

From restoration targets to fair outcomes

Overcoming justice challenges in peatland policy implementation

3 September 2026

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**When you hear “peatland
restoration”, what is the first thing
that comes to mind?**



Workshop structure

- **Presentation:** diverse values of peatland restoration
- **Presentation:** case study Ireland (peat extraction)
- **Presentation:** case study Scotland (agricultural peatlands)
- **Facilitated discussion** in groups:
 - Current just transition challenges in your country/area
 - ‘Looking ahead’ including examples of best practice
- Central **feedback**

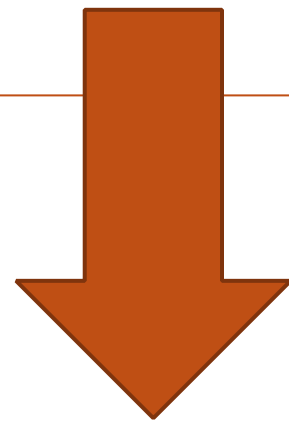


Valuing peatlands: beyond carbon and hectares

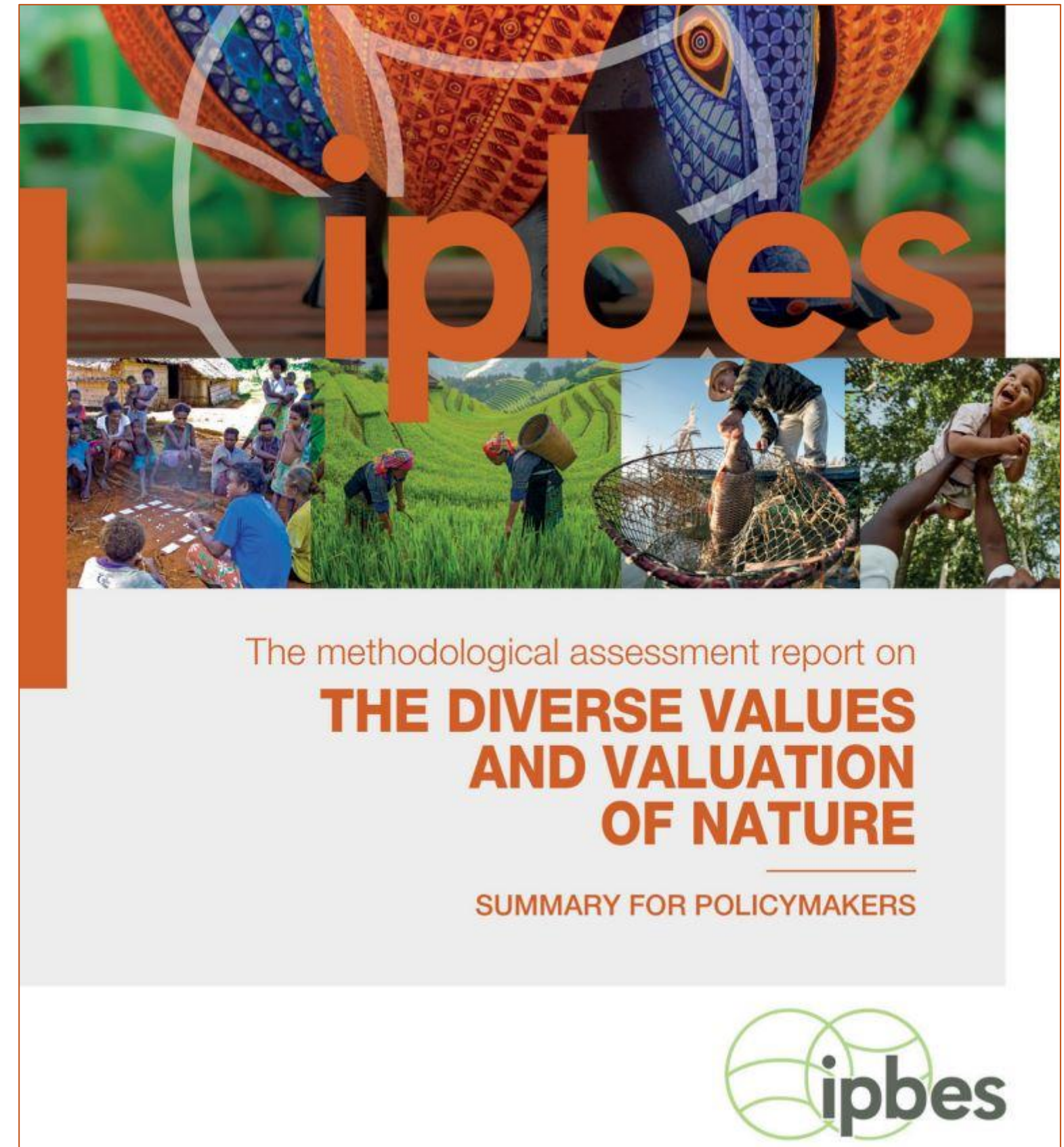
Matilde Meertens – Power to the Peatlands – 3 September 2026

