

Peat Hub Ireland

Evidence synthesis for the sustainable management of peatlands

Presentation to AICBRN All-Island Climate and Biodiversity Research Network – 8th May 2026

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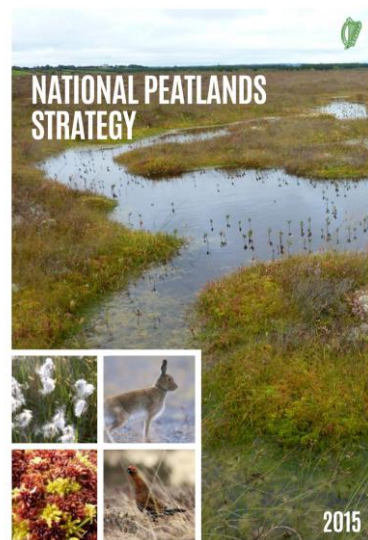
Peat-Hub-Ireland: State of knowledge on Irish peatlands

Aim of PHI project

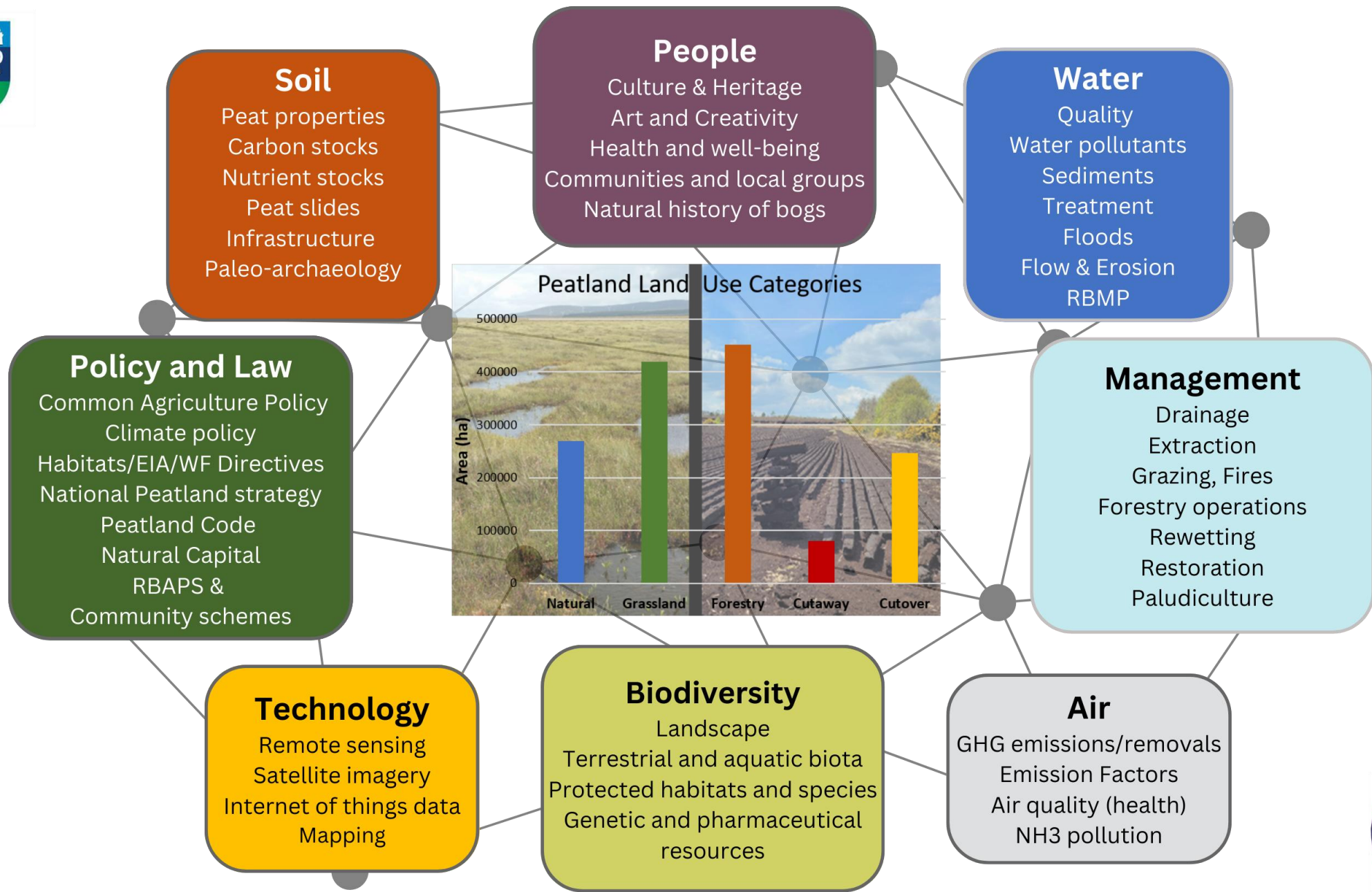
To collate evidence to encourage research, civil society and policy makers to move towards an evidence-based position on how to sustainably manage Ireland's peatlands.

