The way that I went: reminiscences of a Peatnik

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Great Bog of Allen swallow down
That heap of muck called Philipstown
And if thy mor can swallow more
Then take and relish Tullamore.

The Boora complex of peatlands which stretched from the Shannon estuary almost to Dublin is no more. The great Bog of Allen has itself been swallowed up by the gourmands of Philipstown, Tullamore and the Irish economy in their need for electricity.

So begins my Ph.D. thesis, *Ecological Studies on some European Mires*. Half a century on I will lend you my hearing aid.

With a copy of Robert Lloyd Pager's *The Way That I Went* in my fist and the fire of Tullamore Dew in my belly I will take you back through half a century's wandering through the mires of the world and on into a bright future for peatlands and their many virtues. My introduction to the wonders and the problems of peatland was when as I read *The Girl of the Limberlost* by Gene Stratton Porter, a natural historian and authoress whose books sold in their millions back in the early years of the last century. This somewhat smoltzy story is set in Indiana during the period when forests and wetlands began to be destroyed willy-nilly to make way for the potentials of intensive agriculture that came complete with the problems of dustbowls and the great depression. Please remember that during the Second World War Winston Churchill warned that we must keep the sea lanes open because even in my childhood Britain relied for much of its staple food from the wheat belts of America and Canada .

Arthur Ransome's *Coot Club* and *The Big Six* were for me two seminal books about children confronted with the budding package holiday syndrome doing their best to save the wildlife of the Norfolk Broads. Lloyd Praeger's books followed naturally on, as did the vast knowledge and good council of Father John Moore, master of *viva voca* and phytosociology. We walked together at the time that the only Irish location of *Scheuchzeria palustris* was destroyed by the unsustainable use of The Great Bog of Allen. The sad remnants of which still surround this place, waiting patiently for a new role in a sustainable natural history of Ireland.

The current rate of destruction of the world's ecosystems and the structured organic soils and natural history (biodiversity in modern speak) that go with them is horrendous. This is all part of the continuing chain saw and bulldozer massacres on land and the gross over-fishing of the world's marine and fresh water resources. These are today so out of control that the loss of the species-rich solar-powered ecosystems that used to keep the lonely planet in kilter is taking a dreadful toll.

The next great extinction is happening before our very laptops, not because of man-made global warming but because of the past 7 decades of habitat and lifestyle destruction. At the moment perhaps the worst case peatland destruction scenario is that of the Kampar Bog in central Sarawak. Fred Pearce reported in *New Scientist* that 'The bog baron despoilers of Indonesia's swamp forests now want to be paid to staunch the flow of carbon from the exposed peat by rehabilitating the bogs once they have destroyed them.'

A not-so-new twist in the sad story of carbon trading, which already peddles indulgencies so that companies and even nations can flaunt their inefficiencies in the use of fossil fuels in the halls of the money lenders.

Little wonder that Pope Benedict XVI launched a surprise attack on climate change prophets of doom, warning them that any solutions to global warming must be based on firm evidence and not on dubious ideology. Fred Pearce, again in *New Scientist*, October 2006 'More crops for Africa as trees reclaim the desert in the Sahara. Where 20 years ago there was barely a tree and starvation made the headlines in our broadsheets there are now 50 to a hundred per hectare covering an area of 300,000 square kilometers. Production of cereals such as millet and sorghum has soared by between 20 and 85% and vegetable production has quadrupled'.

No mention of the many peer reviewed papers that show that, as the concentration of atmospheric CO_2 increases, plants can regulate water loss by closing their stomata and continue to grow faster. Nor the fact that Carbon dioxide is the most important air-borne fertiliser and has been since the time of the first photosynthetic organisms.

What is more, the rise in a mere 0.7°C, which drives the global warming fraternity into a frenzy of doom and gloom, distils around a billion tonnes of water into the atmosphere which must fall somewhere. Whatever the BBC says, over the past two years large parts of Africa have had good rains. There is also good evidence based on over 100 years of river monitoring that these are linked to multi-decadal solar cycles.

Despite their rules on impartiality the BBC has pushed global warming rhetoric year on year. Take for instance their insistence that the wetlands of Africa are drying because of carbon induced global warming. Never a mention of the fact that the destruction of those wetlands and blocking their outflows with dams to facilitate the growing of cut flowers, vegetables and salads for export is the main culprit.

This practice has recently been castigated by the activists, not for stressing the sustainability of the local water supply but for food miles to get them to Europe.

Now the most important coastal wetlands in Kenya and the main bird flyways that depend on them are threatened with massive irrigated sugar production that will end up as ethanol. This much hyped bio-fuel is some 30% less efficient than oil and contains water that rots engines.

The much lauded shockaholic movie of Al Gore stated among 34 other examples of dodgy science that the desiccation of the Aral Sea was due to global warming, not to the unsustainable production of irrigated cotton. At least in England the showing of this film is now banned unless the other side of the argument is presented in our schools. Who was it that changed our school texts *to lie* that carbon dioxide is the main greenhouse gas when real measurements, not computer-based scenarios put water vapour way out at the head of the list?

Before I get too cross let's find some solace in the record of climate change locked up in our peat deposits and taught in Universities since 1876 onwards.

- The end of the last Ice Age (or was it?), made human occupation in Ireland less of a hassle.
- Roman wine produced in York – of course all that fermentation may have made Eboracum an urban heat island.
- The Medieval warm period saw the blooming of civilisations across the world.
- The Little Ice Age which turned more of the margins of Greenland white again, wiped out the crops of barley, sheep and cattle along with the Norse settlers.
- The destruction of great chunks of the peatland record, by the rights and wrongs of turbary.
- The creation of the multi-million dollar holiday resource we now call the Norfolk Broads, while providing fuel to keep those suffering from ague warm.
- Malaria, by any other name was then endemic across Europe right up into Siberia. We can only guess who wrote Al Gore's script.
- Maunder had his minimum and Good Queen Bess the Second witnessed the coldest winter and the hottest summer in her wedding year.

Later Michael Mann, the IPCC and the *Guardian* did hatchet jobs on all this evidence by cherry picking 1850 as the official end of the little Ice Age as the base line for their now completely discredited hockey stick model. Please note that all it is, is a model bent by GIGO.

While, to dot this international scam, they have not even bothered to publicise the fact that for almost a decade the world's average temperature has not risen despite the fact that 250Gt of CO_2 has poured into the atmosphere during that time.

However back to sanity via one of my favourite bog plants *Scheuchzeria palustris,* now sadly down to one location in Britain and lost from Ireland. Not because of Mann (please note the double NN) but because of drainage and massive eutrophication of ever more bogs.

Once you have got over the post 1970s arguments regarding regeneration complexes, acrotelems, wind-induced bog bursts and the like you will find many papers in peer-reviewed journals indicating that climate change really is in control when it comes to bog growth. Wet and cool periods speed the growth of peat along with a spread of plants like *Scheuchzeria, Rhynchospora* and *Carex limosa.* Warm and dry slow them down. It is almost as simple as that.

I rest my case on the evidence from the bogs, though I do worry that at the present rate of destruction there may not be enough active pristine bogs left to take down the evidence. Many of our bog reserves are rapidly moving towards tree-covered climax so perhaps they could do with a bit of digging although sustainable harvesting is not within the compass of any government's term of office.

The good news is that the bogs of the Limberlost are being rewetted and rehabilitated as are many other peatlands across the world.