I suspected, everyone. So the one thing I would ask you to do that is different is to have a look at the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht web site and make a submission on Ireland’s first Cultural Policy. You should play a part in shaping such important policy. Such public consultations do not require long treatise to have an impact – just a few good and fresh ideas and there is no better group than that assembled here to come up with those

#### AND SO TO CONCLUDE

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<sup>1</sup> Dept of Agriculture, Food and Marine including the Forest Service, Dept of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (National Parks and Wildlife Service), the EPA, Osi, the Heritage Council, and Teagasc.

The Bruce Cockburn song I refer to earlier also contains the line

*“I’ve seen the flame of hope among the hopeless”*

And I will leave you to decide who the hopeless are – but eternally the optimist on behalf of the Heritage Council - I will continue to fan whatever flames I can find (eternal or otherwise) in order to realise the potential that access to and understanding of our natural and cultural heritage offers to the quality of life for communities the length and breadth of Ireland.

Many thanks

Michael Starrett.

September 2015