*“The current dependency of political and economic decisions on a **narrow set of nature’s diverse values** underpins the global biodiversity crisis”*

(page 31)



Embed diverse values
into decisions (**policies**)



Instrumental

- Means to an end (usefulness)
- Ecosystem services
 - Regulating
 - Provisioning
 - Supporting
 - Cultural

Relational

- Human-nature interaction
- Reciprocal environmental stewardship
 - Responsibility
 - Care

Intrinsic

- Inherent worth of biodiversity as ends in-and-of themselves
- Moral imperative

Substitutable

Instrumental
living from nature

Referring to
human-nature
relationships

Not
substitutable

Relational
living in + living as nature

Subjects that
are ends in
themselves
regardless of
their
relationships to
humans

Intrinsic
living with nature

Diverse values of peatlands

INSTRUMENTAL

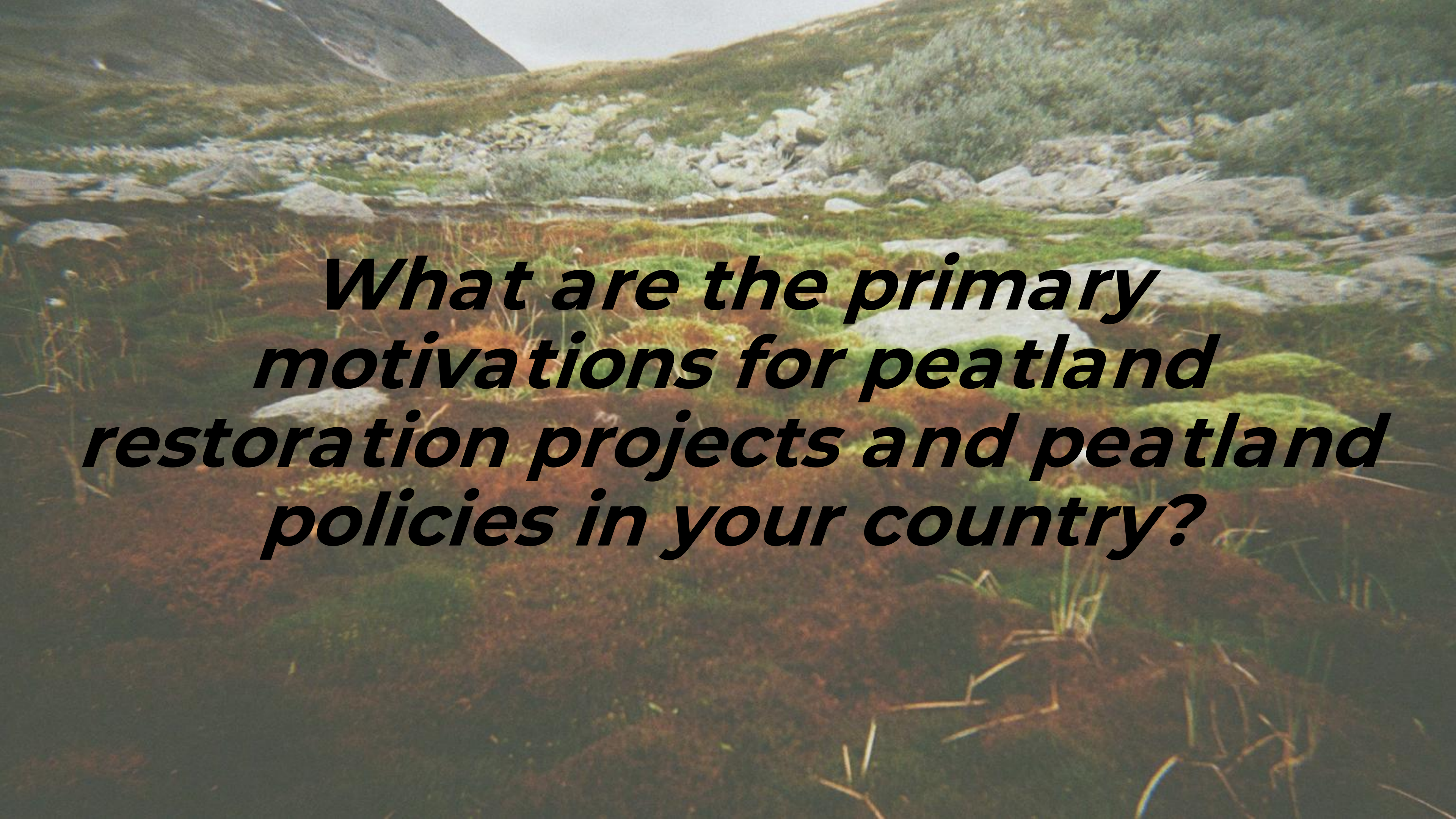
- Carbon storage, flood mitigation, prevention of soil erosion, water quality regulation, wildfire risk reduction, biodiversity, recreation and tourism, tradition, archeologic archives, fuel, horticultural medium, whisky production, ...

