

## GWCT News Blog – Collaboration, not confrontation, the key to a successful Peat Strategy

Anyone in doubt about how important England's peatlands are would soon see from the recent Defra consultation, which opens by asking about peatland's role in 'the needs of wildlife, people and the planet'.

As an organisation, we welcome the opportunity to engage with the policymakers, other organisations and those directly involved in managing our landscape in shaping the future – a better future – for England's peatlands.

One challenge we face is a series of knowledge gaps, particularly on the impact of vegetation burning on upland peat. Without furthering our understanding, we risk relying on 'old truths' and compromising a plan for healthily functioning uplands before we even begin.



It isn't all doom and gloom, however. Collaborative working, such as that demonstrated in Farmer Clusters and cooperative projects such as Moors for the Future, can have an important role in bringing those capable to enacting positive change together to work towards a common goal. These same land managers be they gamekeepers, farmers or otherwise, already play a pivotal role, not only in fighting and reducing wildfires, but in world-leading peatland restoration efforts. They should be supported and incentivised for their efforts and encouraged to work with Natural England to review peatland condition on their holdings. This could work in tandem with the freedom to make site-by-site management plans, varying on the peatland type, land use and location, rather than a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach.

Discussion on upland management often oversimplifies the debate into what is 'good' and what is 'bad', but to succeed we must go beyond this and consider both the aforementioned gaps in understanding, but also the complexity of the subject we are dealing with. It is presented by some as a choice between cutting and burning, with the former promoted as a less-damaging alternative. Very little is known about the long-term effects of cutting, either on vegetation or the subsequent carbon fluxes. Cutting does not remove the fuel load, as the brash is usually left behind, its decomposition releasing greenhouse gases.

When discussing burning, it is important distinguish between 'hot' fires, which tend to happen in spring and summer and can burn the underlying peat, and 'cool' burns designed to burn surface vegetation. In fact, improved understanding of controlled 'cool' burns has led to an adapted approach, often described as 'blanket bog restoration burning'. This concept, focusing on the ecological outcome rather than periodic rotation, can have beneficial outcomes for both blanket bog and the wildlife it supports and more must be done to clearly define the practice. Should the decision be made to ban prescribed 'cool' burns on peatlands, an alternative strategy for managing vegetation must be sought to replace the vegetation management currently undertaken by the private sector. This

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management, providing a vital function in protecting restored peatland and minimising wildfires, will have to be funded and it is not yet clear how effective any alternative might be.

We must also, of course, consider the strategy for peat restoration in the lowlands, which must be carefully balanced with a growing need for food production. Once more, education and collaboration are key to any future success, with changes to crop rotations and farming practice necessary to support both soil health and structure. We must engage our farmers and land managers in sustainable management of our remaining lowland peatlands in the face of this continued demand, rather than simply translocate any degradation.

In writing our submission, it is clear that any strategy must be flexible enough to evolve with the current understanding and work with, rather than against, those able to enact it on the ground. A general approach and catch-all claims regarding 'favourable condition' can throw up more questions than answers. Blanket bog is not uniform, peat depth can vary significantly within a few metres. Tree planting on peatland, often regarded as a positive step to improve carbon sequestration, can risk jeopardising soil carbon stocks. These grey areas show the complexity of conservation policy, which should not be overlooked.

[You can read our submission here](#)

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