



# Social and community dimensions in cutaway peatland policy

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## Summary

Industrial scale harvesting of Irish peatlands has been described both as a technical challenge and a socio-economic opportunity. While these are widely discussed, and thus better understood, a third issue, the relationship of local communities to cutaway peatlands, is less so. Throughout history, peatlands were 'developed' in order to help alleviate unemployment in disadvantaged regions, and this driver is a key influencer of policy and outcomes. But as the resource exploitation in Ireland approaches completion, the new challenges beyond wise use are now being posed: should we conserve some of the endowment undeveloped? Should we restore the cutaway so as to provide recreation and amenity, and other environmental services? How should national policy and local and community policies be reconciled? As part of the transdisciplinary Irish Bogland Project, these dimensions have been examined. Using a combination of focus groups, national and local surveys, and personal interviewing new light has been shed on the social-ecological interface in cutaway peatland areas. In this paper, we will review the relevant literature, and report our methodologies and findings, including the implications for policy.

**Key index words:** Social-ecological, Methodology, Community, Policy, Symbiotic planning.

## Introduction

There has been growing interest in the inter-relationship between humans and ecology in recent years, with much emphasis being placed on linking social-ecological systems and models proposed of how this may be realised (Berkes and Folke, 1998). However, the bulk of research on social-ecological interfaces is based on traditional or aboriginal cultures located in landscapes of high biodiversity importance (West and Brechin, 1991) and this has resulted in the concept of adaptive co-management in these areas (Borrini-Feyerabend *et al.*, 2004). Within this, it is recognised that social and cultural values are central to the conservation of existing habitats (Aronson *et al.*, 2006; Burke and Mitchell, 2007) and the restoration of damaged habitats (Gobster and Hull, 2000; Hobbs, 2004). It is further postulated that by restoring damaged and degraded habitats people can gain just as much, spiritually, socially and intellectually, as the habitats that are being restored may, ecologically. Higgs (2003) refers to this interconnection as 'focal' restoration and there is much discussion on the topic with the focus of research being in case study analysis (Jordan, 2000). At the same time, the degree of success of place-based policy implementation is seen as being dependant upon the extent of local democracy (governance) and level of inclusiveness (Swanson, 2001). Devising policies for the afteruse of industrially cutaway peatlands is

an imperative, because until now the process has been carried out on an *ad hoc* basis. This is unsustainable, unmanageable, unpredictable and vulnerable to abuse. There is therefore a *symbiotic planning* opportunity for both restoring natural capital, i.e. honouring Ireland's biodiversity commitments (CBD, 1992), and augmenting social capital in rural landscapes, i.e. honouring Ireland's governance and landscape commitments (Council of Europe, 2000). It is symbiotic because both have positive interrelationships, which, in addition to methodological description, is the focus of this paper.

## Materials and Methods

The technical and ecological aspects of peatland restoration are largely understood and relate to the restoration of hydrological functions and the maintenance of peat accumulation conditions. Much less is known of the social and economic variables which are of extreme significance in the rural landscapes of Ireland where peat harvesting has a central position in the character of local communities, especially in the industrially harvested landscapes of the Irish midlands (Feehan and O'Donovan, 1996). This study sought to establish, for the first time, how people view industrial peatlands in Ireland with a view to establishing a policy protocol for their afteruse. Understanding the perceptions of community members towards a peatland



landscape is a challenge, since there are many ways that people perceive the landscape – for example, visually, aurally or psychologically. In order to ascertain the perceptions of peatlands that might best facilitate the creation of policies for afteruse it was necessary to establish: 1.) the opinions of stakeholders on all levels of interest (professional, local, national) and 2.) the best mechanisms for eliciting opinion objectively. Social research utilises two central methods of analysis – quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is a deductive approach derived from a positivist epistemological orientation and an objective ontology; whereas qualitative research is largely inductive and derives from an interpretative epistemological orientation with a constructivist ontology (Bryman, 2001, p. 20). It was decided that there was a need to utilise a variety of sociological methods within a multi-disciplinary framework. These were:

- Targeted interviews with key stakeholders from the mining industry, academia, business interests, farmers, community development workers, tourism interests, politicians, local NGO's and local authorities (Qualitative)
- Randomised and targeted focus group meetings and round table discussions (Qualitative)
- Targeted, ethnographic analysis of residents in remote peatland landscapes (Qualitative)
- Local and national questionnaire surveys (Quantitative)

The analysis of each of these studies contains more information than space permits, but in combining research data, as this paper will now report, a high degree of convergence was noticed.

## Results

From interviews with targeted key stakeholders it was discovered that the most favoured afteruse of cutaway peatlands was a combination of biodiversity and local / national amenity. It was possible to build a concise picture of the degree of potential success that the amenity/biodiversity afteruse option may have based on the willingness of expert stakeholders to participate and their expert knowledge of theory and practice. An overwhelming theme in this part of the survey was the level of personal enthusiasm in this afteruse option and the degree of concern for clear policies, planning strategies and non-exclusion of technical stakeholders. Wise afteruse of damaged peatlands requires consideration of numerous variables, the most prominent being technical, where the knowledge of some stakeholders is strong and experience-based (though on limited case studies). Knowledge of ecological, social and economic variables was seen to be poor. Expectations of local community consultation / participation follow closely the top-down, expert-driven model and rarely the inclusive or collaborative model, as discussed by Healey (2006). Finally, institutional representatives are willing to participate in an ecological afteruse option, and many have considered opinion. This could, naturally, benefit their (ecological / biodiversity) goals, professionally, but most were unwilling or unable to divulge specific actions, to identify what their

role may be or to what extent they would be willing to participate.

