



Protecting our raised bogs very much in the public interest



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It is local politics as usual when it comes to turf-cutting as selfish vested interest seeks to trounce science and common sense

IT TOOK a Dutchman to make us realise that our bogs were precious wildlife habitats and not merely places for harvesting cheap fuel. As long ago as 1986, Dr Matthijs Schouten was so appalled by the destruction of peatlands here that he set up the Dutch Foundation for Conservation of Irish Bogs.

Professor of restoration ecology at Wageningen University and also an adjunct professor at **UCD**, he became known as "the father of bog conservation in Ireland" and was knighted in 2004 by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands for the prominent role he played in bringing the fate of Irish bogs to international attention.

The foundation raised sufficient funds in the late 1980s to purchase three endangered sites - Scragh Bog, in Co Westmeath;

Cummeragh River bog, in Co Kerry, and Clochar na gCon bog, in Co Galway - and gifted them to the Irish nation. As a result, the government was shamed into taking the issue seriously.

Dr Schouten pointed out to all and sundry that the Dutch came to regret the destruction of their own peatlands and were investing millions of guilders in conserving the last remaining examples in the southeast of the country. They also built a bog museum in Veen that attracts 1.5 million visitors per year.

But it was not just the tireless efforts of a Dutch ecologist that we needed to take note of. Under the EU habitats directive, adopted in 1992, Ireland was required to designate special areas of conservation (SACs) for protection - and one of the mandatory categories included raised bogs of European importance.

Located mainly in the midlands, raised bogs once covered an area of more than 300,000 hectares (720,000 acres). But due to decades of "harvesting" for electricity production, household fuel and compost, only 18,000 hectares (43,200 acres) still remain - amounting to half of all the surviving raised bogs in Europe.

Spending a day hiking on squishy bogs is the nearest thing to walking on water, enthusiasts say. "It is like being on a giant water bed," as Dr Peter Foss, co-founder of the Irish Peatland Conservation Council, once said. Or to quote Seamus Heaney: "The ground itself is kind, black butter/Melting and opening underfoot".

Like sponges, raised bogs soak up water in times of flooding and slowly release it during dry periods, thereby helping to regulate water systems. Conversely, cutting them up causes erosion of organic matter and this results in silting lakes and river beds, as has happened with Lough Derg on the Shannon system.

The habitat value of raised bogs arises from their rich diversity of flora such as bog-rosemary, cranberry, lichens and sundews, all of which thrive in the sphagnum mosses.

They also support a wide variety of fauna, including otter, hare, merlin, grouse, snipe

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and curlew, as well as dragonflies, frogs and spiders.

Scientific surveys carried out by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the late-1990s resulted in the designation of a mere 139 of the 1,500-plus raised bogs in Ireland either as SACs or natural heritage areas (NHAs), to be protected under domestic legislation. All sites were then notified to the European Commission.

Even so, the government was unwilling to step on the toes of turf-cutters and successfully sought a derogation from implementing the strict terms of the habitats directive. But this period of grace expired in 2008 and, since then, it became imperative to take action to protect peatland sites designated as SACs.

It was not until May 2010 that then minister for the environment John Gormley finally banned turf-cutting on 31 raised bogs, amid an outcry from farming interests and a declaration of defiance by Luke "Ming" Flanagan, PRO of the Turf Cutters and Contractors Association and newly elected Independent TD for Roscommon.

But it's not as if the damage is being done by men and boys using sleans to cut turf. As the National Parks and Wildlife Service has

noted, increasing mechanisation in recent years, together with the use of contractors, "has made the exploitation of small to medium-size bogs economically profitable" for those with turbary rights.

With the traditional turf-cutting season due to open on Good Friday, the Government reaffirmed Gormley's ban this week and announced a compensation package for turf-cutters. Under this scheme, each of them would be entitled to a payment of €1,000 per annum for 15 years or, alternatively, relocation to less sensitive sites.

Minister for the Environment Phil Hogan and Minister for Heritage Jimmy Deenihan, who unveiled the package on Wednesday, had no alternative but to take action; they had been warned by the European Commission that Ireland would face tens of millions of euro in penalties plus fines of €20,000 per day if it didn't protect the bogs.

Inevitably, vested interest farming organisations criticised the annuity payment as inadequate and said it should be doubled to €2,000 per annum "for the lifetime of the bog", rather than just 15 years. Even at the lower figure on offer, the cost to the exchequer would be in the region of €20 million to cover all 55 raised bogs designated as SACs.

Set against that, however, is the value of these areas not just as increasingly rare wildlife habitats, but also as carbon sinks. Indeed, Friends of the Irish Environment - who have been extremely vigilant in campaigning for peatland protection - say the bogs are among our most important assets in offsetting carbon emissions.

In terms of global warming, "not only does burning the cut turf release more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere than any other fossil fuel, but the cutting process both dries out the bog, allowing the remaining peat to oxidise and release CO₂, thereby also destroying the bog's effectiveness as a sink", the group says.

Protecting the bogs is, therefore, very much in the public interest.

Frank McDonald is Environment Editor



Located mainly in the midlands, raised bogs once covered an area of more than 300,000 hectares. After decades of "harvesting" only 18,000 hectares remain, amounting to half of all the surviving raised bogs in Europe. Photograph: Brenda Fitzsimons