

Peatland restoration and the historic environment in Scotland: a perceived climate/culture conflict

Peatland restoration is high on the international agenda, and across the UK extensive targets for restoration are being set by all governments (national and devolved), exceeding 320,000ha by 2030. Overall, this development is positive as restoration can safeguard and enhance biodiversity, ecosystem service provision, and carbon storage/sequestration. Restoration has been brought to prominence by increasing understanding of the quantity of carbon held in global peatlands, how the degraded nature of global peatlands puts carbon stocks at risk, the cost-effective opportunities that restoration offers for reducing CO₂ emissions from decaying vegetal matter, and the potential to return global peatlands to active carbon sinks.



Eroded peat surfaces at Ben Alder exposing sub-peat forests. Credit: T Gardner

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Ditch-blocking in process. Credit: Peatland ACTION project, NatureScot

However, ambitious restoration targets, and restoration techniques that range from low impact (seeding eroded surfaces) to highly invasive (sub-surface bunding), can pose risks to peatland cultural heritage. Archaeological and palaeoecological records, historic cultural associations, place names and folklore are intrinsically bound into peatland landscapes. Human activity over millennia has left indelible marks, with prehistoric and historic drainage, and peat-cutting, beginning long-term degradation of ecosystems leading to the need for modern intervention. Despite this, peatland cultural heritage can be rich and well-preserved, the anaerobic nature of histosols preserving organic archaeological material absent from other ecosystems. Damage to this record, either through ongoing degradation or directly through unmitigated restoration procedures, is unconscionable.

As peatland restoration is currently government funded, policymakers are increasingly asked to comment and legislate in these arenas, often from positions of perceived conflict. Do we restore, and risk damaging cultural heritage assets, or do we attempt to preserve assets in their current state, and target efforts to reduce CO₂ emissions elsewhere, which may be more expensive? The answer has almost invariably been the former, but while the perceived risk to cultural heritage assets has been recognised by many governments, few mitigation strategies have been implemented.

However, new work undertaken by Historic Environment Scotland (HES) is beginning to show the

benefits for cultural heritage that could stem from restoration. The sectoral position is increasingly to measure and recognise benefits, while limiting potential for damage, rather than to stand in the way. Benefits are critical for both those restoring peatlands and those seeking to protect heritage:

- 1 Archaeological material in degrading peatlands is already at risk of deflation and erosion, including loss of organic deposits, and 80 per cent of UK peatlands are degraded, meaning 80 per cent of peatland archaeology could be put at risk. Restoration aims to reduce the severity and ultimately reverse this process, stabilising peatlands and any archaeology they contain.
- 2 Having a system of archaeological oversight and mitigation in place reduces operational risk for restoration projects, which could waste public funds through interacting with archaeological sites unnecessarily.
- 3 Restoration projects actively working in peatland landscapes can, when archaeological oversight is in place, lead to new discoveries; for example, in the Scottish Highlands an undocumented stone row and two rock art panels have been discovered and reported by Peatland ACTION in the past four months and are now under consideration by HES for designation.

The Scottish government has set a legally binding target of restoring 250,000ha of degraded peatlands by 2030, with a £250,000,000 price tag. This work, undertaken by Peatland ACTION, is now being supported by HES with technical advice and training, aiming to smooth the way for restoration by upskilling the sector, while providing a robust level of screening provision under Permitted Development Rights (PDR). Draft ALGAO Scotland guidance will become a key part of the PDR process, ensuring that ecological practitioners have appropriate advice when scoping projects, and setting out how best to mitigate risks to heritage assets.

A planned ClfA Conference session in April 2022 aims to bring together specialists on the subject to discuss skills shortages and policy issues, and ClfA is keen to collate training materials for all involved. Alongside the support of Peatland ACTION and ALGAO, HES is taking real and immediate steps based on our [Climate Action Plan](#); publishing a Position Statement on peatland restoration in 2022, phasing out peat-based composts in supply chains, and developing Landscape Management Plans for HES Properties in Care. Into

2022/23 HES will be contributing a chapter to Scotland's revised National Peatland Plan, continuing our representation on the National Peatland Group, and coordinating the formation of both a UK Heritage Agency working group on the issue and an International Joint Working Group on Peatland Cultural Heritage sitting under the IUCN and the Global Peatlands Initiative.

Peatland restoration is here to stay and is critical for limiting CO2 emissions. We as a sector need to support our ecologist colleagues in aiming for ambitious targets, while protecting cultural heritage in these critical landscapes. The perceived climate/culture conflict in peatlands is only real if we fail to engage properly, and in Scotland we are determined to add value and enable, rather than stand in the way.



Newly identified rock art panel in Sutherland © Gearoid Murphy, Peatland ACTION Project, NatureScot

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