

Northern Ireland as a Sacrifice Zone: The Lough Neagh Crisis

Written by Louise Taylor and John Barry

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LOUISE TAYLOR AND JOHN BARRY, SEP 22 2024

In the summer of 2023, Lough Neagh became an international news story after the eruption of major-scale – algae pollution on the largest commons and freshwater lake in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Locals stated that the algae blooms were a common yearly occurrence, but the scale of the blooms in 2023 was unprecedented and alarmingly the problem became visible from space (Fig 1). In response to this unfolding disaster, *The Guardian* ran the headline “Dying in Plain Sight” (Greene, 2023), while environmental activists held a symbolic ‘wake’ for the Lough to encourage the community to come together and protect the vital waterway. The crisis highlighted a dangerous tipping point in environmental neglect, arguably establishing the view that Northern Ireland had become a sacrifice zone.

A combination of visual and olfactory evidence (including from satellite imagery) became proof of an unfolding (and worsening) ecological disaster and public health emergency. One year later, little has been done to address the root causes of the disaster or implement substantial reparative measures to enable recovery. Widespread national and international media coverage, led to successful and effective grassroots campaigning with many politicians including newly appointed minister, Andrew Muir, responsible for environmental protection, promising to prioritise and act on the crisis. However, it seems words are many, while tangible and meaningful actions are few. (Taylor, McGeown and Barry, 2024). The Lough Neagh Report published by Stormont in July 2024 has been widely criticised by campaigners as insufficient and incapable of adequately protecting the lake from further ecological degradation and destruction.

In Northern Ireland, the environment has for decades been largely ignored by both political and public representatives, because of more pressing societal and political issues, not least the ending of 30-years of domestic terrorism and the establishment of the Good Friday Agreement. The ‘constitutional question’ has shaped the region’s politics, and public debate has been dominated by whether it should reunite with the Republic of Ireland or stay as part of the United Kingdom. Since the partition of Ireland in 1921, the development of Northern Ireland has been marked by domestic terrorism, sectarianism, unresolved legacy issues including those from colonisation, and extended periods of political unrest and dysfunction. These factors have significantly impacted the environment, particularly how ecological entities like Lough Neagh are regulated and managed. Considering the complex political situation in Northern Ireland, it is clear that detrimental environmental practices were normalised leading to their unchecked proliferation over time.

The environment has remained an unacknowledged victim of the Troubles amidst the continued focus on ethno-nationalist and ethno-religious conflicts. (Hwang, 2021). The irony is that environmental protection should be a non-partisan issue capable of uniting both political representatives and the public. Its blatant neglect poses a significant risk to health and infrastructure. Addressing this problem is not merely desired but crucial, particularly as the Lough is the drinking supply for 40% of the population of Northern Ireland.

Algae blooms and eutrophication have been documented since the 1970s (Wood & Gibson, 1973), yet there are minimal legal or policy safeguards for those living near the contaminated water or using it as drinking water. In other countries algae blooms have been associated with increased cancer rates, namely liver and oral cancers. (Lee et al., 2019). Elevated cancer rates are often seen in environmental ‘Sacrifice zones’, (De Souza, 2021), while interviews

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with local residents in Lough shore have raised concerns around potential 'cancer clusters'. (Taylor, McGowan and Barry, 2024).

Despite DAERA (the governmental department responsible for agriculture, environmental protection and rural development) being responsible for the ecological crisis other departments namely the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Office for the First and Deputy First Minister have also failed to sufficiently intervene. The Stormont executive is lacking the united front that would help alleviate the problems. The Department of Health typically handles public health, while DAERA focuses on environmental quality. Last year, during the height of the algae blooms, the only measures to protect the public and alert tourists were sporadic signs posted along the shoreline. This suggests that the crisis was largely managed by a department concerned with farming rather than public health. (Taylor et al, *ibid.*: 20).

The term '*Sacrifice Zone*' describes an area deliberately neglected where the health of human and animal communities are sacrificed on an altar of economic growth or industrialisation (De Souza, 2021) These zones bear the negative environmental and health costs of heavily polluting and environmentally harmful industries with the financial benefits and rewards most often being siphoned off elsewhere. These zones often have low economic value due to the degradation with pollution and systemic neglect contributing to the overall detriment of the area, as exemplified by '*Cancer Alley*' in the US. (Kang, 2021).

