

Briefing 1262

Sustainable management of UK peatlands

Summary

Sustainable management is essential to maintain the wide range of benefits that peatlands provide. Policy objectives are needed that will ensure delivery of priority ecosystem services which fit local situations. These need to take account of ongoing biophysical, socio-economic, market and policy changes. There is a range of policy instruments and options including national co-ordination of policy and knowledge exchange, restoring peatlands damaged by inappropriate management, accessing private finance via carbon markets, encouraging cross-boundary collaboration between stakeholders and improving the planning system.

This paper is taken from the summary of '*Policy Options for Sustainable Management of UK Peatlands*' by a team led by Mark Reed, University of Aberdeen. The full paper is at:
http://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/sites/all/files/Review%208%20Policy%20Options%20-%20Summary_0.pdf

The report is a draft scientific review, commissioned by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) UK Peatland Programme's Commission of Inquiry into Peatland Restoration.

Sustainable management is essential to maintain the wide range of benefits or "ecosystem services" that peatlands provide for society

UK peatlands provide society with a wide range of "ecosystem services": in good condition, they help regulate our climate, provide clean water, reduce downstream flood risk, support wildlife and provide us all with wild, open spaces in which to roam and escape. However, many peatlands have been damaged by former activities such as drainage and over-grazing.

With changes to EU policy influencing the management of these landscapes and climate change adding additional pressures, now is a crucial time to examine how best to secure the ecosystem services provided by peatlands.

Policy objectives are needed that will ensure delivery of priority ecosystem services

It may not always be possible to maintain all ecosystem services in all peatlands, given costs, varying priorities of land owners, managers and members of the public, and the fact that some ecosystem services are mutually exclusive in the same location. UK policy objectives may therefore need to focus on identifying priorities for delivery of ecosystem services and recognising that the priorities may not be the same in different areas.

It may be possible to deliver five priority ecosystem services sustainably, concurrently and efficiently from UK peatlands: biodiversity, fire risk mitigation; climate regulation; freshwater provision; flood risk mitigation/ flood storage; landscape and wildness.

Numerous biophysical, socio-economic, market and policy changes affect the long term sustainability of UK peatlands

Rural communities are struggling to survive economically and build sustainable futures, with many farm businesses in peatlands dependent upon agricultural payments to avoid making an annual loss.

Drainage, burning, grazing and afforestation have affected and continue to affect the ecology and hydrology of UK peatlands. In addition, climate change is causing more rapid deterioration of already damaged bogs, increasing loss of carbon and biodiversity and some lowland peatlands may be threatened by sea level rise.

Current international policy does protect peatlands to a certain degree and there are potential opportunities for improved support. Under the Kyoto Protocol, Greenhouse Gas emissions from peat degradation and the benefits or rewetting are recognised and could be included in national Greenhouse gas reporting. Additionally, peatlands are areas of high biodiversity with their component species and habitats identified as priorities under the EU Birds Directive and Habitats and Species legislation. Biodiversity targets proposed for 2020 under the Convention on Biological Diversity offer an opportunity to protect and restore important peatland habits and ecosystem services.

At the European Union level, CAP reform post-2013 is currently under discussion, at several levels. At all levels payments are potentially vulnerable to budget restrictions due to public spending crises which have already impacted on a number of countries with significant areas of peat. At the same time, the European Landscape Convention came into force in the UK in 2007 and may facilitate a more citizen-led approach to peatland management in future. The EU legislation on water quality and flood management also supports greater recognition of the management of natural habitats and ecosystems to deliver improved water management.

There are a number of national environmental strategies and other legislation relating to peatlands; those peatlands currently covered by statutory designations should be protected from most future forms of intensive management. Some lowland peats that have not already been cultivated may come under pressure from possible moves towards increasing the area of food production in the UK. Current forestry strategies across the UK signal woodland expansion but also give strong protection for peatlands.

Greater flexibility will be needed in the management of peatlands in response to climate change, including providing improved species and habitat management and large scale restoration. Spatial Planning might be able to help facilitate this by extending the concept of "green infrastructure" to connect current protected areas to non designated peatlands within new larger landscape scale units where peatland ecosystem services are prioritised.

Investment in the restoration of degraded peatlands could help meet conservation targets whilst increasing their resilience to climate change and mitigating further climate change.

There are a range of policy instruments and options that could sustain the future provision of important peatland ecosystem services in a rapidly changing world

This analysis leads to a number of specific considerations for future UK peatland policy:

National co-ordination of peatland policy and knowledge exchange

There have been calls for an integrated, national strategy for peatlands that can co-ordinate policy development and delivery across Government. A national research, policy and practice network or partnership could help exchange knowledge and create a shared agenda for understanding and sustaining peatland ecosystems, human communities and the ecosystem services they provide under current and future land use and climate. Effective communication to the public about the importance of peat habitats could also raise public awareness of these vital habitats, and help to achieve more sustainable management through altered consumption patterns (in particular peat products).

Options to restore peatlands damaged by inappropriate management

These may include: ensuring land managers have access to and capacity to use the latest restoration techniques; exchanging knowledge about new techniques and the relative performance of existing techniques; continuing to finance peatland restoration through existing schemes; and facilitating private funding of peatland restoration for carbon and other benefits

Accessing private finance for peatland restoration via carbon markets

Private financing of peatland restoration for carbon and other benefits by companies who wish to become carbon neutral, but are unable to further reduce greenhouse gas emissions at source, could supplement the cost of existing agri-environmental schemes (by at least 20%). However to facilitate this, significant policy changes would be necessary at an international and national level to generate tradeable credits for voluntary or compliance carbon markets.

Improving links between agricultural payments and provision of ecosystem services

The efficiency with which agricultural payments deliver ecosystem services could be enhanced by linking the two more effectively in a spatially targeted scheme that incentivises cross-boundary collaboration for the provision of certain services. This review suggests a framework for such a scheme, which could be piloted in a peatland National Park.

Encouraging cross-boundary collaboration between peatland stakeholders

A shift in the focus of agri-environmental schemes from contractual agreements with individuals to awarding collective payments could facilitate the management of ecosystem services across property boundaries and support self-governance of groups consisting of land owners and managers working alongside other peatland stakeholders.

Improving the planning system to benefit peatlands

Peatland communities could play a greater role in planning decisions, for example as part of the UK coalition Government's "Big Society" initiative, prioritising developments necessary to enable these remote communities to thrive e.g. considering visitor payback to help create a shared understanding of the environmental and economic benefits of peatlands. In future it may be possible to raise additional funds for sustainable peatland management from nearby developments via mechanisms such as the Environment Bank and visitor payback schemes.

Alan Spedding, 13 April 2011

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