INTRINSIC

- Biodiversity, right to exist

RELATIONAL

- “environmental stewardship”, identity, sense of place

A landscape photograph of a peatland area. In the foreground, there is a body of water reflecting the sky, with some reeds and grasses growing in the shallow water. The middle ground shows a peatland area with patches of green moss and brown peat. In the background, there is a rocky, vegetated hill with some bare rock faces. The text is overlaid on the image in a bold, italicized font.

What are the primary motivations for peatland restoration projects and peatland policies in your country?

Ireland's peatlands in transition: from peat extraction to rewetting in a complex socio-ecological landscape

Power to the Peatlands 2026

2-4 September 2026

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Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

In this presentation:

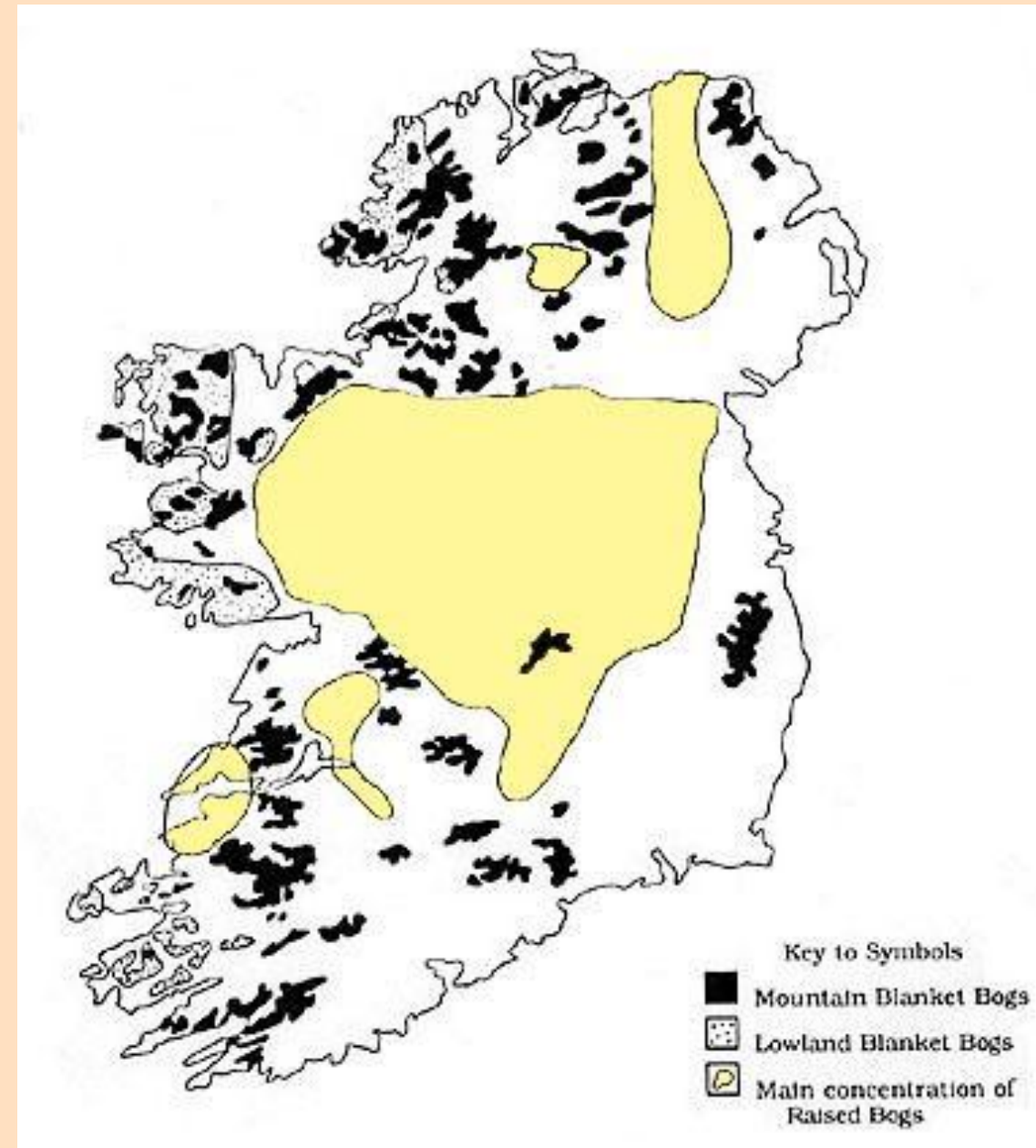
- Ireland as hotspot for peatlands
- Protection of peatlands under climate law, environmental law and national planning law
- On the ground challenges

Picture taken during a field trip to Abbeyleix bog in Ireland
Credits: Alessandra Accogli



Ireland is 'a global hotspot for peatlands'

- Irish peatlands cover about 20% of land surface (Peatlands Gathering 2021)
- They provide for **largest carbon sink in the country** – 64% of total carbon stock if left undisturbed (Climate Action Plan 2023)



EU European Climate Law and the role of carbon sinks



European Union, Publications Office of the EU

European Climate Law

Article 2(1) – Climate-neutrality objective: Union-wide greenhouse gas emissions and **removals** regulated in Union law shall be balanced within the Union at the latest by 2050, thus reducing emissions to net zero by that date, and the Union shall aim to achieve negative emissions thereafter.