The Lough Neagh crisis is largely attributed to agricultural pollution from 13000 farms with policies like the 2013, 'Going for Growth' agrifood policy (DAERA 2013) confirming the province's sacrifice zone status, based on the high levels of nitrates and phosphates contaminating the local waterways. Northern Ireland in this context can be accurately described as a sacrifice zone. The extensive impact of agricultural and industrial pollution, as well as domestic effluence coupled with political dysfunction highlights the prioritization of profit over public and environmental health. An echo of the broader critique of late-stage capitalism and ecocide that prioritises economic growth over human and ecological wellbeing. (White, 2015)

The Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the department in charge of the environment, has a history of mismanagement and incompetence when regulating agriculture and farming initiatives as demonstrated by the RHI (Renewable Heat Incentive) Scheme. That particular scandal cost the public an estimated £500 million and was one of the most shocking displays of governmental incompetence and error ever seen (McBride, 2019). The recommendations made by the Public Inquiry, cost the public a further £5 million pounds, with records citing that there was no corruption, just high levels of political and systemic incompetence and misgovernance. The report recommended that politicians should read documents they sign and senior civil servants be given roles they know how to do. The Public Inquiry's assertion of no corruption or significant individual failings highlights the vulnerabilities within our departments and services. It underscores the lack of robust mechanisms to hold elected representatives, statutory departments, and bodies accountable when serious issues arise, often to the detriment of taxpayers. A similar breakdown in governance seems to be unfolding with the crisis at Lough Neagh, where, once again, those entrusted with safeguarding both the environment and public health appear either unwilling or unable to take responsibility for the ecological disaster and increasing health concerns (Taylor et al., 2024).

Lough Neagh has drawn significant attention, with various agencies, groups, and media outlets describing the crisis as a '*perfect storm*' of contributing factors. However, this analogy is problematic and reductionist, as it implies the crisis was unforeseeable and unavoidable. In reality, high levels of pollution and contamination have been documented and reported for decades. The government has failed to take meaningful action to address the issue or to incentivize industries and households to change how they manage sewage disposal, agricultural runoff, and toxins from all industries in the Lough Neagh catchment area.

In many ways, in terms of research, Lough Neagh has been abandoned. In 2003 the Ulster University research laboratory at Traad Point on the Lough was shut down and nothing has been put in its place. This is not a story that supports the '*perfect storm*' narrative, instead, it supports the Chomsky adage that by underfunding, under-resourcing, and neglecting geographical areas and important resources the conditions become perfect for unregulated and environmentally harmful practices that support economic accumulation and unsustainable yet

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profitable harmful industrial practices (Chomsky, 1998). It is a story of systemic, political, and academic failings and neglect. One of the main reasons the Lough is in such a dire state, is because it has not been monitored and safeguarded, for decades. This is not an oversight this is a result of governmental decisions. Ultimately, environmental-human crises like this are what happen when governments and statutory bodies prioritise wealth and economic growth over environmental and public health. Lake Erie in the Great Lakes suffered a similar fate in 2012 and it led to the United States and Canada signing a binational water quality agreement that was instrumental in managing the algae blooms and curtailing pollution from the catchment area (Johns, 2017).

In 2016, the NI Executive decided to bring together the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment to create a new Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). For many environmentalists, this was a mistake and a deliberate case of weaponised ignorance and an example of how profit and intensive agri-food practices were encouraged to dominate the health of the environment, and in turn the health of the population was compromised to achieve farming targets. Northern Ireland is the only constituent country of the United Kingdom without an Independent Environmental Agency, thus making conditions arguably perfect for this small, often considered problematic country, to be environmentally neglected and the population's public health to be compromised for economic growth- this is how a sacrifice zone is defined- environmentally degraded with a population whose health is compromised (Juskus, 2023). In local Loughshore towns, particularly Antrim and Toome, residents have complained of headaches due to the rancid air from the blooms. Further testimony of the impact that severe levels of environmental degradation have had on air quality.

