Power to the Peatlands European Peatlands Conference, Antwerp, 19-21 September 2023

This landmark conference celebrated the end of the Interreg North-West Europe <u>Care-Peat</u> project and what delegates hope will be the continuation and beginning of new cooperative peatland projects throughout Europe. The conference was huge in scope with many parallel sessions, workshops, a lively poster session, and networking events. This overview provides a snapshot of some of the many peatland presentations, workshops and people who attended the conference. All the <u>conference</u> <u>abstracts are available to review at this link</u>.



Peat Hub Ireland presented in the session "*Restoration and conservation strategies and priority setting*", chaired by Dr. Terry Morley, alongside Irish projects Irish Peatland Resilience and the RePeat project. The presentation highlighted the importance of evidence synthesis for understanding current knowledge of Irish peatlands, highlighting knowledge gaps, informing future research agendas and providing recommendations for policy and decision-making. The poster session also featured the work of many Irish Early Career Researchers and Irish colleagues at projects such as AI2Peat, WaterLANDS, Wild Atlantic Nature and Peatlands and People.

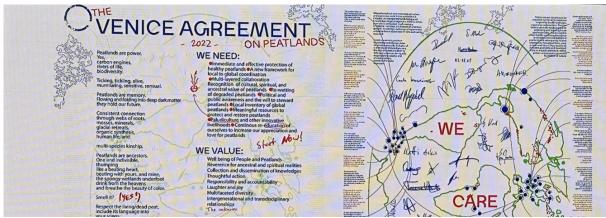


Irish Researchers at Power to the Peatlands. Photos: Elena Aitova, Terry Morley, Catherine Farrell.

Prof. Hans Joosten, University of Greifswald, Germany, Keynote speaker, began by reminding us of the temporality of peatland landscapes and our perceptions of them: "We don't see the past as it was, but as we are" (Ger Harmsen). He highlighted the incompleteness of historical sources and the subjectivity of the interpreter when we look to the past, which we must do to understand peatlands in the present. Furthermore, we are all products of culture and are influenced by particular times, places and ideologies. In Ireland, the past and its strong cultural traditions have often constrained transformational change. But **culture can also be a force for positive change**, enabling adaptation and leading us away from ideologies of over-consumption towards more collaborative values.

<u>Natuurpunt</u> presented their experiences of how volunteers and businesses make a big difference to their work. Conservation, restoration and management of nature is their core business and they are supported by 45,000 volunteers and 550 employees. Similarly, **scaling up peatland employment in Ireland** and better supporting volunteers on the ground would lead to faster action for peatlands.

A workshop on the 'Sensing Peat' project was held with Ulrike Gerhardt, Michael Succow Foundation on future development of the Venice Agreement. The latter is a document combining politics and poetics that recognises the cultural, spiritual and ancestral value of peatlands. A key message was that **peatland restoration brings cultural renewal.** The WaterLANDS project presented their innovative <u>artistic engagement residency programme</u> and the Re-Peat collective reminded us to rebuild our relationship with peatlands and confront challenging topics including our collective and individual grief/eco-anxiety when we witness peatland degradation and other environmental losses.



The Venice Agreement. Available: https://turbatol.org/venice-agreement.html

Dianna Kopansky, Keynote speaker, presented some of the key findings of the <u>Global Peatlands</u> <u>Assessment</u> including that **88% of remaining peatlands need urgent protection** and sustainable management. Another key message - the benefits will always exceed the cost of protecting peatlands.

Lessons from ten years of the PeatRus project included the **crucial importance of landscape thinking**, the need to include economic and social drivers, and how to deal with activities blocked by stakeholders. Restoration should be approached as any business project with feasibility, engineering, monitoring and assessment, and building knowledge and capacity for peatland restoration.

Dr. Richard Lindsay, the first keynote speaker on Day 2, spoke of the invisibility of peatlands, both culturally and politically and how difficult it is to value peatlands when the stuff they are made of is literally hidden underground. He reminded us that **time is an important part of the peatland restoration toolkit** but so many research projects are short-term in peatland years. We need to allow the system to heal and develop its own trajectory towards recovery over longer timescales.

Dr. Catherine Farrell, the second keynote speaker, gave us a wide-ranging presentation with key messages including: **Peatlands have layers of complexity, Policy matters, People matter** and can drive change, Nature is not on the clock, there are choices in restoration, we need to communicate better, and more often with all stakeholders, make restoration work for people and nature and **celebrate peatlands and peatland culture**. A handy summary of this inspiring keynote can be found in this <u>tweet</u>.

