Peatland restoration is both an ecological *and* a social endeavour, with successful projects bringing both ecological *and* social benefits.

Research demonstrates the value of heritage, culture, the arts, and other creative practices to engage people in issues, such as climate change, biodiversity and ecosystem restoration (25, 301). Acknowledging local knowledge, histories and traditions can support cultural change from the bottom-up (299).

Tales and tastes of the bog
Gnáthóga Nádúrtha art project
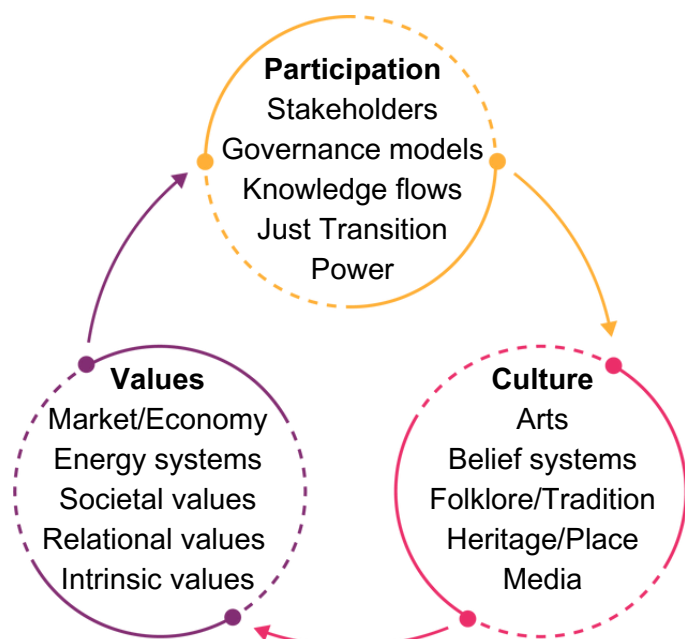

PEATLANDS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

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. Ignoring the social dimensions and realities 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 relationships between people and nature. Insights from the social sciences can be applied to help minimise conflict between stakeholders; design communication strategies to reflect people's diverse values; and understand perceptions of management.

Knowledge gaps in this theme include understanding the health and well-being benefits of peatland environments and the impact of increased amenity use on these ecosystems; identifying reasons why projects meet with resistance and how new policies impact on the lives of people on the ground; and issues around Just Transition. Resistance by a variety of societal 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.

Society and culture in Irish peatland research

Research in the Society and Culture theme was analysed and classified into three overarching categories: Participation, Values and Culture, which intersect and relate to each other across multiple dimensions.

Participation
Stakeholders
Governance models
Knowledge flows
Just Transition
Power

Values
Market/Economy
Energy systems
Societal values
Relational values
Intrinsic values

Culture
Arts
Belief systems
Folklore/Tradition
Heritage/Place
Media

PEATLANDS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Key Research Findings

The evidence base assessed in the Society and Culture theme demonstrates the complexity of issues relating to the human and socio-cultural dimensions of sustainable peatland management (301, 705, 731). This complexity underscores the need for integrated rather than single-value (climate/emissions) approaches to peatland management, monitoring and ecosystem services that combine ecological, socio-cultural, economic, and ethical value dimensions (54, 301, 705, 907).

Active participation and stakeholder engagement

- The literature on Participation highlights the **need for effective participatory processes**, stakeholder engagement, inclusion of civil society and multi-stakeholder governance (top-down/bottom-up) (24, 79, 148, 228, 234, 300, 559, 576, 663, 664, 777).
- Research identifies ongoing tension between the **emphasis on formal scientific knowledge and the lack of consideration of local knowledge** in conservation efforts, which can undermine legitimacy (367, 663). This requires an understanding of power differentials and the barriers to participation for certain groups, which can remain, notwithstanding the establishment of collaborative governance mechanisms (300, 664, 777).
- The **implementation of Just Transition principles** in the Irish midlands faces challenges in terms of perceived discrepancy between "theory" and "practice", trust in the process, which was perceived as being 'top-down' and issues of justice (24, 559).
- The literature in this thematic area provides **empirical evidence of the importance of local communities and knowledge systems for the conservation of peatlands** and highlights the new values, cultures and meanings emerging around Irish peatlands (299, 367, 559, 705). This type of collective action requires urgent **recognition and resources** to support communities negotiating the transition to more sustainable futures.