In late July 2024, shortly after the Lough Neagh Report was published Dr. Neil Reid and team from Queen's University published their paper on the blue-green algae of Lough Neagh (Reid et al., 2024), the findings painted a concerning picture. The study revealed that 80% of the DNA in the algae blooms contained human faecal matter, confirming the presence of significant amounts of untreated raw sewage. This research confirmed that Lough Neagh has effectively become dangerously contaminated by both agricultural runoff and human waste. These pollutants pose a serious health threat to any human or animal who comes into contact with them. The report confirmed that the algae blooms of Lough Neagh were comprised with higher levels of human waste than blooms found in other lakes and water sources (Reid et al., 2024). The impact of these blooms has been severe: wildlife has died after ingesting toxins, public health has been compromised as swimmers and recreational users have fallen ill, and the once-thriving Lough Neagh eel fishing industry has almost collapsed, according to local sources (Taylor et al, 2023).

During the height of the Lough Neagh crisis in the summer of 2023, Northern Ireland had no functioning government due to the collapse of its power-sharing Executive in 2022 over Brexit-related disputes. Despite the public health emergency, the UK Secretary of State, Chris Heaton-Harris, refused to intervene, calling it a devolved matter, even though Westminster had the authority to act. This inaction raises serious questions about the role of the Secretary of State if they are unwilling to step in during emergencies.

The British government's reluctance to assist highlights a long history of political, environmental, and economic neglect in Northern Ireland, worsened over the past century since its formation. The crisis has exposed the region's extreme political vulnerability. Intervention from Westminster is not forthcoming, leaving Northern Ireland to face the fallout without political leadership or support. An echo of the veiled disinterest of Westminster that has plagued the politics of Northern Ireland since its inception and led to the disproportionate suffering of an often ignored and neglected population.

The British and American governments played a significant role in ending three decades of domestic terrorism known as 'The Troubles' with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. However, while this agreement marked the end of the most extreme forms of violence, it opened the door for international companies to enter Northern Ireland for business, as Conor McCabe discusses in his work on the *"Double Transition"* from war to peace to neoliberalism (McCabe, 2012). This shift has led to the introduction of extractivist industries such as gold mining, fracking, quarrying, and sand dredging—activities that have impacted areas of outstanding natural beauty namely the Sperrin Mountains and sites of special scientific interest such as Lough Neagh.

Further complicating the situation are additional factors like climate change, political dysfunction, and the introduction

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of invasive species like zebra mussels. The ongoing connection with Westminster, combined with Northern Ireland's unique governmental structure, creates conditions ripe for international powers—namely the UK, Canadian, and American governments—to exploit the country as a contaminated, extractivist space, prioritizing financial gain over the well-being of local communities and their environment.

In June 2024, the Centre for Sustainability, Equality, and Climate Action published a report exploring the emotional and personal responses of local people connected to Lough Neagh. Based on interviews with twelve individuals, the findings revealed that none held hope for government or departments to take decisive action to protect the Lough (Taylor, Barry & McGeown, 2024). Those interviewed stressed the urgent need to protect the Lough, allow it to heal, and stop the pollution, particularly from agriculture, though they acknowledged how difficult that would be given the current political landscape.

The Lough Neagh Report by the government predicted it would take up to four decades for the Lough to reach a good standard if the pollution stopped. Yet a year after the crisis hit media headlines, no significant actions have been taken to halt the pollution. The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), tasked with managing pollution, incidents, when reported faces numerous challenges. Due to the unclear ownership of the Lough's shoreline and a lack of monitoring infrastructure, such as boats or stations, making it challenging to investigate pollution incidents. The PSNI, meanwhile, lacks the legal authority to address these environmental issues.

The Lough's ownership further complicates management. While the water is overseen by NI Water, the lakebed is owned by the Earl of Shaftesbury, whose family inherited it centuries ago, adding a colonial layer to the already dysfunctional state of affairs. This divided ownership creates barriers in addressing issues of pollution, policing, and harmful business practices impacting the Lough's ecosystem.