Sustainable peatland management (SPM)

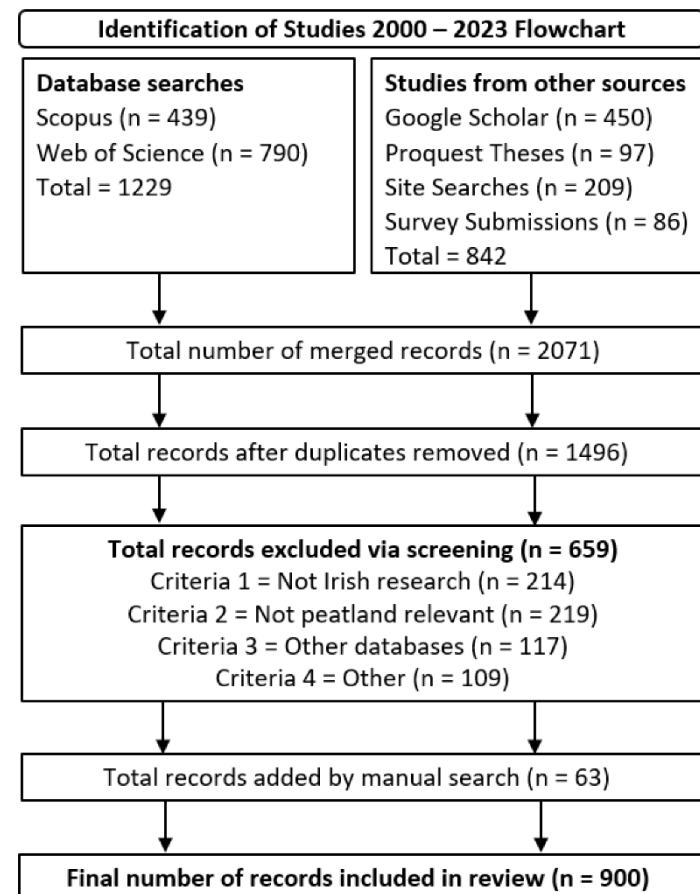
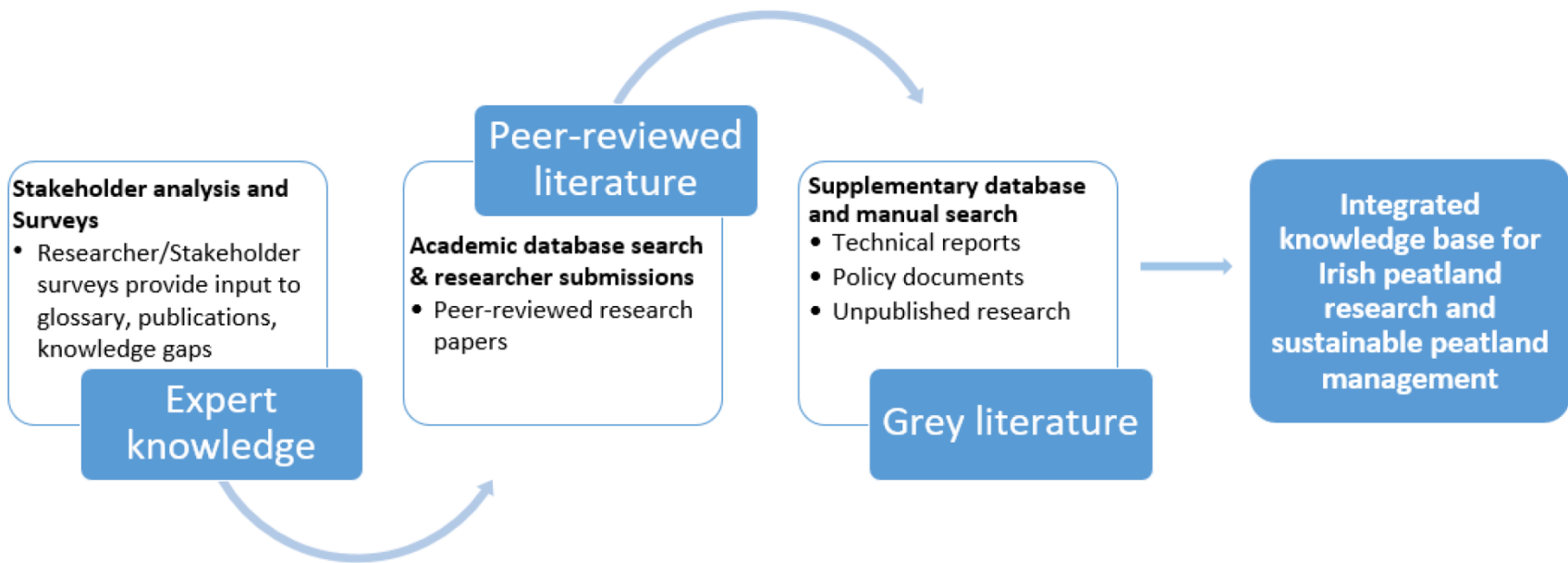
Involves societal responsibility to optimise the social, cultural, environmental and economic contributions that peatlands make to the well-being of current and future generations.



