

Friday 1st May 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Cultural rights and climate change

Climate Change and Peatland Rehabilitation: Implications for cultural rights and practices in Ireland

This is a contribution from WetFutures Ireland, a research project funded by the EU Programme, Joint Programming Initiative Cultural Heritage and based at University College Cork, Ireland. WetFutures aims to facilitate and empower local communities with invested and diverse cultural rights with respect to peatlands, and to create dialogues and connections within the areas of peatland rehabilitation for climate change mitigation. In this document, we address questions **6, 13, 14**. We begin with a brief background to the relevance of peatlands in the context of climate change and cultural heritage.

- Peatlands provide critical ecosystem services; in particular as carbon sinks and therefore valuable environments for mitigating against greenhouse gas emissions and anthropogenic climate change. It has been estimated that globally, peatlands store three times more carbon than the World's forests combined (REF). However, disturbed and degraded peatlands are net contributors of carbon to the atmosphere.
- Globally, drainage, agriculture, peat cutting (both industrial extraction and 'hand cutting') and other anthropogenic interventions threaten these environments and hence related ecosystem services (Wilson et al., 2013). Peatlands are also directly threatened by global warming, in which increased global temperatures reduce the capability of peatlands to maintain storage capacity of CO₂, with increased exposure to drying out and hence ecosystem function collapse (Swindles et al., 2019).
- As an initiative to protect these ecosystem services, wetland rehabilitation (including peatlands) is included in the Kyoto Protocol, as part of signatory member nations commitments to reductions in greenhouse gas emissions (Bonn et al., 2016).
- Peatlands are also critical within the ecosystem services framework for cultural heritage and cultural rights in the following ways: the preservation of organic archaeological remains and records of past environmental and climatic change, that do not survive on terrestrial landscapes. Any processes that impact on peatland function also impact on this non-renewable and fragile record of the historic and prehistoric past. The ongoing processes of degradation and destruction have destroyed significant numbers of archaeological sites (Gearey and Fyfe, 2016). Peatlands are also important in terms of cultural identity, both in positive and negative terms; the place of the 'bog' in Irish art and literature on one hand, and the colonial degradation of the Irish as 'bogtrotters' on the other. Other aspects of cultural heritage values can be described as contested - in Ireland, the exploitation of peat for 'turf' - fuel for domestic heating is a

centuries old 'agricultural tradition' which is regarded as a cultural heritage 'right' by certain Irish communities.

- Drainage and extraction of Irish peatlands has been carried out on an industrial scale since 1946 by the semi state-owned industry Bord na Mona. In 2017, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCA) produced a climate action framework within the National Mitigation Plan, to end the use of peat as a fuel source by 2030. This commitment has been a development of action undertaken by government since 2015, in which a gradual process of reducing support to Bord na Mona has included the removal of Public Service Obligation (PSO) subsidiary financial support of Bord na Mona power plants between (2015-2019).
- The National Mitigation Plan commits to the replacement of peat as (DCCA, 2017). This commitment has been supported by a programme of national programme of peatland 'rehabilitation' - a process of rewetting drained peatlands - an initiative undertaken through the Irish Environmental Protection Agency, in order to restore biodiversity and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to meet climate targets (NEROS, 2012).
- In 2019, it was announced that by 2028 all Bord na Mona plants will have phased out the use of peat as a source of energy (DCCA, 2019). However, the phasing out of industrial peat cutting as part of a transition to a low carbon economy, presents a significant economic challenge for the communities traditionally reliant on employment by Bord na Mona. In terms of cultural heritage, the impact of climate change mitigation programmes on the infrastructure and social relevance of peat extraction must also be considered in terms of cultural rights.
- Very little attention has been paid to these interfaces and tensions between climate change, climate change mitigation and different articulations and valuations of cultural rights and heritage.
- Although peatland rehabilitation as means to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, is a component of Irish government climate policy as per EU Kyoto commitments, the Irish state has previously been in conflict with the EU over its failure to protect peatland environments from illegal peat cutting. In part, this is due to the fact that the right to cut peat by hand is regarded by sectors of Irish society as a cultural right (as outlined above).
- As outlined above, peatland rehabilitation has the potential to help mitigate global warming, but also to preserve and protect the surviving archaeological remains that are an irreplaceable part of Ireland's cultural past. However, peatland restoration programmes, although potentially beneficial to the long-term preservation of material cultural heritage, may inadvertently damage or compromise the survival of archaeological remains (Gearey et al., 2014).
- Likewise, the potential drying out of peatlands due to global warming also threatens the survival of material heritage (the archaeological record), an irreplaceable component of cultural identity.

