

Preservation of the Biodiversity and Ecosystems of Peatlands

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1 Executive Summary

- a) The cultural, wildlife and ecosystem values of peatlands
- b) The importance of peatlands in Ireland globally and the influence of Dutch people to protect peatlands in Ireland
- c) The foundation of the Irish Peatland Conservation Council and our role
- d) Priority actions that must be considered by the Oireachtas Committee in the preservation of the biodiversity and ecosystems of peatlands in IPCC's opinion are:
- e) A national survey of fens in Ireland and the designation of conservation-worthy sites
- f) The designation of the reconfigured network of raised bog Natural Heritage Areas
- g) Publication of the restoration plans for each raised bog after consultation with land owners
- h) A ban on the extraction of moss peat from raised bogs
- i) Setting a conservation target for blanket bog habitats and controlling mechanised turf cutting within designated sites
- j) Community Engagement, visitor awareness and formal education and the provision of permanently open peatland centre in the midlands in liaison with the IPCC.
- k) Planning decisions in relation to upland blanket bog wind farms that take peatland biodiversity and ecosystems into account.
- l) National policy and guidelines on the rehabilitation and restoration of industrial cutaway bogs to provide for biodiversity and habitat protection and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.
- m) Additional staff for NPWS to become more effective
- n) The need to engage with Coillte – the biggest owner of peatlands in the country and the Turf Cutters and Contractors Association – the largest user group of turf in Ireland.

2 Presentation

2.1 Peatlands are regarded as one of the harshest environments on the planet because they are waterlogged and species of plant and animal need special strategies to survive in them. But IPCC say that peatlands are actually ecosystem superheroes. Why? They provide important functions such as purifying water, sometimes mitigating flooding and providing a home for rare plants, animals and biodiversity. And they beat nearly every other ecosystem when it comes to carbon storage. On top of that they are part of the cultural heritage of our people and they have an immense recreational value.

2.2 In Ireland we have 275,000ha of peatlands with a conservation value – fens, raised bogs and blanket bogs – peatlands that are rare and extinct elsewhere in Europe and the world (Malone and O'Connell 2009). This represents 23% of the original peatland area in Ireland.

The remaining peatland area has been man-modified by industrial and private peat extraction, forestry, grazing, land reclamation and other uses.

2.3 When Dutch peatland scientists came to Ireland in the 1980's and saw the extent and speed of the degradation of our peatlands they took two steps: they encouraged the formation of the Irish Peatland Conservation Council to campaign for the conservation of bogs and they raised funds in the Netherlands to purchase three peatlands in Ireland. Once the sites were purchased they were donated to the Irish people as gifts with the message to conserve our peatlands while we still had examples that were in pristine condition. The Dutch logic was that a peatland in pristine condition costs very little to protect and manage in comparison to a site that has been damaged and which needs costly repair. Dutch peatland managers have spent millions of euro trying to restore their lost heritage.

2.4 Despite the friendly Dutch advice, the current Irish peatland conservation scheme is not working. We have reached the stage where we need to invest millions of euro to protect our peatlands or risk a future where a sod of turf will be a peculiar item on display in a museum showcase.

2.5 Several factors have led to our present critical situation and are likely to drive certain peatland types to extinction if action is not taken.

2.5.1 First - damaging activities on designated sites occur due to inadequate regulation. For example allowing the extraction of turf using digger and hopper from Slieve Tooney SAC in Donegal, not enforcing planning law which allows developers to drain peatland for horticultural peat extraction such as at Doolistown Bog in Co. Meath and providing permission for a wind farm development within the Lough Derryduff/West of Ardara Blanket Bog SAC in Co. Donegal. Furthermore in relation to planning, IPCC have analysed 10 years of our casework and we still cannot understand why in the consideration of a wind farm development for example on a blanket bog habitat, that planners rarely cite the intrinsic value of the peatland habitat and its wildlife as a reason for refusing permission (Paterson 2017).

2.5.2 Second – the lack of management of sites that have been designated is causing degradation to continue and this in turn is driving habitat and species losses. Our peatland habitats are drying, shrinking, cracking, slumping and eroding. A comparison of two reports produced by the National Parks and Wildlife Service on the *Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland Report* from 2007 and 2013 (NPWS 2013) has seen some habitats moving from an overall status of inadequate to bad and increasingly bad in the 6 year period. For example for raised bogs a lack of consultation with land owners on restoration plans prepared by the National Parks and Wildlife Service is facilitating loss of critical habitats and species such as Curlew and Large Heath Butterfly.

2.5.3 Third – The unprecedented delays in designating fens, raised bogs and blanket bog sites, engaging with the land owners involved and setting conservation targets for these ecosystems means that sites cannot be protected from damaging activities, nor can restoration begin and this is perpetuating loss. This is due lack of Government commitment, lack of personnel and inadequate funding.

2.6 What can we do now to stop the loss of our peatlands? On the positive side we have a Peatlands Strategy and a Raised Bog Management Plan (DAHG2015, 2017) in place, some communities are engaged in the process of managing sites and a considerable body of knowledge and research is available about how peatlands work. On the other hand progress is constrained by the need for more staff in the NPWS to conduct surveys, consult landowners, set conservation targets and carry out management work. All of this work needs more funding.

2.7 IPCC (see note 1) have been in existence for 37 years and our work of saving bogs is entirely funded by private individuals. To date we have spent €4 million buying bogs, campaigning and educating children. This must be proof that there is a positive attitude from the public towards conserving peatlands. But we need to commit to delivering peatland protection by engaging with people, by bringing every voice into the process and by being transparent in all decisions relating to the management of our conserved peatlands and other peat resources. This is what it will take to turn the tide and provide a future for Irish peatlands and their wildlife.