Peatland web of knowledge - research themes

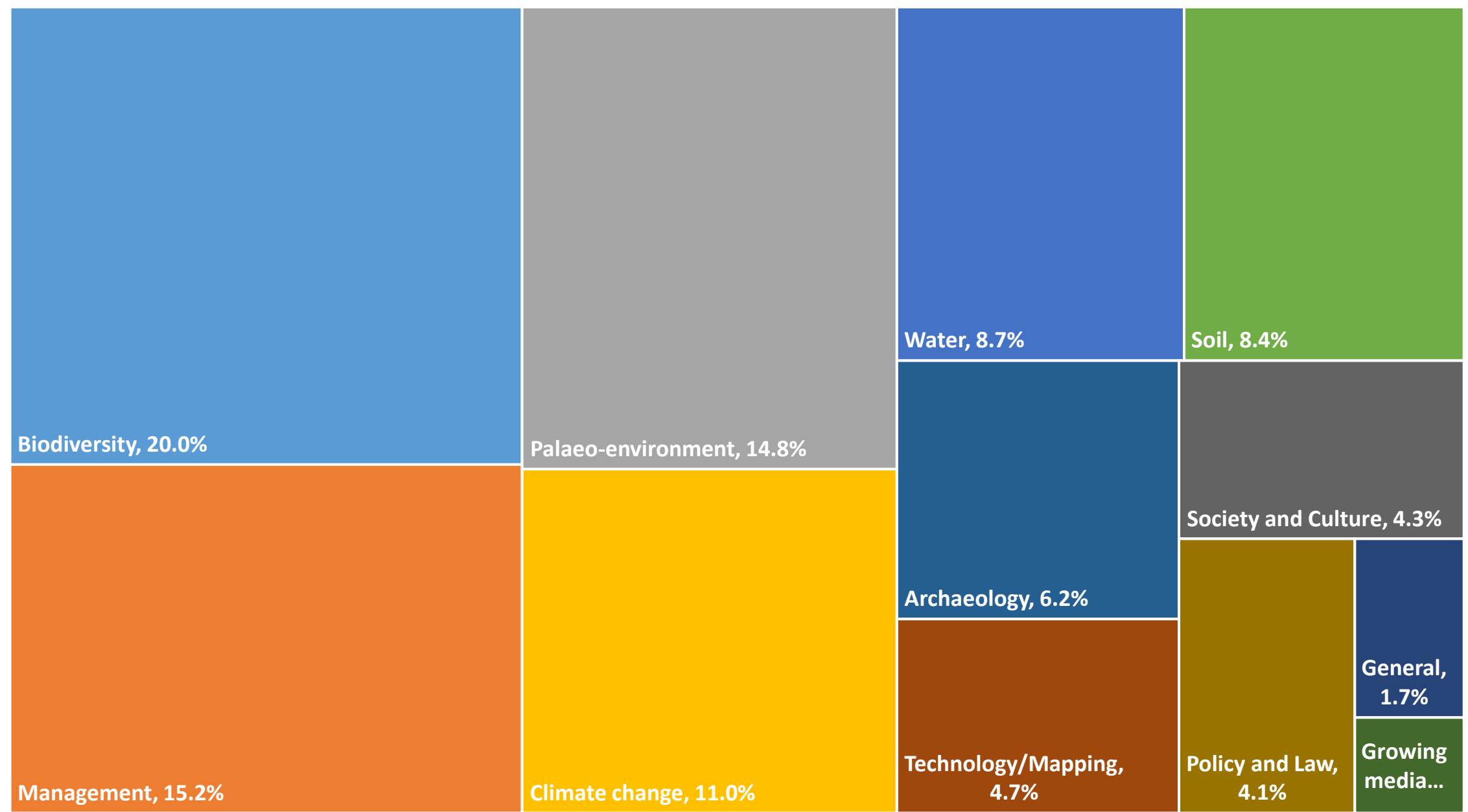


Knowledge base for evidence synthesis on SPM in Ireland



Findings: Distribution of research

Biodiversity, Management, Palaeoenvironment, Climate, Water and Soil = 78%
Society & Culture, Policy, Law, Archaeology = 14.6%



Findings: Peatland trends



Peatland Trends: Declining biodiversity, escalating climate risk, water quality challenges



- **Biodiversity - a mirror of global decline:** A continuing downward trend on all fronts (habitats, birds, invertebrates) reflecting global trends. Activities such as peat cutting and drainage are having an ongoing impact on peatland habitats.
- **Climate - carbon sink to carbon source:** Peatlands are likely to be severely affected by climate change, leading to a loss of carbon stored, increased fire risk and bog slides.
- **Water - the lifeblood of ecosystems and communities:** The widespread degradation of peatlands has led to a significant reduction in water quality with organic matter from peatland runoff posing challenges to the treatment of water.



Trends: VERY BAD on all fronts: habitats, birds, invertebrates.

Theme: Peatland Biodiversity

Key Facts / Synopsis

- Not many species but highly **specialised**
- All types of peatlands—natural, cutover, or cutaway - **crucial habitats for a variety of birds**, including Eurasian Curlew, Hen Harriers and Grey Partridges.
- **Contribution of Irish peatlands to biodiversity not yet fully understood**. Invertebrates, plants, mosses, fungi, algae and microbes remain unrecorded due to their poor level of study in Ireland.
- Poor knowledge of **microbiota and molecules/genetics**

Recommendations

- Preservation of remaining near-natural peatlands and prompt rewetting of degrading peatlands is crucial to protect **threatened species**
- Managing high nature value landscapes through **agri-environment** schemes
- At national level and within the legislation framework, **small peatlands, degraded ones or areas just outside existing protected bogs merit designation**
- Develop a **National Blanket bog SAC Management Plan**
- **Local biodiversity action** plans - a local scale opportunity to renew focus on peatlands biodiversity



Theme: Peatlands and Climate



Trends: loss of carbon and nutrients

Key Facts

- Irish peatlands store an estimated **2.2 billion tonnes of carbon**.
- Peatlands likely to be **severely affected by climate change** (changes in decomposition rates leading to a loss of the carbon stored; DOC release; increased fire risk; and reduced peatland area).
- Near-natural sites are generally carbon sinks but **drained sites are ALWAYS carbon sources**.
- Rewetting is a **climate proof mitigation** strategy.
- **Afforestation of peatlands is unsuitable** climate mitigation strategy.

