

# PEATLANDS, ECONOMY AND CONSERVATION

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Edited by  
M.G.C. Schouten and M.J. Nooren

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*Foundation for Conservation of Irish Bogs*



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*World Wide Fund for Nature of the Netherlands*



Staatsbosbeheer

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*National Forest Service of the Netherlands*



Vereniging tot Behoud van Natuurmonumenten in Nederland

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*Society for Conservation of Nature Monuments in the Netherlands*



Irish Peatland Conservation Council



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## PREFACE

Because of the economic value which peatlands have as a source of energy, the area of the world's bogs has greatly diminished. In certain regions, such as north-western Europe, few peatlands remain intact and over those sites which have not been turned into nature reserves, there is often a great deal of conflict between conservation and exploitation interests. The view that peatland development is of economic importance whereas conservation is not, plays an important role in this conflict.

At the symposium 'Peatlands in Perspective' which was held in Baarn, the Netherlands, from 3 to 5 October 1987, economic aspects of both peatland exploitation and conservation were discussed by way of a comparison between the history of exploitation and conservation in Ireland and in the Netherlands. Holland was the first country in north-western Europe to almost completely exhaust its peat resources and is now carrying out major peatland restoration projects. Ireland is one of the few countries in the north-west of Europe which still contains intact bogs, but the country is also still engaged in large-scale peatland exploitation. A comparison of past and present developments in both countries sheds an interesting light on the socio-economic role which peatlands play both from the exploitation and the conservation point of view, and makes clear that the traditional views which regard conservation as uneconomic should be reassessed.

It should be noted that in this volume the term peatland is mostly used in a limited sense, and refers to the type of peatland which is usually called bog. Therefore, in most papers, one will find the terms peatland and bog side by side. The type of peat-forming wetland which is called fen, is only marginally dealt with. The Irish peatlands mainly consist of bogs. Fens are quite rare in that country, and in those cases that fens are concerned, this is explicitly mentioned. The paper on the history of peatland exploitation in the Netherlands deals with both the peatlands below sea level in the western part of the country and the typical bogs in the eastern part. The western peatlands to a large extent originally developed as bogs, but in the course of time they ended up under the mineral soil water-level because of the relative rise in sea-level, and so became what is known as 'drowned bogs'. The peatlands in the east of the country closely resembled the Irish midland bogs. The paper on bog conservation in the Netherlands describes the efforts to conserve what remains of these eastern Dutch raised bog systems.

Various papers place the Irish and Dutch situation in a NW-European perspective. This is mainly based on ecological grounds and in that context north-

western Europe refers to the area of distribution of oceanic and suboceanic bogs. Scandinavia, which has different peatland types, is not included.

The symposium *Peatlands in Perspective* was organized as a joint project by the Dutch Foundation for Conservation of Irish Bogs, the Irish Peatland Conservation Council, the World Wide Fund for Nature of the Netherlands, the National Forest Service of the Netherlands, and the Society for Conservation of Nature Monuments in the Netherlands. It evolved from years of co-operation between Irish and Dutch scientists in the field of peatland research and conservation. At the same time it marked a historical event since it was the occasion at which the funds raised by Dutch private conservation organizations for peatland conservation in Ireland were officially handed over to the Irish government.

We wish to thank all the people and organizations who made the symposium possible through their enthusiasm, work, and financial support. It was a great honour that His Royal Highness Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands was prepared to open the symposium, and that he officially handed over the funds raised in the Netherlands to the Irish government. We greatly appreciate that His Excellency Minister N. Treacy T.D., responsible for nature conservation in Ireland, was willing to come over to the Netherlands to accept this gift on behalf of the Irish government.

We hope that the conclusions of this symposium will contribute to the development of balanced strategies for the use of peatlands in those countries which still have peatlands left.

*The editors*



Handing over of documents relating to Scragh bog and of funds for three further bog reserves in Ireland by HRH Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands to Minister N. Treacy T.D. (Foto: O. Coops)

## OPENING ADDRESS

### HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS PRINCE BERNHARD OF THE NETHERLANDS

It is with great pleasure that I have accepted the invitation to open the symposium 'Peatlands in Perspective'.