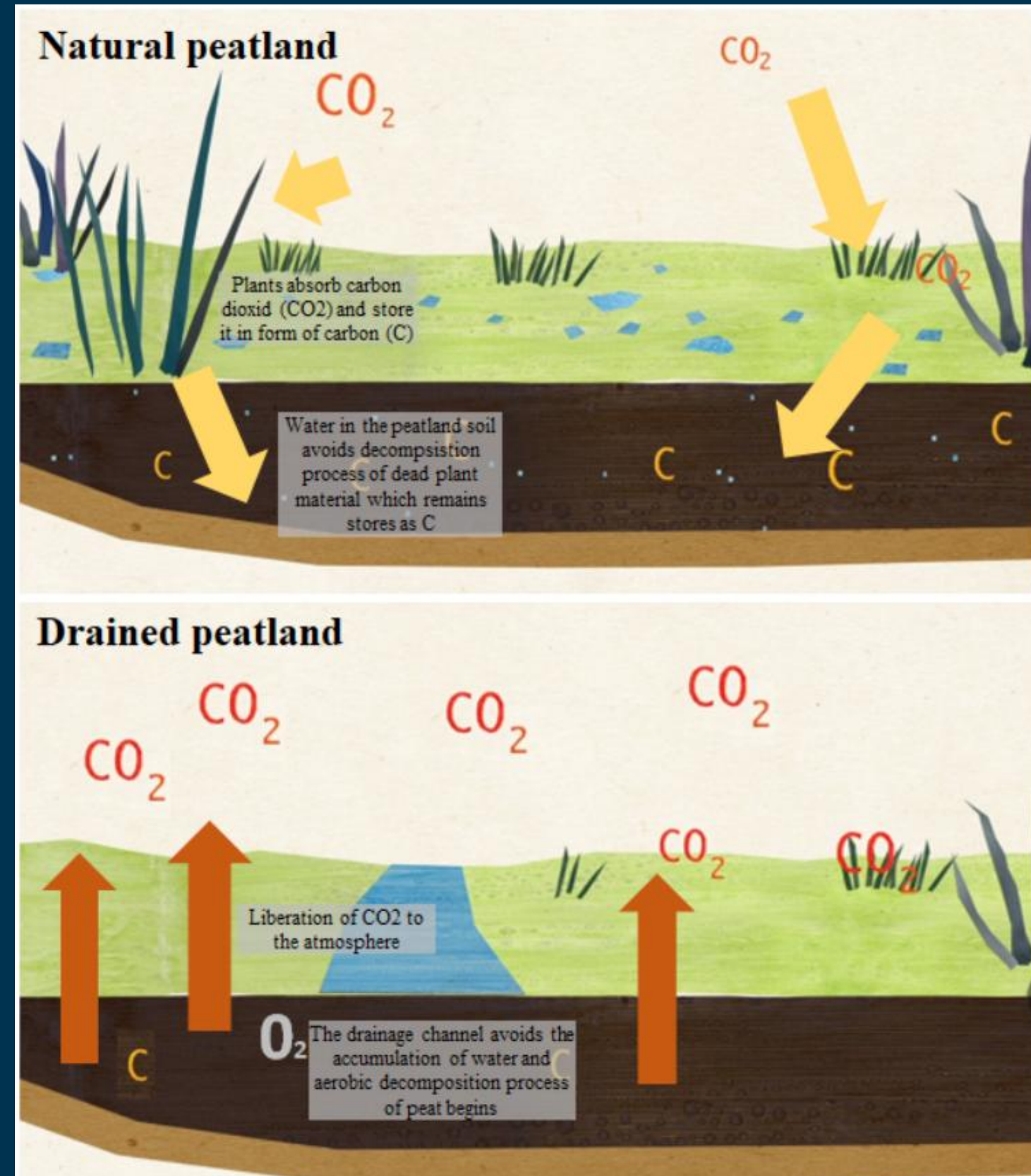
Article 1:

This Regulation establishes a framework for the irreversible and gradual reduction of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions by sources and **enhancement of removals by sinks** regulated in Union law.

Peatlands are also places shaped by human interaction through land use activities

Irish bogs are 'deeply humanised landscape' (Renou-Wilson 2018) as they have evolved in association with land use systems:

- domestic peat/turf cutting for household fuel
- industrial peat extraction for energy production and horticulture
- agriculture
- afforestation
- infrastructure development



World's largely unprotected peatlands are ticking 'carbon bomb', warns study

Bogs and swamps are a colossal carbon store but their continued destruction would blow climate change targets

Damian Carrington
Environment editor

Thu 13 Feb 2025 07.00 CET

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📷 Peatlands, pictured here in the Scottish Highlands, contain more carbon than all of the world's forests. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod/The Guardian

The article references a recent study that comprehensively assesses the global conservation status of peatlands, revealing they are dangerously under-protected