Recommendations

- High priority: Drained peatlands should be targeted for rewetting.
- **Site-by-site approach** for future rewetting management schemes is required.
- Development of **repository geographical information** on both public and private peatland rewetting projects.
- **High-resolution maps** of Irish peatlands under various management/land uses should be developed.
- **Multi-annual measurements** of carbon balances from peatland sites.

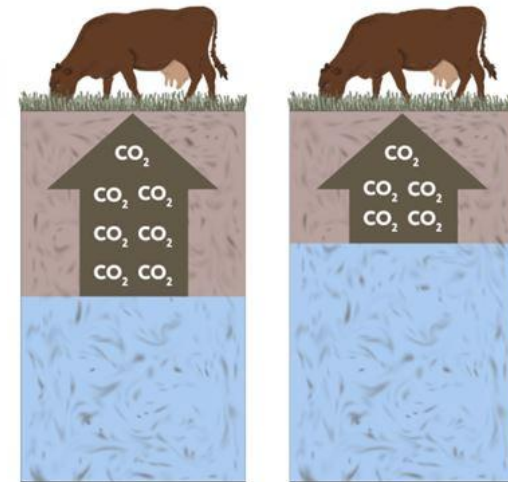
Management of agricultural peat soils

Key Facts / Synopsis

- Some 339,300 ha of peat soils are under grassland, **releasing an estimated 3.9 million t CO₂eq/year** (NIR, 2023).
- Agricultural peat soils are the **second largest emissions source** in the Land Use, Land-Use Change and Forestry category, hence need to reduce their management intensity and raise the water table.
- Farmed drained peat soils **emit carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide** but this depends on (1) the composition of the vegetation, (2) the drainage status, and (3) the nutrient status of the peat.
- Heavy **grazing pressure** has been implicated in a decline of the condition of blanket bogs (731).

Recommendations:

- **Nutrient-rich organic soils under grasslands (Midlands) produce much higher GHG emissions and also emit more carbon and ammonia to water bodies.** These soils should be targeted for water table management (734).
- **Rewetting of farmed peat soils and “paludiculture” or “wet agriculture”** (the cultivation of commercial plants or trees under water saturated soil conditions) **could restore some peat soil ecosystem services**, including the carbon store and carbon sequestration (1023).
- Farmers need to know their peat soil properties (nutrient and water table levels) and their value within the overall catchment. **Managing the water table and seasonal grazing can bring about synergistic benefits for climate, water and biodiversity.**



10cm water table increase = 3 tCO₂e/ha/yr emissions reduction.

Image: Farmpeat project

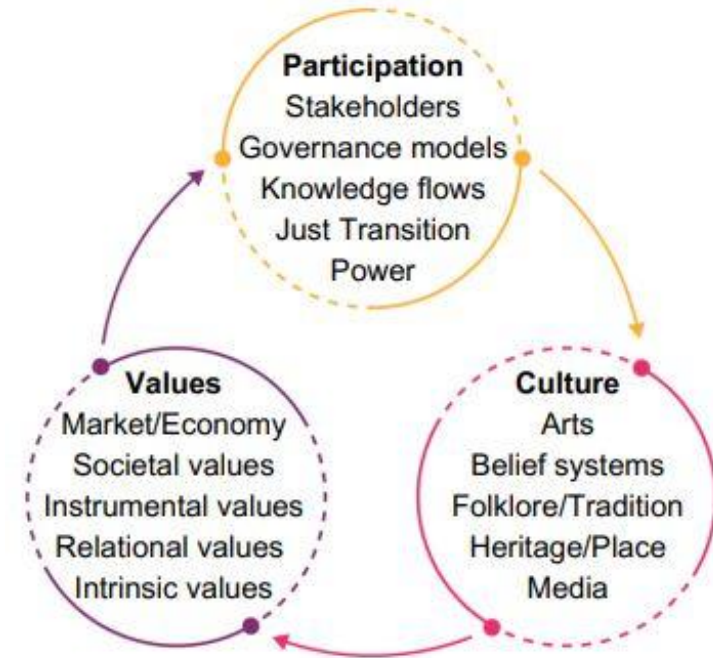
Peat Hub Ireland – Society and Culture theme

Key Findings / Synopsis

- **Themes identified in the literature:** Participation still seen as tokenistic; Culture as catalyst for social change; Values shape conservation goals and outcomes
- **Resistance by a variety of societal actors** can hamper efforts to sustainably manage peatlands.
- Lack of research on **impacts of policies** ‘on the ground’ therefore lack of strategies to deal with barriers to change.

