

Ireland's BOGS

In part three of our series in conjunction with the Irish Ramsar Wetlands Committee, we look at farming and blanket bogs

Ireland has 8% of the world's blanket bog and this is worth nurturing, according to Dr Catherine O'Connell*.

Peatlands in Ireland comprise (1) fens which are fed by ground water, (2) raised bogs fed only by rain water and which occur in basins in the midlands, and (3) blanket bogs.

Ireland's bogs occur extensively along the western seaboard and in mountainous areas throughout the country. Here annual rainfall exceeds 2,500mm, occurring for over 200 days a year. Blanket bogs cover an area of 775,000ha in Ireland. They are regarded as an iconic landscape.

These wetlands provide many important services. They are a refuge for unique and specialist flora, fauna and habitats not found anywhere else. They act as a store of soil organic carbon, helping to mitigate climate change. Did you know that a substantial portion of Ireland's drinking water filters through peat?

Over 20% of the area of Irish blanket bogs are conserved by the Government through the designation of Special Areas of Conservation and Natural Heritage Areas. As these areas are being protected for the common good, farmers and land owners have a responsibility to ensure they do not damage the wildlife quality in the designated blanket bog site. Damage can be caused by intensive

grazing, heavy sporting and turf cutting.

Blanket bogs have supported pastoral farming in Ireland for 5,000 years. This activity is only sustainable if stocking densities are low and grazing is seasonal.

Driven by European Union grants, the numbers of sheep being grazed on the blanket bogs increased dramatically in the 1990s. Soils and vegetation of blanket bogs are highly susceptible to erosion and loss due to intensified land use.

The density of grazing sheep had drastic effects on the blanket bog. The height and cover of vegetation was reduced and the species composition of the habitat altered. In some instances where plant cover was entirely lost, the erosion of the blanket bog peat affected drinking water quality through the presence of peat particles.

This was also harmful to fish in the streams and rivers. Thankfully, this issue has been resolved, largely through reduction in stocking densities and sustainable management of the blanket bog commonages.

Turf is harvested on blanket bogs as a source of fuel, but cannot be regarded as renewable in Ireland as the rate of harvesting is so great that the peatlands do not have time to regenerate. Drainage and burning are two activities strongly associated with turf cutting and are cause for concern.

The disappearance of traditional cutting methods and the advance of contractors with heavy machinery that can access remote areas of lowland blanket bog has caused fragmentation of the bogs. This has knock-on effects

on habitat loss, disturbance of wildlife, reduction in water quality and, in scenic areas, is unsightly. Heavy machinery also compacts the peat, further reducing its potential to regenerate.

RED GROUSE

Healthy peatlands in Ireland support Red Grouse and other wildlife. Red Grouse is a traditional game bird and is inextricably linked to blanket and raised bogs. A mosaic of different aged heather is essential to their habitat needs. While traditional management of heather has included carefully planned and controlled rotational burning, such methods can irreparably damage these sensitive habitats. Appropriate grazing is also beneficial.

THE FUTURE

What might the farming future hold in relation to our blanket bogs?

The Wildlife Trusts in the upland area of Pumlumon in Wales are working with local communities to guide a major change in the way land is managed. This is to make sure that the upland natural environment is as healthy as possible. This approach could be considered in Ireland.

Farmers can increase the volume of carbon (and water) stored in blanket peats by blocking ditches on drained bogs, allowing them to re-wet, helping to slow down climate change. When blanket bogs are in good condition, tonnes of carbon is locked away in

the peat. More carbon is absorbed by the growing bog mosses.

Unhealthy bogs are dry and cannot hold much water, so the rainwater runs off, increasing the chances of flooding. A healthy bog can hold enormous quantities of water like a giant sponge. It releases

water slowly into the rivers and helps prevent floods. Blocking drains also makes great sense from a wildlife point of view. It can aid the restoration of a habitat and the return of lost wildlife. Such landscapes farmed for commodities such as carbon, water, as well as food, can then be a focal point for

eco-tourism and outdoor recreational projects, all of which help to boost local economies.

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