

Opinion – Northern Ireland as an Environmental Sacrifice Zone

Written by Louise Taylor

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LOUISE TAYLOR, SEP 9 2025

It is difficult to categorise and describe Northern Ireland without some careful consideration. Some call it a province; others, a statelet. ChatGPT refers to it as a 'constituent country' and I consider it to be a country – just about. To me, it is a small, troubled, dysfunctional, resilient, misunderstood and neglected country. The political and constitutional confusion and geographical location of Northern Ireland is the main reason I believe it can also be described as an environmental 'Sacrifice Zone'. Northern Ireland is located on the island of Ireland, yet devolved from Westminster and part of the United Kingdom. It is not geographically connected to the island of Great Britain, though many staunch supporters of this political union here identify as British. The residents here can have either British or Irish passports, and many hold both.

This small, difficult country, just over a century old, is most famous for being the site of thirty years of guerilla warfare. This three decades of domestic terrorism is often referred to by the British and international press as 'The Troubles'. The Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, bringing the domestic terrorism to a precarious, but thankfully lasting end. Yet while peace has largely held, the highly acclaimed and internationally celebrated agreement has been criticised in recent years by scholars and activists for neglecting the often-forgotten victim of war, our environment (Doran, 2024; Hwang, 2024).

In recent decades we have seen multiple environmental scandals costing the population millions of pounds and leaving devastating ecological impacts. The Renewable Heat Incentive scandal and the discovery of Europe's largest illegal landfill at Mobuoy are just two examples (Hwang, 2024). Since 2023 we have had the blue-green algae crisis of Lough Neagh caused by decades of nutrient overloading and unregulated amounts of raw sewage entering waterways and our drinking supplies (Reid et al., 2024).

Lough Neagh is the largest ecological commons in Ireland and the United Kingdom, yet it was not factored into or accounted for in the peace process. This oversight is difficult to account for but has cost the population dearly in terms of environmental and public health. It supplies drinking water to 40% of the population and yet it is being dangerously polluted by agriculture, NI Water and septic tanks leakage. Covering an area larger than Malta and sometimes considered the seventh county of this small country, the Lough was ignored in the peace process for reasons unknown. A process that involved several global economic powerhouses, the most noteworthy being the United States of America. This oversight can possibly be understood when considering that this country was seemingly being earmarked for development and the introduction of extractivist industries, namely mining.

A sacrifice zone is an area that has been disproportionately burdened by environmental degradation. Typical markers include widespread ecological degradation, compromised public health, political disempowerment, economic exploitation, and state negligence or complicity (Taylor & Barry, 2024). Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom with no independent Environmental Agency and no governmental department dedicated to the environment or climate. Wales, Scotland and England all have such bodies. Instead, Northern Ireland is managed by a department that puts the environment alongside the largest industry in this country, agriculture. This has been argued by many campaign groups to be a conflict of interest and there has been much political debate on this blatantly dysfunctional and unhealthy departmental arrangement.

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The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, locally referred to as DAERA, is one of the most widely criticised departments in Stormont (the Northern Ireland government). It is scorned by farmers and environmentalists alike and since publishing their Lough Neagh action plan, the largest environmental disaster the island has ever witnessed has escalated.

Most effective environmental plans and strategies are impeded due to limited budgets and a lack of adequate funding. The largest environmental crisis of this country and our government has allocated only £7.5 million in funding to try and fix the disaster. The projected cost to update wastewater infrastructure currently polluting the lake was recently estimated to be £2-3 billion alone. Policies and strategies without appropriate funding mean that the environmental deterioration has inevitably accelerated. This has further supported the claims made by Sinn Féin and economic academics that Northern Ireland is not economically viable and Westminster is no longer interested with additional funding or economic support.

In Northern Ireland this is what the population and local communities are expected to accept as good governance and democratic practice. The public pays for public servants to write policies, environmental reviews and action plans that are clearly not fit to remedy the environmental problems we face as they are chronically underfunded. Such governmental dysfunction and departmental greenwashing have become normalised.

Lough Neagh had research facilities and laboratories and teams working on nutrient levels from the 1960s until 2005. These stations and dedicated projects have all been closed since the Good Friday Agreement, the most notable being a research laboratory on the shores of Lough Neagh called Traád Point. It is almost impossible to produce research and collect data on the scale of the environmental issues, when there are no facilities to monitor the pollution. In recent months, new prospecting licenses have been granted by the department for the economy in the Sperrin Mountains, an area of outstanding natural beauty. Despite widespread community outcry and condemnation, our departments are placing international economic interest over community consent and public health. Two petroleum applications also remain under review.

Recent reports in the Financial Times revealed that American law makers and former Secretary of State, Peter Mandelson, were applying political pressure on our departments to fast-track mining applications against the will of the people. For a decade, the campaign group *Save Our Sperrins*, supported by tens of thousands of people, has fought to protect these landscapes. Yet, our public servants and departments appear to favour international investors rather than the local population, who overwhelmingly want to protect our sacred natural spaces and resources. Prospecting licences should never have been agreed to, particularly not in designated areas of outstanding natural beauty.

For Northern Ireland to cease being treated as a sacrifice zone would require substantial investment, cross-party political will and support, departmental restructuring, and a stronger role for local communities. Greater consideration must also be given to future generations when making economic and environmental decisions, as they will inevitably bear the greatest impact (Cooley & Hill, 2025).

There is broad agreement among the people of Northern Ireland that environmental health is important, should be prioritised, and must remain on the political agenda. In 2024, Lough Neagh became the first environmental project ever to be included in the programme for government. At present, however, it could be argued that the Good Friday Agreement – together with its environmental shortcomings and unresolved colonial legacies – continues to undermine the quality of life and health of people in Northern Ireland. It may now be time to envision a new agreement, one that frames sustainable peace through the lens of a healthy, thriving population and environment.

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