Recommendations:

- **Awareness of power dynamics for inclusive participation processes** and greater community agency and stewardship of landscapes.
- **Culture as catalyst:** Incorporate the social sciences, heritage, the arts and other cultural, creative and interdisciplinary approaches into peatland restoration and management
- **Engaged research:** Advancing **participation and co-creation in research** to foregrounds and works with communities and stakeholders affected. Insights and methods from the **social sciences, arts and humanities.**



Social barriers and opportunities to the implementation of the England Peat Strategy
Reed et al, 2020



Peat Hub Ireland Strategic Recommendations



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF IRISH PEATLANDS



1. Accountability



Sustainable peatland management requires policy alignment, compliance, regulation and enforcement with coherent regulatory frameworks and peatland mainstreaming. Improved participatory processes and inclusion of civil society are also crucial to build trust, knowledge and public support.

2. Longevity



Mechanisms for long-term funding of sustainable peatland management and long-term monitoring are critical and should be leveraged through financial frameworks, subsidies (promote positive; remove negative), private finance and enhancing local community and landowner supports.

3. Equity



To foster equitable and sustainable peatland management, urgent resources are needed for education, training, knowledge exchange, and capacity building across stakeholder groups. Institutions should promote engaged research and empower people and communities to drive change.

4. Holistic knowledge



A new paradigm for peatland research in Ireland should aim to empower stakeholders via participatory methodologies and knowledge co-production; integrate principles of Open Science for sharing data and knowledge; and develop technological capacity.

Peat Hub Ireland Policy Brief / Key Actions



Peat Hub Ireland

Policy Brief

Key policy actions for the sustainable management of Ireland's peatlands



Glossary



- 120 + peatland terms
- 25 + sources



A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S | T | U | V | W | X | Y | Z

Peatland Term	Definition	Source of definition
A		
Acrotelm	The living, actively growing upper layer of a bog, the surface of which is composed mainly of living bog mosses. The presence of the acrotelm is vital to a raised bog as this is the peat-forming and water-storing layer of the bog.	DCHG, 2017
Active or peat forming	According to the Interpretation Manual of the Habitats Directive, the term Active is taken to mean still supporting a significant area of vegetation that is normally peat forming.	DAHG, 2015

Peat Hub Ireland Database/Journal article/EPA report

zenodo Search records... Communities My dashboard

There is a newer version of the record available.

Published October 9, 2024 | Version 1.0

Dataset Open

Peat-Hub-Ireland Database Version 1.0

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Flood, Kate (Researcher)¹ 


Show affiliations

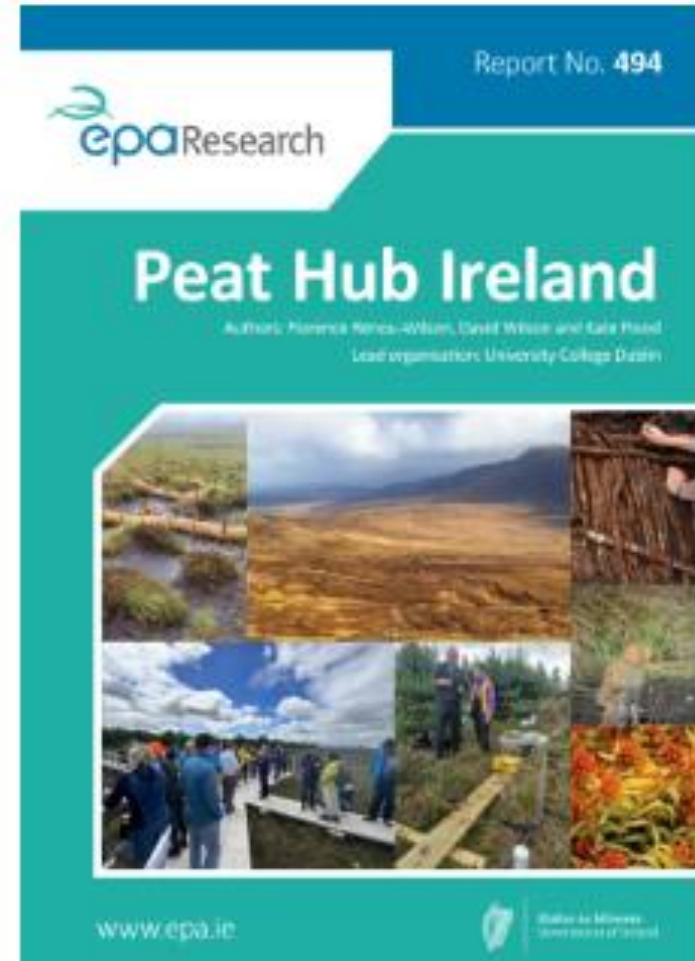
The **Peat Hub Ireland** Database of Research on Irish Peatlands is a freely accessible resource that makes research data on Irish peatlands available for use by researchers and other stakeholders. The database provides a searchable, updatable and comprehensive evidence base for sustainable management of peatlands in Ireland. The evidence base draws on a thorough review of Irish peatland research focusing on literature from 2000 to 2023. The review embraces a broad evidence synthesis framework that incorporates expert and stakeholder knowledge with peer-reviewed and grey literature to represent the wide knowledge base involved in peatland research and management in Ireland.