With over twenty management bodies overseeing the Lough, an absentee landlord, and no centralized environmental protection or policing authority, the Lough's neglect is unsurprising. There are an estimated 13,000 farms in the catchment area contributing to the pollution, while legal deterrents are weak, and none of the responsible agencies have the power to stop polluting industries. NI Water has been identified as the second biggest polluter, with septic tanks following closely behind. Northern Ireland's lack of robust environmental safeguards and protections makes it attractive to international extractivist companies seeking profit with minimal oversight and interference, thanks to the region's lax environmental laws.

The ongoing environmental crisis at Lough Neagh, dubbed an "*ecological Chernobyl*," has sparked the emergence of several campaign groups demanding immediate action to protect the public, wildlife, and the Lough itself. One group, Love Our Lough, has garnered over 40,000 signatures on a petition calling for an end to pollution, stronger environmental protections, a focus on sustainable tourism, and the Lough's transition to community ownership. Interestingly, the Earl of Shaftesbury, who owns the lakebed, has expressed interest in selling the Lough or 'gifting' the Lough to a community or charity group. (The Irish News, 2024) This seemingly kind and altruistic gesture could be argued from a more cynical lens as an attempt for him to quickly exit the unfortunate debacle and therefore abscond responsibility for the Lough's current state and leave the community to bear the burden of cleaning up the dangerously polluted lake.

These grassroots/ civil society efforts, supported by NGOs like Friends of the Earth and local academics, have gained considerable media attention. They highlight the power of local communities becoming active in environmental advocacy and demonstrate how collective action can raise awareness of critical issues. Activist movements in the Sperrin Mountains and elsewhere reflect a growing trend of "place protectors" rather than traditional environmentalists, pushing back against environmentally harmful/ extractivist industries. These protests offer a rare glimpse of unity in a country with a strong history of division, moving beyond sectarian politics to address shared environmental concerns.

However, while the public and many local representatives are eager for change, government departments have been slow to act. Only £1.6 million was recently allocated to address the crisis, an inadequate sum for the largest public health and ecological disaster Northern Ireland has ever faced. DAERA Minister Mr. Muir expressed his frustration at

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the limited funding. As John Barry pointed out, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the government want to act swiftly on a crisis they can (Barry, 2020). Despite a declared climate emergency in 2022 and the Lough Neagh crisis in 2023, senior officials and the Secretary of State have failed to prioritize the Lough and our environment, defaulting instead to “business as usual” and reports that symbolise token governmental gestures.

This reluctance to disrupt the status quo reflects a broader trend: Northern Ireland, like many post-colonial regions, remains vulnerable to exploitation by harmful industries, corporations and governmental neglect, sacrificing public health and environmental integrity for financial gain. Lough Neagh, symbolic of colonialism, capitalism, and neglect, stands as a warning. The Lough’s ongoing degradation mirrors the political and social issues that have been ignored for too long. Yet, local activists and communities are showing that resistance is possible, pushing back against the exploitation and environmental destruction that threaten their home. In the end, this crisis reveals that without a healthy environment, there is no public health. If we don’t have our health, we have nothing and right now the ill health of our environment is a danger to everyone.

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Dr Louise Taylor is a Political Ecologist, Eco therapist, and Researcher with the Centre for Sustainability, Equality, and Climate Action at Queen's University Belfast. Her research explores the intersections between politics, gender, health, and ecology. Much of her work focuses on environmental issues and how they impact mental, emotional, and psychological health. She recently co-authored a paper on the personal and emotional impacts of the Lough Neagh crisis on local people. She is also the founder of the campaign group Love Our Lough.

Dr John Barry is a father, political activist, recovering politician, and Professor of Green Political Economy at Queen's University Belfast, within the Centre for Sustainability, Equality, and Climate Action. His academic-activist research spans post-growth and heterodox political economy; decarbonisation and decolonisation; the politics and policy of climate breakdown and resilience; socio-technical analyses of low-carbon, just energy transitions; climate injustice-focused nonviolent direct action; and the intersection of conflict transformation with sustainability and energy transformations. His upcoming book, *Practicing What You Teach: Anti-Capitalist and Post-Growth Tales of Failing (Forward) from the Molehills of Power and Disciplinary Margins*, is set for release in 2025 by Agenda Publishers.