



The Future of the Irish Bog

Ciara Murphy, Environmental Policy Advocate at the Jesuit centre for Faith and Justice, looks at the role bogs have played in Irish culture and history, and their ongoing environmental and cultural significance.



In Seamus Heaney's poem, 'Bogland', he explores the role of the Irish environment in shaping the country's culture. The 'kind, black butter' of Irish peatlands were, to Heaney, a rich and complex source of inspiration for his writing.

Ireland's bogs are more than a distinctive feature of the landscape; they are a part of our identity. Restoring them is important for biodiversity, cultural and ecological significance, as well as in the fight against climate chaos.

The natural world is a silent witness

to a culture's past and traditions, and a source of social, political and cultural rejuvenation. Part of our cultural identity is disappearing with these ecosystems, which alongside the role we now acknowledge bogs play in the climate emergency, has led to the importance and active purpose of our bogs being reconsidered.

Far from being wastelands, bogs are important wetlands that provide refuge to plant, bird and insect species. The peat soils that make up bogs accumulate and store millions of tonnes of carbon, playing an important role in

regulating greenhouse gas emissions. Their ability to store vast amounts of water also makes them a vital ecosystem that can help buffer the worst of the impacts of climate change, including flooding and drought.

Unfortunately, the historical perception that bogs were only useful when drained or burned has resulted in their widespread destruction with very few left in Ireland in good condition.

Peat extraction, for energy and horticulture, draining for agriculture and tree plantations, reclamation for development, burning and over-grazing have all taken their toll on this fragile environment. Draining bogs destroys the natural hydrology of these ecosystems, removing their ability to store water. This has contributed to widespread flooding that is now common in Ireland, led to widespread erosion and reduced the ecological health of these systems. The landslides that were observed in Donegal in November 2020 are a dramatic example of the environmental destruction that can be wrought when these systems are not respected.

Draining and drying out bogs also exposes the carbon rich peat soil to the air. This allows the peat to decompose, which releases huge amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and provides ready fuel for wildfires. The changing soil conditions lead to changes in plant and animal species; we can no longer expect to experience the kind of biodiversity that was familiar to previous generations.

While the current situation seems bleak, there is hope for our peatlands.

Restoration and rewetting can reverse this trend, leading to reduced carbon emissions with knock-on benefits for flood control and biodiversity. Abbey-leix Bog Project in Co. Laois is one such example where a community-led project can lead to incredible results.

This mismanagement of bogs typifies what Pope Francis tells us in *Laudato Si'* that 'Caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness, since no one looking for a quick and easy profit is truly interested in preservation. But the cost of the damage caused by such selfish lack of concern is much greater than the economic benefits to be obtained' (LS, 36).

While this is undoubtedly true, we can't ignore the fact that a transition away from peat extraction will result in widespread change in the midlands where whole towns rely on the carbon rich soil for their economy. The transition away from peat extraction into ecosystem restoration needs an integral ecology approach that leaves no community behind. Employing people to restore and rehabilitate these degraded ecosystems, as well as investing in alternative employment, needs to be an integral part of this transition.

This network of restored bogs could also help reignite our interest in the biodiversity and the cultural and ecological significance of peatlands. Our bogs are more than a source of non-renewable energy; our history is steeped within their depths. Protecting and restoring their natural structure and function must be the next iteration of our relationship with them. 