Review

Evidence Synthesis and Knowledge Integration for Sustainable Peatland Management

Kate Flood ^{1,*}, David Wilson ²  and Florence Renou-Wilson ¹ 



Peat Hub Ireland Factsheets



An Roinn Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #1

PEATLANDS AND BIODIVERSITY Introduction

Peatland biodiversity is relatively unexplored with many rare species yet to be discovered. Peatlands are refugia of rare and threatened species (e.g. bog orchids) that are at sharp decline not only in Ireland but on a global scale. Many peatland species are threatened by unsustainable human activities worldwide and in Ireland.

The ecosystem services (provisioning, regulating and cultural and supporting services) provided by natural peatlands ultimately depend on living organisms. Biodiversity is directly responsible for creating the diversity of landscapes and habitats, as well as the variety of peat types.

This biodiversity helps underpin a sustainable rural community, as well as providing services for society: water filtering and supply, floods such as barriers and multi-functional, eco-tourism and other socio-cultural benefits. As well as potential future medicines from extracted derivatives in bog plants that help light disease.

To increase biodiversity, it is essential to protect, effectively manage, and restore peatlands. This is vital not only for biodiversity but for the support of wetlands, but also for their role as habitat connectors and their contribution to global climatic and hydrological processes.



Peatlands are exceptional natural entities. They can form a variety of landscapes that contain a range of ecosystems along with their unique biodiversity (i.e. the variety and variability of living species including plants, animals, bacteria, fungi and genetic material, as well as the human).



Trends Very bad on all fronts - habitats, birds, invertebrates (SASP) and Special Protected Areas (SPAs), activities such as peat cutting and drainage continue to impact peatland habitats (37% loss in 2017, over 31% of our active raised bogs were recorded as lost from the SAC network (1500). There are more green peatlands in Dublin city than there are actively growing raised bogs in Ireland (1030 ha (1000). Latest research reveals that the cutaway peat decline has accelerated since the 1980s, highlighting the urgent need to action to prevent its disappearance from the Irish landscape.



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Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #2

PEAT SOILS Introduction

Peat consists of partly decomposed plant remains that have accumulated where they have been produced (in situ). More precisely, peat is defined as a sedimentarily accumulated natural consistency of at least 30% (dry mass) of dead organic material. Peat belongs to the upper family of **organic soils** or **'thick soils'**, which includes a wider range of managed soils consisting of at least 20% organic matter. However, Irish peat soils typically contain on average more than 90% organic matter content, with lower nutrient levels in peat soils under greatest (72).

According to the **Global Peatland Assessment Report**, land with any incidence of a peat soil is a peatland (32). However, for mapping and statistical purposes, peat soils have their own definition involving a minimal peat depth in Ireland. A group of experts from various institutions met during the 2022-2023 project (22) and defined peat soils as 'peat topsoil cover over a depth of at least 30 cm deep; the depth requirement does not apply in the event that the peat layer is directly over bedrock'. Irish peat soils are defined as soils with a water table between 0 and 30 cm below the soil surface. Internationally, wet soils are not defined by the water table but are soils (mineral or organic) that are saturated by water for all or part of the year to the extent that the soil biota have adapted to anaerobic conditions. For the purpose of reporting greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. National Inventory Report), EPA Ireland use the depth *stratum* and if the peat layer is less than 30 cm then the soil is classified as *agrisolvent* (or *polyesther*).



Irish peatland soils store approximately 2216 Million tonnes of carbon.

Preservation of this store is critical to help Ireland meet its targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Healthy peat soils also help to improve water quality and provide a habitat for a range of species. Peat soils are also important repositories of historical and archaeological evidence and provide a platform for many human activities.



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Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #3

CLIMATE CHANGE AND GHG EMISSIONS Introduction

Peatlands play a vital role in regulating the global climate by acting as long-term carbon sinks, which accumulate when the amount of carbon dioxide fixed by the peatland vegetation during photosynthesis is greater than that released during soil respiration by the plants and the microbial communities, (3) methane emissions, and (2) leaching and surface runoff of dissolved organic carbon (DOC). On average, Irish peatlands contain more than 1.4 of total soil organic carbon in Ireland with conservative estimates of 2.2 billion tonnes of carbon locked up in the peat (72). However, this carbon is released when the peat is dry and to ensure that the peat is wet is the key measure to reduce negative impacts on the climate (84).

Peatlands are likely to be severely affected by climate change, leading to a loss of the carbon stored, increased fire risk, and a reduced peatland area (14). Crucially, the rising temperatures will enhance peat decomposition and DOC release to inland waters. Degraded peatlands are also expected to be more vulnerable to climate change and to longer a rewetted peatland is established, the more resistant it will be to climate change (73).



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Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #4

PEATLANDS AND WATER Introduction

Interrelated between land and water, peatlands are the main substrate of wetlands in Ireland. Water is the blood of all peatlands. Un drained peatlands provide important ecosystem service benefits by providing a buffer against acidification and eutrophication, taking up nutrients and other elements (nitrate, nitrite and heavy metals from atmospheric deposition) and therefore buffering downstream waters and their biota. Although the water in blanket bogs is acidic and low in mineral content, the streams that drain these areas have an annual variety of organisms (90).

