



Mount Stewart National Trust

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Interview with National Trust Climate & Environment Advisor, Sean Maxwell

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Sean Maxwell



National Trust Climate & Environment Advisor, Sean Maxwell

Seán has over 15 years of operations and facilities management experience, previously acting as a technical support manager for the BBC and developing business continuity strategies for office space giant, IWG. In 2013, while working in the Philippines, Seán witnessed devastation on the islands caused by Typhoon Haiyan, this prompted him to change careers and pursue a role where he could act as a steward to nature. Following a return to university to gain knowledge in environmental management, he is now leading on delivery of National Trust's environmental management strategy and climate change mitigation and adaptation projects for its sites across Northern Ireland.



1. What does your role entail within the National Trust and which Northern Ireland properties do you cover?

In a nutshell, I partner with teams across Northern Ireland to promote environmental best practice, reduce the environmental footprint of our operations, and prepare for the impacts of climate change.

I support the property teams at all 56 sites we have in the region and link in with National Specialists and our External Affairs team to ensure that our organisational policies and practices reflect the Northern Ireland context as well as using our role as a major Northern Ireland landholder and steward for nature to try to influence government to do more of nature and heritage. As the lead for all things 'environmental management' for National Trust in Northern Ireland, I manage our Climate and Environment Management System to ensure we continue to be accredited to ISO14001 and hopefully in the next year or so we will also be accredited the new Climate Change adaptation standard ISO14090.

2. The National Trust has long since been an environmentally focused charity, how has your role changed in recent years with the demands to increase sustainability and biodiversity?

In January 2020 National Trust made a series of commitments to play our part in mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change. Since then, and in the context of 2 years of disrupted operations across our organisation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, my role has changed to encompass climate change adaptation planning which is all about understanding the climate change related risks relevant to our sites and working with our expert site based and consultancy teams to plan for appropriate and sustainable changes where they are required.

These changes can be process, technical or policy based, and no two sites are the same with lots of different risks threatening the long-term viability of buildings in our care, habitats we protect and our ability to offer fantastic visitor experiences. As we learn more about these risks and the potential impacts they could have, it is my role to ensure that we thoughtfully consider each aspect of a place and apply the knowledge and skills of internal experts and our partners in a way that is appropriate both for the special places that we look after and the people who interact with them.



3. What have been the biggest changes in the use of renewable energy at property level which have had the biggest impact in terms of reduction in Carbon footprint?

With many of our sites being in rural locations and inside areas that are highly designated for conservation purposes, we've really had to carefully plan for renewable energy generation and use at our places.

We are currently getting 53% of our energy needs from renewable sources, mostly from our biomass installations and our micro-gen systems that are supporting off-grid visitor infrastructure. We see the use of renewable energy generation and storage as being increasingly important, but we are also keen to improve the carbon efficiency and sustainability of our existing renewable energy installations. Currently we are looking at opportunities to support our biomass boilers with self-supply of wood chip, and we are looking at how small-scale renewable systems can be incorporated into the historic buildings in our care, replicating some of the brilliant work that has been done by my colleagues in England and Wales.

We have several feasibility projects currently running that aim to improve our knowledge of energy demand across our organisational elements, such as thermal modelling of historic and modern buildings in our care that will help us identify the type of renewable energy system needed in context, and the use of remote monitoring and real time data collection in energy use versus demand planning that we hope will help us understand supply and storage opportunities.

4. What are the plans for the National Trust in NI to achieve #netzero by 2050?

We're being particularly ambitious about our #netzero target which we have set for 2030, and we are confident that we can achieve this but it's not the whole picture for us. To achieve an absolute reduction in our gross carbon emissions we are following Science Based Targets approach in line with the Science Based Targets initiative.

This approach will see the organisation increase its use of appropriate and carefully planned renewable energy systems across Northern Ireland, improve the energy efficiency of our building stock and reduce the embedded energy in our operations.

Following guidelines from Science Based Targets initiative we will be using the carbon sequestration opportunities of bigger, better more joined up habitats, and our work in support of nature's recovery to draw more of our equivalent carbon emissions out of the atmosphere and locking it into the soil – this benefits climate and nature so it's a win-win really. Our current tree planting ambitions for the region see us being able to plant up to 150,000 new trees, taking care to plant the right tree in the right place.



We appreciate that as part of our role in providing access to nature, and without an adequately supportive public transport network in the region that can take our visitors to our houses, parks and gardens, our organisation relies on visitor travel by car. This is something we are committed to helping to address, by working with social enterprise partners and government bodies to improve access to sustainable travel options for visitors, and increase the number of green corridors that link urban and rural areas.

In summary, although we are aiming to be #netzero by 2030, we will continue our efforts beyond this date to reduce the carbon emissions of our organisation and sequester more carbon from the atmosphere and we will be using our knowledge and understanding of how we achieve carbon reductions to help others do the same.

5. If you could implement one change immediately that would reduce the Carbon Footprint within the National Trust, what would it be and why?

