

Seaweed Is Their Way of Life. A Company's Sweeping Plan Threatens It.

As global demand for seaweed surges, a Canadian corporation's bid for exclusive harvesting rights in the west of Ireland has upended a once-sleepy industry.

By [Ali Watkins](#)

Visuals by Paulo Nunes dos Santos

Ali Watkins traveled by currach, a traditional rowboat, to the Kinnelly Islands of Ireland with seaweed harvesters. Paulo Nunes dos Santos went with them to Kilkieran.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/09/08/world/europe/ireland-seaweed-harvesting.html?smid=nytcore-android-share>

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Colemann Pat Dundass surveyed the rocky foreshore of the Kinnelly Islands, where the seaweed spread like a carpet.

To anyone else, it looked verdant. To Mr. Dundass, it wasn't quite right. Someone had hacked it the wrong way years ago, he said, and it hadn't grown back properly since.

Mr. Dundass, 78, has been harvesting seaweed for decades, like his father before him. Ashore, he plucked tangles of it from the rocks: the red moss, a homeopathic remedy steeped in tea; the long green strands, used as fertilizer for potatoes; bulbous green stalks, a salty snack edible right from the sea.

"Cutting seaweed up to now," Mr. Dundass said, "it was very easy, nobody bothering you."



Colemann Pat Dundass has been harvesting seaweed for decades, like his father before him. He stood with his currach, a traditional Irish boat used by most harvesters, in Kilkieran Bay, Ireland, in July.

That was before everyone wanted a piece of Connemara, a region on Ireland's west coast that includes the Kinnelly Islands and Kilkieran Bay and is one of the most pristine areas in the world for seaweed. Now, a Canadian corporation wants greater control of that seaweed.

The company, Acadian Seaplants, took over seaweed processing in the region about a decade ago. As the value of the algae surges, Acadian is also seeking exclusive rights to harvest it along much of the shoreline, where people have done so informally for generations.

Experts say the company's sweeping proposal risks the stability of the marine habitat and the livelihoods of traditional harvesters like Mr. Dundass.

"You could be in trouble," he said, slicing the seaweed from the rocks. "We just don't know."

A map highlighting the Kinnelly Islands, Galway, Ireland.



The New York Times

From ‘Niche Product’ to Powerhouse

For centuries, seaweed has been part of the fabric of life in Connemara. With its small population, minimal runoff and proximity to the Gulf Stream, the region’s craggy coastline is perhaps one of the most fertile environments in the world for seaweeds like *Ascophyllum nodosum*, or Asco, a stringy brown algae with air-filled bubbles.\

The economic potential of Connemara’s seaweed processing was long contained to Kilkieran Bay, where the Irish state began operating the Arramara Teoranta plant in 1949. From one slipway, harvesters across Connemara could collect, package and sell their bales as far away as Scotland or as close as Kerry or Galway City, where farmers bought the seaweed to fertilize their fields.

But in recent years, Western industry discovered what Connemara already knew: Seaweed is nutrient-rich, all-natural and — in the modern wellness boom — eminently marketable.

“Seaweeds have never been in the spotlight like it is today, globally,” said Maggie M. Reddy, a marine biologist who specializes in seaweed studies at the University of Galway. “It’s exploded from a niche product to an economic powerhouse.”



Arramara Teoranta, a seaweed processing plant, is on the Kilkieran Pier along the Connemara coastline. The Irish state began operating the facility in 1949.

In the midst of this, in 2014, the Irish state sold Arramara Teoranta to Acadian, which supplies seaweed to the global fertilizer and biostimulant industries. According to local government documents, obtained by The New York Times, officials selected Acadian over bids by two other companies, including an Irish one. The sale, for an undisclosed amount and subject to a confidentiality clause over its terms, prompted pushback from local harvesters.

Some improvements were immediate: The price of the harvesters’ seaweed went up, and the company upgraded the aging factory.

But Acadian’s arrival also brought an abrupt shift. Arramara Teoranta, long a key supplier across the region, was suddenly owned by a global competitor that had an effective monopoly over processing. An urgent question emerged: Who would cash in on Connemara’s seaweed?

Image



The Connemara coastline is covered in *Ascophyllum nodosum*, or Asco, a stringy brown seaweed with air-filled bubbles.

Despite initial promises that it would continue to supply local companies with seaweed, Acadian stopped doing so in 2022. The company applied for exclusive harvesting rights across much of the public foreshore in County Galway last year. Guided by the knowledge of its local suppliers, Acadian had quietly mapped every inch of Connemara's coast, identifying areas where harvesting rights had never been formally claimed.