Blanket bog catchments are also important to drinking water supply (37). In Ireland and the United Kingdom, approximately 95% of the drinking water is sourced directly from peatlands, highlighting the crucial role that peatlands play in the water security of these nations (84). However, if the global rise, only 38% of water-scarping peatlands remain protected, emphasizing the urgent need for responsible stewardship.



Drainage lowers the water table and leads to significant changes in hydrology (the way the water is stored and flows off the peat surface) and the water quality within the bog and downstream water bodies (704, 718). Land use management, such as afforestation and subsequent forestry operations as well as peat extraction, further lead to a deterioration in the water quality that flows from these degraded peat soils (304, 641).



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Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #5

PEATLANDS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

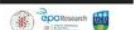
An exceptional repository of knowledge

In Ireland, peatland and wetland archaeology has been the subject of archaeological and palaeo-environmental evidence, collectively known as the archaeo-environmental record (36). The preservative qualities of peatlands arise from their acidic and anoxic environment (a deficiency of oxygen) (102) and have contributed to the preservation of human and animal remains (713).

The value of bogs for understanding human history and the past over millennia through palaeo-environmental studies is also evident in research exploring the archaeo-environmental record. An understanding of the context of the site or find, which often informs interpretation and feed into theory building (127, 1050). Peatland, sampled from cores extracted from bog peat, provide the means to reconstruct local vegetation and thereby human impacts and abandonment in various historical periods (541).



Wetland archaeological discoveries indicate that peat people in peatlands and other elements (nitrate, nitrite and heavy metals from atmospheric deposition) and therefore buffering downstream waters and their biota. Although the water in blanket bogs is acidic and low in mineral content, the streams that drain these areas have an annual variety of organisms (90).



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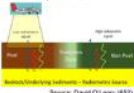


Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #6

TECHNOLOGY AND MAPPING Introduction

Ireland is mapping peatland information derived from digital data has grown exponentially in the last few decades. This includes remote sensing data (e.g. satellite images, geospatial surveys), as well as other digital mapping (historic maps) and Machine Learning technologies. There are now multiple means to remotely monitor peatlands and their status and the effects of management (especially re-wetting and restoration), ranging from space-based satellite measurements (optical and radar) to airborne, shore and ground based geophysical measurements (Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR), Electro-Magnetic and Resistivity) (passive measure of naturally occurring salinity).

To date, the analysis and classification of land cover, land use, peat depth and 3D terrain modelling has been one of the principal applications but methodologies are also being increasingly employed to monitor the environmental conditions of peatlands, vegetation and other indicators, such as fauna. A variety of data sources are now available, such as Earth Observation (EO) data (images with various sensors, e.g. NASA Landsat) or European Space Station (Sentinel), airborne geophysical surveys (e.g. Geological Survey Ireland's Telemag project or LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) surveys) operated on shore or on airborne platforms. The use of a combination of data sources, such as satellite imagery and geophysical products, combined with machine learning algorithms, will help address sustainable peatland management by providing more accurate maps, as well as tools to more effectively monitor the status of peatlands.



'Securing peatlands for the future and adding their contribution to atmospheric carbon sinks, means digitally mapping them now. Digital mapping using field observations combined with remotely sensed images and statistical models is an avenue to more accurately map peatlands and decrease this knowledge gap (60).



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Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #7

PEATLANDS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE Introduction

Research on the socio-cultural and human dimensions of conservation, restoration and sustainable management of ecosystems has demonstrated improved conservation and management outcomes when civil society is empowered to act and actively manage local habitats and landscapes. Beyond the social dimensions, and realisation of local communities has limited the success of conservation projects in the past.

Social science disciplines provide a variety of participatory methods and approaches to understand the relationship between people and nature. Insights from the social sciences can be applied to help mitigate conflict between stakeholders; design conservation strategies to reflect people's diverse values; and understand processes of management.

Knowledge gaps in this theme include understanding the health and well-being benefits of peatland environments and the impact of increased anxiety and use on these ecosystems; identifying reasons why projects meet with resistance and how new public input on the lives of people on the ground, and assess around Just Transition. Resistance by a variety of social actors can hamper efforts to sustainably manage peatland landscapes and thus such knowledge gaps should be addressed with participatory, engaged research that foregrounds communities affected.



Research demonstrates the value of heritage, culture, the arts and other creative practices to engage people in nature, both as climate change and biodiversity and ecosystem restoration (25, 30). Acknowledging local knowledge, histories and traditions can support cultural change from the bottom-up (296).



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Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #8

PEATLAND MANAGEMENT FORESTRY Introduction

For centuries, peatlands have been utilised and managed for a wide range of uses. Historically, these included light grazing (by livestock) and extension of peat for heaving (by hand) but, more recently, peatlands have been subject to extensive use for forestry, grassland and peat extraction, as well as for agriculture (wet farms).

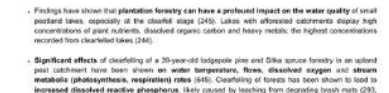
Wet peatlands are naturally fire-free due to climate and peat soil development. Afforested peatlands cover approximately 45,800 ha of peat soil in Ireland (DIR, 2023). In an effort to increase the forest cover in Ireland, large-scale areas of peatlands, especially blanket bogs, were afforested by the State over the second half of the 20th century, which changed the local landscape, changing ecosystem services, such as fire risk, biodiversity and water quality (72). Afforestation of peatlands declined at the start of the 21st century (86).