Values shape conservation goals and outcomes

- **Values are crucial** in conservation and sustainable management **because they help define why we conserve, what we conserve, and how we go about conserving**, shaping motivations, priorities and approaches to protecting nature (79, 299).
- The Values theme highlights the **central role of human values in enabling sustainable peatland management** that integrates socio-cultural, environmental and economic values of peatlands (148, 150, 299, 663, 664, 705).

Engaging young people is a key pathway to transformative change

It is crucial to foster changes in how peatlands are valued across Irish society to secure support and action for their restoration, conservation and sustainable management. Values are the deeper, slower variables in a system that shape how landscapes are perceived and experienced, which in turn influences land use decision making and environmental stewardship at multiple scales (299, 301).

PEATLANDS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Key Research Findings (continued)

Community-based projects have the potential to increase social-ecological resilience and adaptive capacity of communities, animating the collective knowledge, skills, creativity, and networks of relationships that enable stewardship of peatlands (110, 300, 367).

Photo: Chris Uys

The Abbeyleix Bog Project meet to carry out conservation activities.

The Community Wetlands Forum (CWF) provides support to diverse groups involved in wetland conservation and sustainable management. The CWF network facilitates sharing of knowledge and best practice and provides mentoring and funding advice to communities (1006). Networks are vital for supporting community-based governance and building trust and mediating between organisations at different scales, often acting as catalysts for change in policy and institutions at higher levels (300, 554). The CWF is underpinned by community development values including participation, equity, partnership, and wise use of wetlands.

Values shape conservation outcomes (continued)

- Historically, **peatlands have been valued for their economic productivity,** aligned to technological advances, social progress and profit (65, 1026), with public subsidies often permitting or encouraging activities that are incompatible with sustainability of peatland ecosystems (79).
- Research has highlighted that **Ireland has applied a market-based approach to innovation/peatland innovation, at the expense of grassroots innovations** (559). Innovative grassroots projects support a diverse range of values and activities that enable stewardship and collective action (66, 148, 299).

Culture as catalyst for social change

- The theme of **Culture encompasses the visual arts, literature, music, heritage, tradition and folklore, as well as less visible aspects of human cultures including belief systems, values, ethics, shared meaning and worldviews** (79, 149, 273, 298, 299, 301, 540, 661, 663).
- **Peatlands and their biodiversity have deep cultural significance and value for many communities.** Cultural services related to recreation, ecotourism, education, tangible/intangible cultural heritage, history and spirituality are especially important for local communities, yet are under-represented in peatland conservation and management (301, 328).
- The **representation and coverage of peatlands in Irish print, visual, broadcast and online media has received little attention** (189), yet media can have a major influence on public debates and attitudes to peatland restoration/management and cultural narratives around peatlands (64).

Photo: CWF

Community Wetlands Forum event at Abbeyleix Bog

PEATLANDS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

How can we effectively address the societal and cultural dimensions of sustainable management of Irish peatlands?

Photo: Earth Horizon Productions

New cultural practices and activities at peatlands: Ecoeye (top) and school visit to Girley Bog, Co. Meath.

Respecting traditional culture and heritage is important, yet it is also critical to acknowledge the need for transformative change and the potential to create new cultural practices and traditions as legacies for future generations. Peatland communities around Ireland are transforming their relationship with peatlands and harnessing their potential as social spaces for health and wellbeing and learning contexts for building capacity and peatland literacy (299, 300).

- **Inclusive participation processes:** Improve and diversify the structures and processes for participation in peatland conservation, restoration, and management. Greater community agency, ownership and stewardship of landscapes should be encouraged via, for example, training and education in the skillsets required for peatland conservation & management, citizen science initiatives, community trusts and community land purchase.

- **Diverse stakeholder engagement:** Institutions and organisations in government and academia should develop a culture of early and inclusive stakeholder engagement in the planning of peatland management and restoration programs. Further research on stakeholder attitudes to peatlands and their management, to understand barriers to restoration and identify local conflicts, needs and perspectives.

- **Culture as catalyst:** Incorporate the social sciences, heritage, the arts and other cultural, creative and interdisicplinary approaches into peatland restoration and management.

- **Equitable partnerships and collaboration:** Develop new partnerships across sectors with civil society organisations and cultural institutions for effective and sustainable peatland management. This requires dealing with institutional barriers such as lack of capacity, staff and funding, and awareness that participatory approaches and building partnerships take time and effort but lead to long-term commitment, outcomes and benefits for people and peatlands.

Database

This factsheet is part of a series produced by Peat Hub Ireland (PHI). The reference numbers in brackets refer to individual publications in the PHI database which link to the original source of evidence. Use the QR codes to access the database or view research projects associated with the themes. All factsheets in the series are available on the PHI website.

Research Projects