



## The cultural value of peatlands

Peatlands occur in all humid areas of the world. In Europe, the degradation status of peatlands is very severe. Around one half of all peatland areas no longer accumulate peat. In densely populated Germany, only about one percent of raised bogs as the most threatened type of peatlands is still in an intact state.

The ecosystem services approach has helped to increase awareness about the states of peatlands on a political level and in the general public. Much knowledge on the climate regulation function of peatlands has been generated in recent years. Since 2012, the Kyoto protocol allows accounting for the reduction of greenhouse gas emission from peatland rewetting.

The Millenium Ecosystem Service Assessment (2005) defines four different categories of ecosystem services: regulating services, provisioning services, supporting services and cultural services. In contrast to the high number of research publications on ecological functions of peatlands and subsequent benefits to humans (relating especially to supporting and regulating services), only very few studies have addressed the cultural value (or 'cultural services') of peatlands. Within the BIOMOT project, case studies on peatland protection initiatives were conducted in four countries: The life project 'Ardenne Liégeoise' in Belgium, the 'Sustainable Catchment Management Programm' (SCaMP) in the UK, the MoorFutures-initiative in Germany and a citizen initiative on the protection of the Viirusuo mire in Finland. Five to thirteen actors per case study with different interests in the respective initiatives were interviewed. Additionally, in depth interviews have been conducted in Germany with two persons engaged in the protection of peatlands: A peatland researcher and activist and a representative of a peat mining company developing new strategies for a sustainable use of degraded raised bogs. What is the cultural value of peatlands according to the interviewees?

### Recreation and contemplation

Peatlands were described as important spaces for hiking, skiing, fishing, hunting, mushroom and berry picking and meditation. Interviewees were touched by the beauty of the landscape. A landowner agreed with the rewetting of his area mainly because of financial compensation, and he was happy with the development of the area after the restoration process: *"Another positive result is that a beautiful area has developed, this year I have seen about 2000 cranes there!"*

The representative of the peat mining company explained that he has no problems to mine peat in a degraded bog. However he would have personal difficulties to touch an intact mire: *"You are impressed by the beauty of such a living mire, you are impressed by its vastness, by the hydrology of such a mire"* (peat cutter). More than just appreciating the aesthetics and wilderness of peatlands, the vastness of these landscapes also offered spaces for retreat: *"When I had difficulties, then I took a walk in the peatlands"* (peatland activist).

### Peatlands as contemporary witnesses

Everything that is lost in the peat is overgrown by peat mosses and stored for eternity, if not excavated by land users or archeologists. Pollen in different peat layers originating from vegetation in history provides information on human activities and ecological processes in the past. But they do not only deliver data. They are also landscapes in which humans fought against each other in times of war. The peatland activist had read a lot about the battles that had taken place in the peatlands

he was working in: *“this sadness of peatlands, [...] that is probably important that I experience it in this landscape”* (peatland activist).

### **Peatlands as consultants**

If you study peatlands, you inevitably learn about time dimensions. The peatland activist transferred this knowledge to his own activities for society: *“that is one aspect that we do not understand fully, time [...] and many things can only be understood when you think in the long-term and make strategic plans, for example for this area we did a plan as a protection group where we want to be in 50 years.”* (peatland activist).

### **Peatlands arouse curiosity**

All ecologists interviewed in the case studies were fascinated by the ecological processes taking place in peatland ecosystems. Curiosity on these processes can also be aroused in lay people: *“It was very interesting, the [...] hole, because you could see the profile. [...] the sward, and this black [...] soil [...] and subjacent this sponge [...] with a structure easy to identify. This was very interesting I have to say”* (owner of a restored peatland area).

### **Peatland regions as homelands**

In all countries, interviewees referred to their attachment or that of other people to specific peatlands. In Finland, a typical Finnish scent was attributed to these landscapes. In the uplands of the UK, these landscapes are the places where sheep farmers have developed their traditional ways of land-use. In Belgium and Finland, peatland protectors were engaged also because they had grown up in that region, or they had chosen to live in that region because it resembled the region they originated from. The representative of the peat mining company had grown up in a peat mining family that had lived and worked there for generations. He became aware of the finiteness of peat resources and he felt responsible for the areas that had been cultivated by his company.

Knowledge on the uniqueness of landscapes with intact mires even increased their valuation by the interviewees: *“And this (a living mire) is a special kind of landscape, that one grieves about, we do not have it any more in northern Germany”* (peat cutter). *“For us the peatland was so normal that one cannot cherish it. Because everywhere you look is peatland one thinks that this is not rare. So I had to go study further away to [name of town] to understand what we have at home. And that is why I understand the people who live here in the peatland but cannot appreciate it. Because it is always there and normal things in a daily life are not special”* (peatland activist).

Summarizing the characteristics the interviewees attribute to peatlands we can say that these landscapes are representatives of old knowledge and places of identity, they are spaces of tranquility and stability; things that many people are searching for in our fast-paced world and important reasons to protect them...

(This Findings for All was written by Nathalie Soethe, Almut Beringer, Juha Hiedanpää, Pekka Jokinen, Florin Popa, Outi Ratamäki, Tiina Soininen, Jose Luis Vivero Pol about data that was gathered by the whole BIOMOT team.)

### *References:*

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