The types of peatlands which are usually called bogs were once a characteristic feature of the landscape in cool and temperate climates. At present they belong to the most endangered ecosystems in the world. Man always had quite an ambivalent attitude towards peatlands. On the one hand he considered them to be hostile, treacherous, and dangerous places. On the other, they were of importance to him as a source of cheap fuel. Over the centuries, bogs have been drained and developed, and their size has diminished in many parts of the world to a point where they are in danger of extinction.

The concept of bog conservation is relatively new. Now that bogs are rapidly disappearing from our environment, their conservation value becomes more widely recognized. Bogs support a unique flora and fauna, which can not survive elsewhere. They are the wintering grounds of various bird species. Through the pollen fossilized in them, peatlands represent living libraries for the history of the landscape since the last Ice Age. As ecosystems they are of such a complex nature, that many questions with respect to their ecology still remain unanswered. Moreover, bogs are a most remarkable feature of the landscape, characterized by vastness, openness, and silence, all qualities which have become quite rare in the present-day world.

These assets make peatlands of great value to tourism, recreation, science, and education. In these fields they even generate long-term economic benefits, so that from the economic point of view, bog conservation may be as important as bog development, which has traditionally been looked at as the only economic use that can be made of peatlands.

It is of great importance that decisions on the future of the remaining peatlands will not be solely based on their exploitation interests but also on their conservation value. Because there is a point of no return. It took thousands of years for bogs to grow into the ecosystems which we know today. Once they are gone, they cannot be brought back again. We in the Netherlands have become very much aware of that fact. We were the first country in north-western Europe to completely cut away our at one time vast peatlands. At present this is much regretted, even to such an extent that expensive restoration projects are being carried out in the remaining cut-over peatland areas in our country, in

order to bring back some of the original flora and fauna. May this be a warning to those countries which still have intact bogs.

What is needed for the future is a proper bog resource management which tries to find a compromise between exploitation and conservation interests. I trust that this conference, which has brought so many politicians, environmentalists, and scientists together, will bring forth strategies for such a resource management.

I am very happy to see so many, and such distinguished participants from Ireland, which is practically the last country in north-western Europe to contain bogs in their original form. Your country has the difficult task of developing policies for these sites, which have become of great international significance. However, it would not be justified to hold Ireland solely responsible for the conservation of some of the best remaining untouched bogs in north-western Europe, where other countries have first cut away their own peatlands. The other NW-European countries have an obligation to help Ireland in her bog conservation programme.

Therefore, it gives me great pleasure to be able to announce that the Dutch Foundation for Conservation of Irish Bogs has raised sufficient funds in the Netherlands to purchase four bog sites in Ireland, sites of great scenic and scientific importance. This was done through the help of thousands of Dutch people, who bought symbolic shares in these bog areas, and through a major contribution from the World Wide Fund for Nature of the Netherlands, which in its wetlands campaign raised half of the funds needed. The Irish government has agreed on accepting these sites as nature reserves.

On behalf of the Dutch Foundation for Conservation of Irish Bogs and the WWF – the Netherlands, I would now like to hand these documents over to His Excellency Minister Noel Treacy, in whose department these four bog sites will be managed as State Nature Reserves.



## ADDRESS

NOEL TREACY, T.D.

*Minister of State, Department of Finance, Office of Public Works  
(O.P.W.), Dublin*

Your Royal Highness, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with the greatest of pleasure that I accept on behalf of the Irish Government and the Irish Nation this gift of Scragh bog from Your Royal Highness; We are indebted to you and to the Dutch Foundation for Conservation of Irish Bogs as well as the World Wide Fund for Nature of The Netherlands, and to the people of the Netherlands who have contributed so generously to these organizations.

Scragh is what is known as a quaking bog or fen with a traditional bog developing in the centre. It is small comprising just over 15 hectares but it is, nevertheless, of international importance illustrating the transition from alkaline fen to acidic raised bog. It contains a large number of uncommon plants and it is a most welcome addition to the national network of Irish peatland nature reserves.

I am no less delighted to accept the accompanying gift of a substantial financial contribution which will be used in the acquisition of three other peatland sites for the purpose of conserving them for future Irish generations and, indeed, for the benefit of future generations in other countries who wish to appreciate and enjoy them. They will always serve as a monument to the generosity of the Dutch people. I am confident that this historic occasion will further enhance the relationship between our countries.

May I once again through His Royal Highness thank the people of the Netherlands for their generous gift and for the hospitality and generosity which we have experienced.