- In Ireland, the cessation of peat cutting and peatland rehabilitation marks the end of an economic activity (peat cutting) that has been a cultural right for many centuries, and in contemporary society a significant provider of employment, particularly in the Irish Midlands. The end of such activity, although an important component of attempts to mitigate climate change and protect the associated archaeological record, hence threatens particular aspects of the cultural life and rights of these communities.
- Examples of the economic implications include Bord na Mona job cuts of 500 staff by the end of 2019 (FT, 2019), including 150 staff at one plant in Lough Ree, County Longford (The Journal, 2019) - a rural community in the heart of the Irish Midlands.

These issues highlight the specific tensions that exist in Ireland between culture and cultural rights, and the need to address climate change via ecosystem rehabilitation. In the following section, we address three questions 6, 13, 14 in the context of the above summary discussion on climate change, peatland rehabilitation and cultural rights of peatland communities in Ireland.

6. What opportunities are available for people to publicly engage in cultural life in ways that demonstrate contemporary cultural shifts in response to climate change? Are there currently visible signs of cultural change underway? What factors might impede such practice of cultural life?

To help promote the value of the cultural heritage of peatlands at community level, and the importance of peatland rehabilitation as a means to mitigate climate change in Ireland, the WetFutures project has collaborated with the Community Wetlands Forum (CWF), a regional umbrella group involved in wetland conservation, who are promoting the cultural rights of communities in the context of the values an environmental, educational and social resource. This is significant in terms of realigning public perceptions and attitudes from peat as an economic resource, to one that in its undisturbed state, is a valuable component of the mitigation of climate change.

Through the CWF, we are providing opportunities for engagement, using workshops, practical sessions and producing educational material illustrating the importance of peatlands in climate change mitigation. An important aspect of this is also communicating the close relationship between healthy peatlands as essential for ecosystem services and cultural rights. In terms of impediments, the growth in the membership of the CWF over the last few years reflects increasing engagement with these issues, but funding opportunities remain limited. In terms of the tensions between peat cutting as cultural heritage right and economically deprived rural communities such as those of the Irish Midlands, very little work has been attempted to consider the problems as well as potential of cultural rights and climate change mitigation associated with the cessation of peat cutting.

13. What national, regional and international initiatives are being undertaken to address the intersections of climate change, culture and cultural rights? How effective have such initiatives been, what primary challenges have they faced, and what additional efforts should be suggested in this regard?

At a national level, Irish government policy has committed to a programme of rehabilitation of peatlands for climate change mitigation. This action alone provides an intersect between mitigating climate change and the protection of cultural rights for those with an environmentally-driven investment. This however does not address the diversity of cultural rights invested in peatlands, and fails to address communities with cultural rights derived from peat cutting as a cultural heritage right.

As discussed above, regional initiatives from the CWF are helping to disseminate the importance of peatland rehabilitation as means to mitigate climate change in Ireland. To address the diversity of cultural rights that this initiative intersects, the CWF have collaborated with WetFutures Ireland, not only to promote value of the cultural heritage of peatlands at community level, but also address the tension and empower local communities with invested and diverse cultural rights with respect to peatlands. WetFutures Ireland aims to address this tension and break down divisions between different cultural rights in Irish peatland communities by:

- Identifying and developing a new interface for discussion of cultural rights between those whose rights centre on peatlands as economic resource, and those concerned with the environmental value of rehabilitated peatlands;
- Promoting and protecting the value of peatlands as archives of the historic and prehistoric environment, as a means to engage local communities in terms of appreciating the link between climate change, mitigation of climate change and cultural heritage;
- Developing open engagement and dialogues to improve communication between different stakeholders and encourage discussions of contested cultural rights in the face of climate change mitigation.

WetFutures have demonstrated how we can integrate diverse aspects of peatland heritage, including marginalised and conflicting iterations of cultural rights as a means to address the connection with climate change and policies mitigating global greenhouse emissions. For example, this includes activities such as recording the cultural process of peat cutting, including preserving cut faces of peat, as a physical archive of this historical activity and therefore retaining in an archive the cultural identity of a community.

This is the first example of engagement in promoting cultural rights in Ireland between peatland rehabilitation experts and those involved with historic environment research.

14. What recommendations should be made to States and other stakeholders concerning these topics?

In terms of further recommendations, WetFutures Ireland advises the following points for consideration:

- State-led commitment to funding for community groups across Ireland involved in promoting the importance of peatland rehabilitation as a means to mitigate climate change;
- Improved communication and collaborative investment by stakeholders representing economic, environmental and historic aspects of peatland rehabilitation;

- Wider engagement with peatland communities across Ireland during the rehabilitation process and associated demise of economic activity.

We see this as an essential opportunity to restore cultural rights to both 'economic' and 'environmental' groups via what we refer to as 'the peace process'. One belonging to the 'past' - cutting and drainage, once destructive but now worthy of preserving through recording the practices and language of peat cutting communities; and the other to the future - rehabilitation for climate change mitigation, therefore a creation of a 'new' articulation of heritage. In turn, this also protects the cultural rights of communities represented by the archaeological records of the 'unknown' past in peatlands.



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