Group research was conducted in order to gain insight into the concerns of the communities in peatland areas as well as their willingness to participate in an afteruse strategy, via interpersonal communication. Analysis of focus group data also yielded strong amenity and biodiversity dialogues as the desirable and wise afteruse option, in terms of local communities. Unlike many of the professional stakeholders, community consultations with randomly selected group participants, as well as concerned voluntary community organisations, yielded a wider variety of sociological issues and many specific ones. Themes here revolved around waste management, planning and developmental issues, water and air quality, tourism and health. With respect to the peatlands, the amenity option was stronger as there was considerable concern over health, recreation, tourism and sports opportunities locally. Most participants expressed the desire to assist with 'wildness' afteruse of industrial peatlands. Strong scepticism was recorded in relation to landscape planning, management and sincerity of the expert stakeholders, with many participants indicating that any lack of sincerity or weakness of policies, would affect their willingness to participate and support.

From the ethnographic research the focus group data were supported, with local communities being concerned with what will happen once peatland harvesting ceases. Many were frustrated by the lack of amenity opportunities in their area and there was an overwhelming desire, again, for 'wildness', which is a phrase that continually arises in place of 'biodiversity' and 'wilderness'. Health and welfare, recreation and leisure activities also featured proximately as did 'green' issues such as air / water quality, energy and wildlife. Tradition and heritage featured prominently in all ethnographic research, which was to be expected of people-place relationships in peatland landscapes. Willingness to participate was strongest among these participants, which is perhaps not surprising given that this aspect of the overall study specifically targeted people who may have close cultural associations with, and physical proximity to, peatlands. However, most were fearful that the amenity and biodiversity option would not be able to supersede other, industrial afteruses such as energy crops or wind farming and that corrupt planning and politicians would produce poor afteruse policies. Presented with that scenario, these participants would still participate in afteruse planning, in supportive as well as unsupportive roles, depending on whether options were favoured or not, respectively. This willingness to participate is an indicator of the high level of social capital located, in this case, within peatland landscapes (see Collier and Scott, 2008).

Nationwide, randomised surveys yielded much data on relationships of Irish people, in general, towards peatlands. An overwhelming number indicated that the Irish Government was not doing enough to protect peatlands. Personal knowledge of peatland functions was better than hypothesised with a high statistical correlation between respondent location and knowledge of peatlands. Afteruse issues again centred on the themes of ecology and amenity,



reinforcing the earlier data discussed above. Willingness to participate in favoured afteruse options (mainly amenity or 'green' industry) exceeded current levels of volunteering. This would indicate that industrial peatlands have a high social-ecological potential, as hypothesised.

## Discussion

Ecological variables in the restoration of cutaway peatlands are largely understood in the Irish landscape, though specific trajectories may not be known due to differences in local climatic conditions, residual peat, hydrology, availability of diaspores and sub-peatland geology. Abandonment studies have shown that cutaway peatlands have a high potential for natural regeneration with likelihood for high ecological success. Until now, sociological studies in cutaway peatlands did not exist and it was not possible to establish people-place relationships in these landscapes. The multi-methodological approach used in this study indicates that cutaway peatlands have, if used for amenity and biodiversity purposes, a high likelihood for success if all stakeholder opinions are considered at an early stage in the process and if policies reflect and address community issues. The degree of willingness to participate may be indicative of a high level of social capital in these peatland areas and that afteruse participation may augment communities. While many observers have indicated that the participation of local or indigenous stakeholders is essential for successful conservation strategies, it is illustrated here that there is a willingness to participate in a conservation / restoration strategy for habitats that do not exist as yet. This may address issues of integrating social concerns in restoration ecology (Hobbs, 2007) and illustrates what is loosely described as the social amenity value of cutaway peatlands (Joosten and Clarke, 2002, p. 83).

In using an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of landscape change, there is an opportunity to establish a baseline for future studies and to create an awareness of the high potential of post-industrial landscapes to become areas of high social-ecological value. This may be best achieved utilising an interactive or participatory planning model (Selman, 2006) combined with holistic landscape planning and rehabilitation (Naveh, 1998). In linking key stakeholder interviews, focus group research and ethnographic research with objective questionnaire surveys, this study may be described as having achieved a high degree of triangulation. This means that truthful perceptions may have been gathered and thus a more rounded view of damaged landscapes, specifically harvested peatland landscapes, has been established. This will greatly aid in the creation of related policy instruments that ought to include a symbiotic planning inter-relationship. Such policies ought to reflect the level of concern among communities over vested interests and the lack of planning strategies, which, in turn, may result in non-collaborative participation.

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