Policy and nature conservation initiatives are now paving the way to restore blanket bogs previously afforested or semi-afforested peatlands. However, management practices and planning hurdles require more robust stakeholder consultation and scientific monitoring.



Key Research Findings

- While the majority of the national forest estate is found on peat soils, the status of peatland forestry in Ireland remains marginal and its national economic significance has yet to be fully evaluated (723).
- Findings have shown that plantation forestry can have a profound impact on the water quality of small peatland lakes, especially at the shallow edge (245). Lakes with afforested catchments display high concentrations of peat nutrients, dissolved organic carbon and heavy metals, the highest concentrations recorded from classified lakes (246).
- Significant effects of clearfelling of a 35-year-old Sitka spruce and Sitka spruce forestry in an upland peat catchment have been shown as water temperature, flow, dissolved oxygen and stream methane (methanogenesis, respiration) rates (846). Clearfelling of forests has been shown to lead to increased dissolved reactive phosphorus, likely caused by leaching from degraded brush mats (283, 660, 769).



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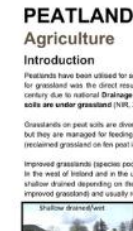
Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #9

PEATLAND MANAGEMENT Agriculture Introduction

Peatlands have been utilised for agriculture for centuries. The reclamation of wet peat soils or shallow peatlands for grassland was the direct result of population pressure in the 19th century, which increased in the 20th century due to national Drainage Acts and agricultural schemes (287). Nowadays, some 330,300 ha of peat soils are under grassland (DIR, 2023), with negligible organic fertilizer use for crops (228).

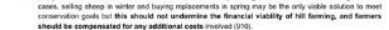
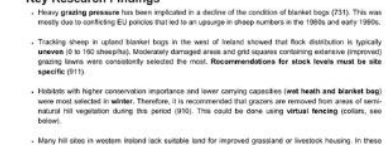
Grasslands on peat soils are diverse across Ireland due to the type of peat and local management practices but they are managed for leading domestic ruminants, mostly through direct grazing with only minimum areas improved grassland (on ten peat in the Midlands) used for large production (hay or silage) (8).

Improved grasslands (species poor and intensively drained and fertilised) are most widespread in the Midlands. In the west of Ireland and in the uplands, unimproved 'rough' grassland can be found, which can be deep or shallow drained depending on the slope, and which have variable sward type/vegetation (with patches of improved grassland) and usually include organic fertilizer only through animal dropp (241).



Key Research Findings

- Heavy grazing pressure has been implicated in a decline of the condition of blanket bogs (21). This was linked to conflicting EU policies that led to an increase in sheep numbers in the 1980s and early 1990s.
- Trading sheep in upland blanket bogs in the west of Ireland showed that flock distribution is typically skewed to 100 sheep/ha. However, blanket bog grazing with sheep can have negative impacts on peat bog grasses were consistently selected the most. Recommendations for stock levels must be site specific (211).
- Habitats with higher conservation importance and lower carrying capacities (wet heath and blanket bog) were most selected in winter. Therefore, it is recommended that grazers are removed from areas of semi-natural hill vegetation during this period (30). This could be done using virtual fencing (collars, see below).
- Many hill sites in western Ireland lack suitable land for improved grassland or livestock rearing. In these cases, taking sheep in winter and buying replacements in spring may be the only viable solution to meet conservation goals but this should not undermine the financial viability of hill rearing, and farmers should be compensated for any additional costs involved (976).



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Peat Hub Ireland Factsheet #10

PEATLANDS POLICY AND LAW Introduction

Peatlands are valuable ecosystems and are highly significant for global efforts to combat biodiversity loss, climate change, as well as contributing to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2022) and other international and EU commitments (2015, 650).

The sustainable management of peatlands requires collaboration across all sectors and levels of government, across research disciplines and including all stakeholder groups (214). Peatlands must be managed in an integrated, multi-stakeholder manner, using a landscape approach with a combination of policy instruments (regulatory, incentive and educational) to ensure success (54, 117, 872). Land users, driven by EU and national policies across agriculture, energy and forestry sectors have resulted in the degradation of more than 95% of Irish peatlands with emergent recreational pressures in upland areas (872). There is a need for a stronger and more urgent public policy response to address the ongoing losses of peatland biodiversity and ecosystem services (54). Ireland must provide more coherent and effective implementation of existing global and national policies (705).



EU policies applying to peatlands include the EU Habitats and Birds Directives, EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, LULUCF Regulations, 2018 Climate and Energy Framework, Common Agricultural Policy, Farm to Fork Strategy, Water Framework Directive, Soil Thematic Strategy, Just Transition, Renewable Energy Directive, and the EU Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Directive (11076).



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Peat-Hub-Ireland - Outputs and Impact

A living template for Sustainable Peatland Management

Adaptive management principles: fostering a culture of continued **learning**, participation, **experimenting** and **monitoring**

Outputs

- Glossary of terms
- PHI Database
- Factsheets
- Policy Brief
- Scenarios workshop
- Journal article
- Final EPA report with key facts, research gaps, implications for policy and future research
- → Inform Nature Restoration Law implementation and development of 2025-2035 Peatland Strategy.



Thank you!

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