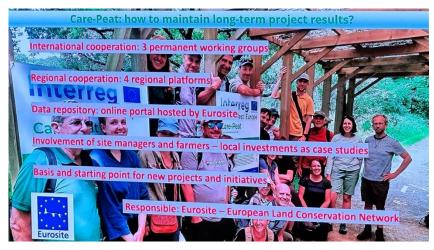
Sophie Hirschelmann, speaking on behalf of the Greifswald Mire Centre, discussed the policy-practice nexus and the scale of the work needed in Germany to reach EU climate targets. The Centre takes a strategic approach to engaging with policy and decision-makers, analysing peatland policies and illustrating practical problems by, for example, bringing policy-makers on field trips to rewetted and

paludiculture sites. This helps **build trust, understanding and cooperation and highlights policy gaps** with respect to sustainable use of peatlands. The centre also carries out social science and legal research to examine the barriers to implementing peatland rewetting and how to speed up planning and permissions for rewetting projects, providing valuable lessons for the Irish context.

Another presentation of relevance to Ireland was about the <u>Dutch Peat Covenant</u>, a national reduction plan for peat use in the Netherlands. Peat was a non-topic in the Netherlands in 2021 but change happened quickly and a broad group of representatives from horticulture, politics, science and civil society came together in 2022 to sign the covenant. The Netherlands will become the first European country where the substrate industry will report annual production figures and ingredients lists will be mandatory for substrate bags and also potentially for the compost used in plants. Although currently there is no penalty for non-compliance, Dutch covenants do have political weight. **Perhaps a Peat Proclamation could be drawn up to tackle similar issues in Ireland** as we move towards peatfree growing media for the horticulture sector.

The <u>Peat Mothership</u> project called for **scientific consensus** to: achieve purposeful mapping and monitoring of peatland condition and state shifts, realise consistent definitions of peat/non-peat and have consistent condition classifiers that include all factors. They also called for an awareness of potential uses (and misuses) of payments for ES and sounded a caution - **peat is a commodity** again, in Scotland and elsewhere, and carbon credits are affecting land values.

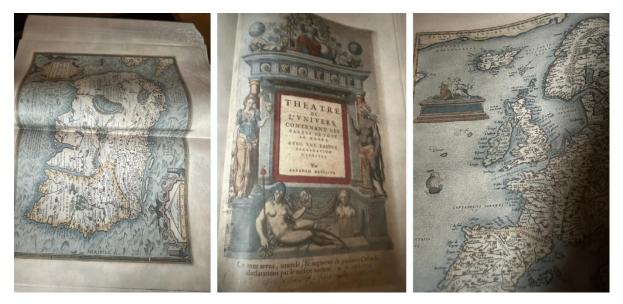
We heard from a wide variety of other projects too including: **Sphagnum paludiculture** projects saving carbon compared to grassland use on drained organic soils, **measuring peat depth** with geophysics and multiple sensors, the <u>Alfa Wetlands</u> Living Labs approach, future plans for the Care Peat team (Image below), the European Peatlands Initiative and the difficult situation for NGOs which have been closed in **Belarus** since the war, and where there is now a renewed drive to drain peatlands.



Every research project should have a plan for how to maintain results, co-operation and networks into the future

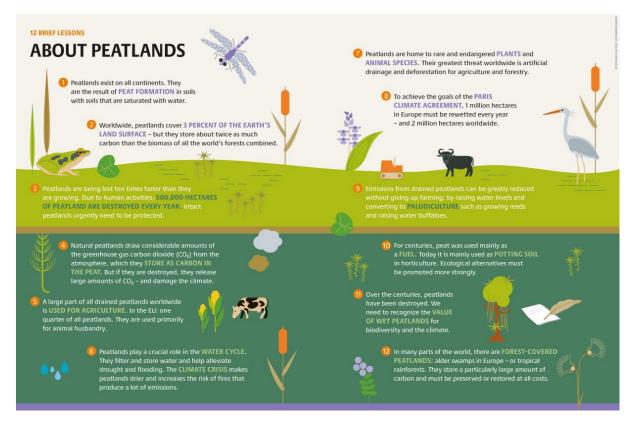
Finally, a visit to the UNESCO World Heritage <u>Museum Plantin-Moretus</u> in Antwerp was a fascinating look at the emergence of book printing in Europe (yes there is a connection to peatlands!). It houses the only printing workshop and publishing house dating back to the 16th century in existence. Science developed at a remarkable speed with the advent of book publishing and the scientific age of discovery began in earnest when scientists could share their findings with each other and the wider world. The museum featured many key figures in the history of human knowledge, including Abraham Ortelius, inventor of the atlas and first to observe continental drift. The atlas, dating from 1570, brought maps of the world together in one format and was called Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, or the <u>Theatre of the</u>

<u>World</u>. It was ornamented with meaningful signs and symbols of the time to create a visual language to improve understanding of the maps.



The Theatre of the World Atlas. Website: <u>https://museumplantinmoretus.be/</u> Photos: K.Flood

Continuing the tradition 450 years later, the <u>Peatland Atlas 2023</u> provides facts, figures and maps in an accessible and highly visual format, clearly demonstrating to a broad audience the urgency of protecting and rewetting peatlands and showing possibilities for how politics and society can act. An **Irish Peatland Atlas** aimed at policy makers and the wider public would be a valuable tool for broader societal understanding and appreciation of the many values of peatlands.



About Peatlands – 12 Brief Lessons. Source: <u>Heinrich Böll Stiftung website</u>