

Scottish Wildlife Trust Briefing



Members' debate:

Motion S4M-13158: Peat extraction for horticulture

The Scottish Wildlife Trust supports Rob Gibson's motion regarding the need for stronger measures to end the commercial extraction of peat for horticulture. Commercial extraction of peat mainly occurs on lowland raised bogs and our briefing concentrates on this.

Commercial peat extraction is damaging and destroying some of Scotland's valuable raised bogs. Peat-free composts are commercially available and numerous high profile gardeners have moved to completely peat-free methods of gardening, showing that peat usage is not essential for successful horticulture.

The carbon and biodiversity value of peatlands and lowland raised bogs

Peatland habitat in Scotland covers around 2 million ha (approximately 23% of Scotland's land area) of which over 60% may be adversely affected by land use activities including drainage, forestry, burning, grazing and peat extraction. Scotland's deepest peats (>1 m) store around 6500 million tonnes of CO₂e: ten times as much carbon as stored in the whole of the UK's forest biomass.^{1,2} A loss of just 1.6% of this peatland carbon is equivalent to the total annual human carbon emissions in Scotland.³

The two major types of peatland in Scotland are blanket bog and raised bog. Both types of bog are listed on Annex I of the Habitats Directive, and the unprecedented inclusion of degraded raised bogs highlights the importance of this habitat.⁴ Raised bog is also listed as 'conservation action needed' and 'avoid negative impacts' on the Scottish Biodiversity List.⁵

Scotland's raised bogs are **internationally important from a biodiversity perspective** and many form part of the Natura 2000 network under the Birds and Habitats Directive. Raised bogs support a range of rare and/or declining plants and animals. Some characteristic raised bog species are:

- Bog rosemary *Andromeda polifolia*
- Cranberry *Vaccinium oxycoccos*
- Great sundew *Drosera anglica*
- Large heath butterfly *Coenonympha tullia*
- Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*
- Curlew *Numenius arquata*

Raised bogs provide multiple benefits to the Scottish economy, environment and society. These ecosystem services include⁶:

- Carbon storage: intact bogs act as a carbon sink, helping to meet Scotland's greenhouse gas targets
- Water supply: bogs assist in water purification
- Flood management: healthy bogs hold water, regulating its flow and limiting flooding downstream
- Grazing: bogs can be lightly grazed by sheep (ideally at low densities)
- Recreation: walking, wildlife watching, art and photography.

The declining resource

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/03/16170508/0>

² UK National Ecosystem Assessment. (2011). The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Synthesis of the Key Findings. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge

³ Galbraith C.A., Hughes J. and King A. (2011) Climate Connections: towards low carbon high biodiversity economies. Scottish Wildlife Trust, Edinburgh

⁴ <http://jncc.defra.gov.uk/page-1523>

⁵ <http://www.biodiversityscotland.gov.uk/advice-and-resources/scottish-biodiversity-list/categories/>

⁶ Kimmel, K. & Mander, U. (2010) Ecosystem services of peatlands: Implications for restoration. Progress in Physical Geography 34(4), 491-514.)

The area of lowland raised bog in the UK has decreased by around 94% over the last two centuries from c 95,000 ha to c 6,000 ha at the present day. Scotland's area of intact raised bog has declined from 28,000 ha to 2,500 ha. Along with agricultural drainage and forestry, **commercial peat extraction** is a major cause of this decline.

Scottish Planning Policy states that "*Policies should protect areas of peatland and only permit commercial extraction in areas suffering historic, significant damage through human activity and where the conservation value is low and restoration is impossible*" The Scottish Wildlife Trust would like to see commercial peat extraction cease completely and a date set for phasing it out which would be compatible with: Scotland's Third National Planning Framework which states "*We will... take action towards delivering the proposal in Low Carbon Scotland (RPP2) to increase the rate of **peatland restoration** to 22,000 hectares per year* (Although RPP2⁷ ("We are also working with the other UK Administrations to reduce and eventually phase out the use of peat in horticulture" we would like to see a date set in the near future and given in RPP3.

Commercial peat extraction continues today

Applications for commercial peat extraction continue to come forward in the planning system. The Scottish Wildlife Trust **objected** to commercial peat extraction applications for Springfield Moss in Midlothian and Mossmorran in Fife. **The Springfield Moss application was granted, permitting a further 25 years of peat extraction for horticulture. This will involve removal of up to 3.5 metres of peat – which is likely to have begun forming 3500 years ago. The local authority justified approval by stating they would restore the bog - from which most of the peat would have been removed - in 25 years' time!** The Mossmorran application is still in the planning system.

It is also likely that recent purchases of peat extraction licences by Natural England may increase applications for horticultural peat extraction in Scotland – this should be resisted in order to conserve Scotland's important raised bog resource.

Job creation in alternative industry

Commercial peat extraction for horticulture creates few jobs – a recent application for extraction of peat on a bog in Fife stated that only two full time jobs would be created. Restoration of degraded bogs can create a variety of jobs, providing a genuine boost to rural economies. Additionally, such restoration can draw money into rural areas e.g. through SRDP management payments, or conservation grant funds. Restored peatlands, as well as being of huge carbon and biodiversity value, can be popular sites for recreation including walking and birdwatching. Developing alternatives to peat for horticultural purposes should also lead to job creation.

What we believe

The Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that peat should not be extracted for horticultural purposes. We do not and will not use any peat products at any of our reserves, visitor centres or offices. The Scottish Wildlife Trust believes that protecting and restoring peatland habitats is in the public interest. The ecosystem services provided by bogs, which are not currently captured in economic metrics, outweigh any perceived benefit to horticulture. There should **be no new peat extraction sites, and existing sites should be restored to as near favourable condition as possible. We believe that targets should be made for phasing out the use of peat in growing media for both amateur and commercial use.**⁸

Our restoration work

The Scottish Wildlife Trust is involved in peatland restoration projects through the SNH Peatland Action project, and has been involved in restoring five lowland raised bogs: Carsegowan Moss in Dumfries & Galloway and Red Moss of Netherley in Aberdeenshire; Longridge Moss, West Lothian; Bankhead Moss, Fife; Cowgarth Flow, Dumfries and Galloway.

We believe restoration of all degraded lowland bogs should continue to take place with support from the Scottish Government.

For further information please contact:

John McTague, Living Landscapes Policy Officer
jmctague@scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk

May 2015

⁷ Low Carbon Scotland: Meeting the Emissions Reduction Targets 2013-2027 – The Second Report on Proposals and Policies

⁸(http://scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk/docs/002_057_publications_policies_Lowland_peat_and_horticulture_policy__October_2011__1320168162.pdf)