

A Statement on Peatland, River and Wetland Restoration

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The issue

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report¹ (August 2019), coupled with the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services report² (May 2019) each advise that we must achieve transformative change to limit annual average global temperature increases to within 1.5°C of 1990 levels, and to reverse the alarming decline in global biodiversity during this Anthropocene extinction event. We acknowledge the IPCC priorities: first, to reduce emissions; second, to halt the loss of existing habitat and restore where possible; and third, afforestation and habitat creation.

Safeguarding and restoring peatlands, rivers and wetlands are integral to this, especially in an upland, peat- and wetland-rich, though woodland-poor National Park. The Welsh Government has missed its ambition of bringing all of Wales' peatlands into restoration management by 2020 and is due to adopt a Welsh Peatlands Action Plan during 2020. In turn, the Local Nature Partnership's Nature Recovery Action Plan, "A Future with Nature at its Heart,"³ includes several priorities, the peatlands and wetland focus being to "agree primary ecosystems and/or geographic areas for NRAP focussed project development and funding to support the goal of 'bigger, better and more joined up' nature recovery networks;" and to "Raise awareness and understanding of our upland habitat networks in order to foster greater connectivity between local people and the uplands and encourage more nature-friendly management practices."

The evidence

A range of studies has illustrated the multiple benefits of peatland restoration (Appendix I). Among the many options for removing atmospheric CO₂ equ or preventing further land-based CO₂ equ emissions, peatland restoration is a proven method. Whilst peatland restoration is also driven by the need to restore nature and landscape, protecting and restoring heavily eroded and drained peatland is particularly important for preventing further CO₂ equ emissions; this type of peatland damage is more prevalent in the Brecon Beacons National Park than elsewhere in Wales.

We are already active in a range of peatland restoration projects including the Welsh Peatlands Project, the Black Mountains Land Use Partnership, the Waun Figen Felen bog restoration project, a range of upland path restoration projects benefiting blanket bog, and several projects benefiting lowland raised bogs. We also support applied research benefiting blanket and raised bogs (Appendix I).

Our analysis

The multiple benefits that healthy and functioning peatlands, rivers and wetlands provide, where they are already rich in biodiversity, include:

CO ₂ sequestration	Soil ecology conservation
Healthy carbon and oxygen cycles	Rich and varied nature
Natural food	Energy
Water	Landscape screening
Water quality improvement	Landscape connectivity
Water infiltration into the landscape	Recreation; and
Flood amelioration	

¹ <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/srccl/>

² <https://www.ipbes.net/global-assessment-report-biodiversity-ecosystem-services>

³ <https://www.beacons-npa.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/BBNPA-Nature-Recovery-A4-ENG-WEB.pdf>

Human health and well-being.

Peatlands, rivers and wetlands are affected by a range of issues:

- Upland influences on the moderate rather than good ecological status for most of the Park's rivers;
- Upland influences on the sub-optimal ecological condition and status of Special Areas of Conservation (Rivers Usk and Wye, Llangors Lake, Brecon Beacons, Usk Bat Sites) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest;
- The actively draining and eroding peatlands, with significant areas of bare and eroded peat on blanket bogs;
- The historic effects of overgrazing and atmospheric pollution, favouring species like purple moor grass;
- The high vulnerability of blanket bogs to arson-related wildfires;
- Securing and maintaining the right levels of mixed grazing and shepherding in the uplands;
- Eliminating illegal off-road vehicle use in the uplands;
- Soil exposure and erosion leading to river pollution;
- The paucity of vegetated river corridors on main rivers;
- The increase and spread of riparian and aquatic Invasive Non-Native Species (INNS);
- The declining freshwater fisheries on the Wye, Usk and Taf catchments;
- Restoring semi-natural broadleaf and riparian woodland to improve water infiltration, trapping of soil sediment, and improving soil ecology and biodiversity;
- Resolving access to water for recreation by anglers and water craft users;
- Eliminating water pollution from domestic, built and agricultural sources;
- Delivering sustainable and resilient drinking water supply and waste water treatment networks in response to demand;
- The impacts of riparian squeeze - loss of riparian vegetation combined with lower river discharge levels and encroachment by agriculture and development;
- Improving water quality in the Llangors Nitrate Vulnerable Zone; and
- Raising public awareness of peatland, river and wetland conservation.

The Park's peatlands, rivers and wetlands are profiled (Appendix 2).

Actions needed for effective peatlands and wetland restoration

The predominantly moderate rather than good ecological status of the Park's rivers means that these and their associated wetlands require ecological restoration. This includes reducing and eliminating the adverse impacts of abstraction, soil erosion, pollution, habitat fragmentation, urbanisation and INNS. The main sectors influencing these habitats include the Welsh Government, Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water, Natural Resources Wales, the National Trust Wales, the Canal and Rivers Trust, the Wye and Usk Foundation, private riparian and upland landowners, farmers, other land managers and the National Park Authority.

The Park has at least five identifiable peatland and wetland delivery areas suitable for integrated land management programmes:

- i. Mynydd Du and Western Great Forest and Tawe headwaters;
- ii. Eastern Great Forest – Manor Penderyn – Taf - Central Beacons (and Mynydd Llangynidr Mynydd Llangatock);
- iii. Black Mountains;
- iv. Llangors – Wye catchment; and
- v. Usk catchment.

We also need:

- A unified peatlands, rivers and wetlands restoration programme
- A long term, fully funded Environmental Land Management Scheme and advisory service

A long term public awareness and involvement programme

A definition for the Favourable Conservation Status⁴ of peatlands, rivers and wetlands in the Brecon Beacons National Park

Setting objectives, a pathway and timetable to achieve FCS including:

- Protecting and restoring all bare, eroding and drained peatland
- Introducing sustainable integrated land management, in particular low intensity mixed grazing and fuel load management
- Restoring and expanding floodplain woodland
- Restoring riparian woodland
- Safeguarding existing and creating new ponds and wetland marginal zones
- Controlling and wherever possible eliminating riparian and aquatic INNS
- Eliminating pollution and soil erosion
- Recovering a more even river discharge throughout the year
- Safeguarding the historic environment
- Providing just, fair and equitable access to water for all recreation users
- Providing just and fair incentives to land managers for contributions to nature-based enhancements that provide public benefits
- Insisting on the polluter pays principle
- Reducing water consumption
- Increasing landscape resilience through water retention
- Achieving a better quality built environment within ecologically rich river valleys
- Maximising the contribution of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS)
- Permitting no new building within floodplains whilst
- Commissioning research on suitable building within floodplains.

As well as actions on our land and those we carry out on behalf of other landowners on their land, we would welcome opportunities to advise and assist landowners to maximise opportunities to restore their peatlands, rivers and wetlands by:

- Implementing restoration plans for eroded and drained peatlands;
- Restoring grass-dominated blanket bogs to healthy peatlands;
- Managing lowland raised bogs, valley mires and fens for high nature value;
- Avoiding burning and eliminating arson and wildfires on blanket bog;
- Restoring riparian vegetation along river corridors;
- Restoring floodplain wetlands and wooded areas; and
- Helping landowners to develop their own restoration ideas and plans.

⁴ <https://ieep.eu/publications/how-is-favourable-conservation-status-being-defined-across-the-eu>