It's got to be moving our sites that are reliant on fossil fuels, onto renewable sources of energy. The Northern Ireland context means that we have more of our historic and supporting buildings using oil than other National Trust sites in England and Wales so it can be frustrating to see us not being on par with those regions and of course our Northern Ireland sites where fossil fuels are used mostly for heating, are big carbon producers as a result.

If I could flick a switch and for all these places, have a sustainable renewable energy alternative that is sensitive to the significance of the landscape and cultural heritage I would do it today no hesitation, and the regional leadership team is fully behind that idea as well as our partners. We all know the importance of moving away from fossil fuels not only as an organisation but also as a society, we simply need to find a way forward that delivers what we want while preserving the physical integrity and character of the special places we care for.



6. What are the biggest environmental challenges facing the charity in the short and long term?

In the short term we need to improve our data set and understanding of environmental impacts. We've always been monitoring and responding to our environmental risks and challenges based on best available data but now we are starting to see that we can and should improve the quality of data we collect from internal processes and external sources, and we are committed to including climate change projections in our management approach. The Northern Ireland context is that government investment in data collection on environmental matters has been lacking and is markedly behind that of England and Wales so although generally the data is improving, National Trust must invest in acquiring regional and local data from our own purposes, so that we can make better decisions and deliver sustainable plans.

In the long term, climate change adaptation will be a massive challenge. Globally there is about 25 maybe 30 years of climate change related changes baked into the Earth's system because of anthropogenic emissions and the continued delay in taking action to tackle climate change. Many of the sites we care for in Northern Ireland are of significant importance to heritage and nature; Giants Causeway, Strangford Lough, Divis and the Black Mountain being just some examples of where we are currently, or need to begin planning for climate change impacts such as sea level rise, increased frequency of extreme weather events and longer more intense periods of wetting and drying – all of which impact our organisations ability to deliver its core purpose in some way, and the ability of our sites to sustain the delicate natural balances that make them work without human led intervention. We are currently mapping the types of risks that exist and interpreting these for each of our sites so that as we plan to grow and change, climate change related impacts and the adaptation needed to respond to or mitigate changes is embedded in our long-term approach.

7. How important are memberships in the drive to secure the future sustainability of National Trust projects?

Hugely important, members are the life blood of our organisation and without them we simply could not continue to deliver the important work we do. From planting trees, to improving access to nature, memberships support the development of core purpose and our ability to support thriving places where nature and people connect.

As well as providing the opportunities to financially support key projects, our members are vital to communicating our message to a wider audience and building strong effective partnerships. In 2021 when a wildfire decimated a large swathe of heathland on the eastern slopes of Slieve Donard our members, supporters and local communities rallied, providing messages of support for the affected teams, offering their free time and their skills to help us limit the damage and kick start recovery of the extremely important natural habitats.



5. If you could implement one change immediately that would reduce the Carbon Footprint within the National Trust, what would it be?

As they carry out work on the Slieve Donard mountain path, our Mourne rangers continue to meet our members every day who are fascinated by the amount and complexity of work needed to maintain and improve sustainable access to this special place while protecting its character and function. It's that curiosity and love for nature, beauty and history that makes the difference to all of us.

Our 100,000 strong Northern Ireland membership base, who consider sites like Slieve Donard, Crom and The Argory as extensions of their home, keep our teams going and remind us of the reason why we must consider climate change as one of the greatest threats to the special places we care for.

8. Covid-19 had a big impact accessibility to National Trust Properties. Fortunately, we are now moving out of the pandemic, what events are taking place in the coming months that we should look out for?

Yes Covid-19 pandemic had a massive impact on National Trust. Our properties were closed for a long time and our internal structure underwent significant change. Some of our teams have only recently recovered the level of resource and energy needed to do effective work for all the of places we care for, and some of our special places have only reopened this year.

There are some exciting things happening this year; as well as Easter trails at our historic houses and gardens, like Rowallane, Mount Stewart and Florence Court which have always been popular with our supporters, we also have a 'From The Earth' Sustainable Market taking place at Castle Ward over the Easter weekend which will see locally produced products on offer and is part of Castle Wards ambition to promote sustainable and nature positive local food production across the estate and with our partners in the area.

Unboxed, an initiative to highlight the creative minds that call UK home, will be bringing 'Our Place in Space' to Divis and the Black Mountain in June and July. This scale model of the solar system designed by artist and children's author Oliver Jeffers, incorporates a 10-kilometre sculpture and augmented reality trail which seeks to put the Earth and its inhabitants in the perspective of the vastness of space, and asks the question 'What is the difference between 'us' and 'them'?'

As well as Our Place in Space, there will be 'Come and Play' activities happening at most of our special places over the Summer that will feature fun games and active ways for children to connect to nature.

And of course, we will make all efforts to deliver the amazing memorable experiences in nature and history for our visitors in Autumn and Winter, so plenty to think about and even more to look forward to.