2.8 Illustrations



Figure 1: Extraction of turf using digger and hopper from Slieve Tooley SAC in Donegal in 2016. Photo: IPCC



Figure 2: Peatland drainage for horticultural peat extraction at Doolistown Bog in Co. Meath 2019 without planning permission: Photo: IPCC Supporter



Figure 3: Windfarm planning permission granted for Lough Derryduff/West of Ardara Blanket Bog SAC in Co. Donegal

BLANKET BOG (ACTIVE)*

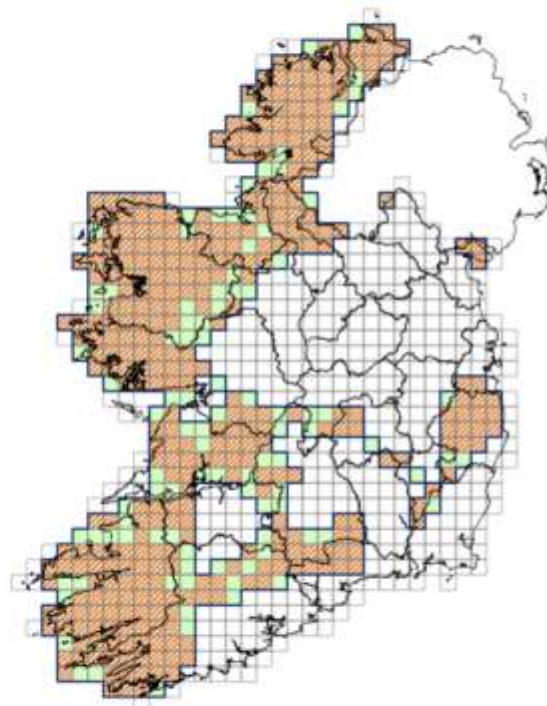
Blanket bogs occur in areas of consistently high rainfall where the ground surface is waterlogged for much of the time resulting in the development of deep peats. They may be broadly divided into upland and lowland communities. The peat is typically more than 50 cm deep and often 1-2m deep in the uplands and up to 7m deep in the lowlands. Blanket bogs generally occur on level ground or gentle slopes although upland blanket bog can occasionally occur on steeper ground. This habitat is widespread along the western seaboard and on uplands but absent from lowlands in the midland and eastern Ireland. Active blanket bog is a priority Annex I habitat, and is characterised by significant areas of vegetation that are normally peat-forming including sphagnum and other mosses, cottongrasses (*Eriophorum* spp.) and other species such as black bog rush (*Schoenus nigricans*) and white-beaked sedge (*Rhynchospora alba*) typical of lowland bog. Inactive blanket bog is also an Annex I habitat though lacks significant areas of peat-forming species.

Additional characteristic species include ling (*Calluna vulgaris*), cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*), purple moor-grass (*Molinia caerulea*), deergrass (*Trichophorum germanicum*), bog myrtle (*Myrica gale*), bog asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*) and sundews (*Drosera* spp.). Mosses are a significant component, particularly sphagnum mosses and woolly fringe-moss (*Racomitrium lanuginosum*), campylopus moss (*Campylopus atrovirens*) and the liverwort *Pleurozia purpurea*.

The main threats to blanket bog include overgrazing and trampling, drainage, afforestation, mechanical peat-extraction, burning and windfarm and other infrastructural development. Reductions in sheep numbers on upland commonages over the last decade has had a major positive impact on overgrazed areas, however recovery is a slow process and restoration measures are required to prevent further erosion of blanket bog. The Overall Status of this habitat is assessed as Bad with an ongoing decline of extent and quality.



Henry Frost



BLANKET BOG (ACTIVE)* (7130)
 0 25 50 km
 Current Distribution (361 cells) Favourable Reference Range (459 cells)
 Current Range (459 cells) 10km Grid Cells

ASSESSMENT SUMMARY:

CONCLUSION	2007	2013
Range	Favourable	Favourable
Area	Bad	Bad
Structures & Functions	Intermediate	Bad
Future Prospects	Bad	Bad
Overall Status	Bad	Bad
Reason for change	Genuine decline	

Figure 4: Blanket Bog Habitat Assessment 2007 to 2013. Source: *Status of EU Protected Habitats and Species in Ireland* from 2013

3. Further information

3.1 References

DAHG (2017) The National Raised Bog Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) Management Plan 2017-2022. Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin.

DAHG (2015) Managing Ireland's Peatlands. A National Peatlands Strategy 2015. Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin.

Malone, S. and O'Connell, C. A. (2009) *Irish Peatland Conservation Action Plan 2020*. IPCC, Kildare

NPWS (2013) *The Status of Protected EU Habitats and Species in Ireland*. Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Dublin.

Paterson, K. (2017) Is the Peatland Pen Mightier Than the Sword? *Peatland News* **63**: 13-14

3.2 Note 1: The Irish Peatland Conservation Council is a non governmental organisation and a registered charity. IPCC's mandate is to conserve a representative sample of the peatlands of Ireland for people to enjoy now and in the future. We were established in 1982 and have over 35 years of public support for the work that we do. In that period of time we have spent over €4 million on peatland conservation, education and management projects and we have engaged with hundreds of projects and thousands of people across the breadth of our work. We are largely funded through private subscriptions and grant awards. Core funding from the Department of and the Environment amounts to 9% of our annual budget. Over the years we have acquired five peatland nature reserves covering an area of 62ha and we own and manage the Bog of Allen Nature Centre in Co. Kildare.