The company said it was simply following maritime law that had been ignored.

But in Connemara, which has dealt with centuries of outside forces — British conquest, the Great Famine and, more recently, a wave of wealthy, seasonal transplants — it was seen as a profound betrayal.

A Fight Over Land and Labor

Residents like Mr. Dundass have traditionally navigated the foreshore with gentlemen's agreements and intuition. Neighbors handled harvesting rights with good faith, cash and mutual trust, part of a collective need to protect a shared resource.

Acadian's application for licenses wrenched South Connemara into a bureaucracy that had been bypassed in favor of these congenial arrangements. Irish law requires a

[maritime usage license](#) for the harvesting of seaweed on any foreshore, including private land. Few had gone through the arduous, expensive process of obtaining one, nor had they registered their territorial claims with the state.

If Acadian's exclusive licenses are approved, locals would lose their right to harvest on that land unless they sold to the company. If they chose to harvest or sell elsewhere, the state would require them to obtain their own license — which can cost thousands of dollars — by 2028.

“These things are very difficult for people who have been used to doing things their own way their whole life,” said Jim Keogh, the Europe director for Arramara. “There is a clash.”

Image



Maidhc Ó Curraoin holds a handmade tool used to harvest seaweed near Rosmuc, Ireland.

Acadian and its backers have promised that if the company gains exclusive rights, it will bring prosperity to the coastline, which is a designated [Special Area of Conservation](#) and subject to environmental protections. But locals fear they will be left behind if the company opts for cheaper labor and more productive but less sustainable harvesting methods.

Mr. Keogh, who is from the farmlands of Limerick, farther inland, insists that Acadian has no plans to use mechanical harvesting and will keep buying from the locals. But experts say the industry's harvesting projections are far greater than any amount currently gathered and will inevitably require a trade-off.

About 74,000 tons of wet Asco can be sustainably harvested every year from Ireland's west coast, according to industry estimates. A vast majority comes from County Galway.

While Mr. Keogh said Arramara planned to harvest 20,000 tons annually — the same amount it has collected for years — locals said they feared the company would increase that target over time.

“The real struggle that Ireland will have to come to terms with is how big you want to make this industry,” said Charlene Vance, a researcher at University College Dublin who studies the country's seaweed industry.

Maidhc Ó Curraoin, 58, has watched the licensing debate warily. A longtime harvester, he took a job with Acadian in 2021 but left around the time it applied for the exclusive license. The boat that the company gave him still bobs off his foreshore. He refuses to use it.



Mr. Ó Curraoin said his family's seaweed harvesting predated the formation of the modern Irish government.

Mr. Ó Curraoin said he was upset with Acadian but more so with his own government. The notion that a state entity could own a coastline cuts to the heart of Ireland's post-colonial relationship with land and country.

"The Irish state never gave anyone the seaweed. They didn't have it to give," said Mr. Ó Curraoin, who added that his family's harvesting predated the formation of the modern Irish government in 1937.

The Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, the government agency that oversees seaweed harvesting in Ireland's waters, has said it will ensure that the licensing process is fair and that any company operating in South Connemara abides by strict marine protection rules. The agency declined a request for an interview.

A Different Future

Oilibhéar Ó Niaidh stepped carefully through the Carna Research Station, about five miles west of Kilkieran. There were puddles on the floor, a persistent damp. Someday, he hoped, the dingy outpost could be Connemara's salvation.

Here, through the University of Galway, Mr. Ó Niaidh is building a center where small businesses can work with locals and researchers. Mr. Ó Niaidh, 55, said he hoped the center could help build a sustainable economic path for Connemara, one that avoided Acadian's missteps.

"They had a plan to come in and just railroad everything," he said. "In Connemara, you won't get away with that easy with the local people."

Image



Oilibhéar Ó Niaidh is building a center near Kilkieran where small businesses can work with locals and researchers to leverage the bay's resources. Credit...Ali Watkins/The New York Times

Suspensions have crept into the tight-knit community of harvesters like Mr. Dundass. The usual pub chatter — where people were harvesting, who was selling and buying — had quieted. No matter what happened with Acadian, he said, the old days of harvesting were probably over. Even if the company's license were not approved, it would be a matter of time before someone else tried.

He fiercely disagreed with forcing harvesters to register with the state. If Acadian were granted its application, he feared small harvesters like himself would be out of a job. But until then, Mr. Dundass said, he would keep selling to them. At his age, finding a new buyer was not worth the effort.

"It's a different ballgame now," Mr. Dundass said. "We're all kind of working against each other."