

[Power to the Peatlands](#) European Peatlands Conference, Antwerp, 19-21 September 2023

This landmark conference celebrated the end of the Interreg North-West Europe [Care-Peat](#) project and what delegates hope will be the continuation and beginning of new cooperative peatland projects throughout Europe. The conference was huge in scope with many parallel sessions, workshops, a lively poster session, and networking events. This overview provides a snapshot of some of the many peatland presentations, workshops and people who attended the conference. All the [conference abstracts are available to review at this link](#).



[Peat Hub Ireland](#) presented in the session “*Restoration and conservation strategies and priority setting*”, chaired by Dr. Terry Morley, alongside Irish projects [Irish Peatland Resilience](#) and the [RePeat](#) project. The presentation highlighted the importance of evidence synthesis for understanding current knowledge of Irish peatlands, highlighting knowledge gaps, informing future research agendas and providing recommendations for policy and decision-making. The [poster session](#) also featured the work of many [Irish Early Career Researchers](#) and Irish colleagues at projects such as [A12Peat](#), [WaterLANDS](#), [Wild Atlantic Nature](#) and [Peatlands and People](#).



Irish Researchers at Power to the Peatlands. Photos: Elena Aitova, Terry Morley, Catherine Farrell.

Prof. Hans Joosten, University of Greifswald, Germany, Keynote speaker, began by reminding us of the temporality of peatland landscapes and our perceptions of them: “We don’t see the past as it was, but as we are” (Ger Harmsen). He highlighted the incompleteness of historical sources and the subjectivity of the interpreter when we look to the past, which we must do to understand peatlands in the present. Furthermore, we are all products of culture and are influenced by particular times, places and ideologies. In Ireland, the past and its strong cultural traditions have often constrained transformational change. But **culture can also be a force for positive change**, enabling adaptation and leading us away from ideologies of over-consumption towards more collaborative values.

paludiculture sites. This helps **build trust, understanding and cooperation and highlights policy gaps** with respect to sustainable use of peatlands. The centre also carries out social science and legal research to examine the barriers to implementing peatland rewetting and how to speed up planning and permissions for rewetting projects, providing valuable lessons for the Irish context.

Another presentation of relevance to Ireland was about the [Dutch Peat Covenant](#), a national reduction plan for peat use in the Netherlands. Peat was a non-topic in the Netherlands in 2021 but change happened quickly and a broad group of representatives from horticulture, politics, science and civil society came together in 2022 to sign the covenant. The Netherlands will become the first European country where the substrate industry will report annual production figures and ingredients lists will be mandatory for substrate bags and also potentially for the compost used in plants. Although currently there is no penalty for non-compliance, Dutch covenants do have political weight. **Perhaps a Peat Proclamation could be drawn up to tackle similar issues in Ireland** as we move towards peat-free growing media for the horticulture sector.

The [Peat Mothership](#) project called for **scientific consensus** to: achieve purposeful mapping and monitoring of peatland condition and state shifts, realise consistent definitions of peat/non-peat and have consistent condition classifiers that include all factors. They also called for an awareness of potential uses (and misuses) of payments for ES and sounded a caution - **peat is a commodity** again, in Scotland and elsewhere, and carbon credits are affecting land values.

We heard from a wide variety of other projects too including: **Sphagnum paludiculture** projects saving carbon compared to grassland use on drained organic soils, **measuring peat depth** with geophysics and multiple sensors, the [Alfa Wetlands Living Labs approach](#), **future plans for the Care Peat team** (Image below), the **European Peatlands Initiative** and the difficult situation for NGOs which have been closed in **Belarus** since the war, and where there is now a renewed drive to drain peatlands.



Every research project should have a plan for how to maintain results, co-operation and networks into the future

Finally, a visit to the UNESCO World Heritage [Museum Plantin-Moretus](#) in Antwerp was a fascinating look at the emergence of book printing in Europe (yes there is a connection to peatlands!). It houses the only printing workshop and publishing house dating back to the 16th century in existence. Science developed at a remarkable speed with the advent of book publishing and the scientific age of discovery began in earnest when scientists could share their findings with each other and the wider world. The museum featured many key figures in the history of human knowledge, including Abraham Ortelius, inventor of the atlas and first to observe continental drift. The atlas, dating from 1570, brought maps of the world together in one format and was called Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, or the [Theatre of the](#)

[World](#). It was ornamented with meaningful signs and symbols of the time to create a visual language to improve understanding of the maps.



The Theatre of the World Atlas. Website: <https://museumplantinmoretus.be/> Photos: K.Flood

Continuing the tradition 450 years later, the [Peatland Atlas 2023](#) provides facts, figures and maps in an accessible and highly visual format, clearly demonstrating to a broad audience the urgency of protecting and rewetting peatlands and showing possibilities for how politics and society can act. An **Irish Peatland Atlas** aimed at policy makers and the wider public would be a valuable tool for broader societal understanding and appreciation of the many values of peatlands.

12 BRIEF LESSONS ABOUT PEATLANDS

- 1 Peatlands exist on all continents. They are the result of **PEAT FORMATION** in soils with soils that are saturated with water.
- 2 Worldwide, peatlands cover **3 PERCENT OF THE EARTH'S LAND SURFACE** - but they store about twice as much carbon than the biomass of all the world's forests combined.
- 3 Peatlands are being lost ten times faster than they are growing. Due to human activities, **500,000 HECTARES OF PEATLAND ARE DESTROYED EVERY YEAR**. Intact peatlands urgently need to be protected.
- 4 Natural peatlands draw considerable amounts of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the atmosphere, which they **STORE AS CARBON IN THE PEAT**. But if they are destroyed, they release large amounts of CO₂ - and damage the climate.
- 5 A large part of all drained peatlands worldwide is **USED FOR AGRICULTURE**. In the EU: one quarter of all peatlands. They are used primarily for animal husbandry.
- 6 Peatlands play a crucial role in the **WATER CYCLE**. They filter and store water and help alleviate drought and flooding. The **CLIMATE CRISIS** makes peatlands drier and increases the risk of fires that produce a lot of emissions.
- 7 Peatlands are home to rare and endangered **PLANTS** and **ANIMAL SPECIES**. Their greatest threat worldwide is artificial drainage and deforestation for agriculture and forestry.
- 8 To achieve the goals of the **PARIS CLIMATE AGREEMENT**, 1 million hectares in Europe must be rewetted every year - and 2 million hectares worldwide.
- 9 Emissions from drained peatlands can be greatly reduced without giving up farming: by raising water levels and converting to **PALUDICULTURE** such as growing reeds and raising water buffaloes.
- 10 For centuries, peat was used mainly as a **FUEL**. Today it is mainly used as **POTTING SOIL** in horticulture. Ecological alternatives must be promoted more strongly.
- 11 Over the centuries, peatlands have been destroyed. We need to recognize the **VALUE OF WET PEATLANDS** for biodiversity and the climate.
- 12 In many parts of the world, there are **FOREST-COVERED PEATLANDS**: alder swamps in Europe - or tropical rainforests. They store a particularly large amount of carbon and must be preserved or restored at all costs.

About Peatlands – 12 Brief Lessons. Source: [Heinrich Böll Stiftung website](#)