Legal protection of peatlands

- EU climate change regime (LULUCF Regulation)
- EU environmental law (Habitats Directive and Nature Restoration Law)
- National planning law & EIA Directive

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Accounting of Emissions and Removals under the EU LULUCF Regulation

Article 4 - Two commitments period:

- From 2021 to 2025, Member States must comply with the 'no-debit rule'
- From 2026 to 2030, Member States must comply with **binding national targets**, which together should deliver an EU-wide target: 310 million tonnes of net carbon removals (CO₂ equivalent) by 2030

What must Member States do in practice to achieve the LULUCF targets?

Essentially, they are required to prepare and maintain accounts that reflect emissions and removals from land uses.

In Ireland: degree of uncertainty when it comes to estimating emissions and removals, despite progress in scientific understanding and improvements in land-use data

Designations of Protected Areas under the EU Habitats Directive

Under the Habitats Directive, Member States are required to **designate** ecologically important habitats as **Special Areas of Conservation**, with the goal of maintaining or restoring these sites to a healthy and stable ecological condition (Article 2(2))

- Article 6(3): Any plan or project (...) likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to **appropriate assessment** of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site (...), the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned

In **Ireland**, this system of protection has led to restrictions on land-use activities on SACs, prompting resistance from land users and posing challenges for the Directive's implementation.



New Restoration Efforts under the EU Nature Restoration Law

The EU Nature Restoration Law establishes legally binding restoration targets for degraded ecosystems, including **specific targets** for peatlands

- Article 4: Restoration of **terrestrial**, coastal and **freshwater ecosystems**: at least 30% of the total area of all habitat types' in need of restoration by 2030, and at least 60% and 90% 'of the area of each group of habitat types' by, respectively, 2040 and 2050
- Article 11: Restoration of agricultural ecosystems
- Articles 14-19: Member States must now develop **national restoration plans** and identify the measures that are necessary to meet the restoration targets

Given ownership challenges, EU lawmakers also agreed that meeting these targets does not imply an obligation for farmers or private landowners to rewet their land, as this remains voluntary.

In **Ireland**, coordinated action for restoration measures is complicated by **fragmented ownership structures**



Land Use Restrictions under National Planning Laws and the EU EIA Directive

The protection of carbon sinks often depends on national planning rules that regulate such activities

- Some of these rules, like the requirement for an appropriate assessment for designated areas under the Habitats Directive, are mandated by EU law but implemented through national planning systems
- (in non-designated areas) Article 2 EIA Directive: Member States shall adopt all measures necessary to ensure that, before development consent is given, projects **likely to have significant effects on the environment** by virtue, inter alia, of their nature, size or location are made subject to a requirement for development consent and **an assessment** with regard to their effects on the environment



Picture taken during a field trip in Ireland
Credits: Alessandra Accogli

Concluding remarks

- Restoring peatlands is essential to achieving the EU's climate neutrality target by 2050, but doing so is far from straightforward. These ecosystems are governed by a complex web of legal frameworks, spanning climate law, biodiversity law, and national planning systems, that can both support and undermine each other
- While EU legislation such as the LULUCF Regulation, the Habitats Directive, and the EIA Directive each contribute to carbon sink restoration, they were developed with different priorities in mind and often operate in silos



Concluding remarks

- As the example of Irish peatlands illustrates, while it is true that difficult decisions must be made when prioritising peatland restoration, it is essential to recognise that peatlands encompass local communities and their relationships with the land through livelihoods, traditions, and recreational practices. **EU's legal frameworks must evolve not only to foster legal coherence and cross-sectoral integration, but also to enable more context-sensitive approaches to carbon sink governance.**



Thank you!

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RESPECT

LAND USE *for* NET ZERO >>>

Peatland transitions in Scotland: targets, trade-offs and justice

Miranda Geelhoed, Jill Robbie and Larissa A. Naylor



**UK Research
and Innovation**



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Department for
Energy Security
& Net Zero



Department for
Science, Innovation,
& Technology



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
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Agricultural peatlands in Scotland

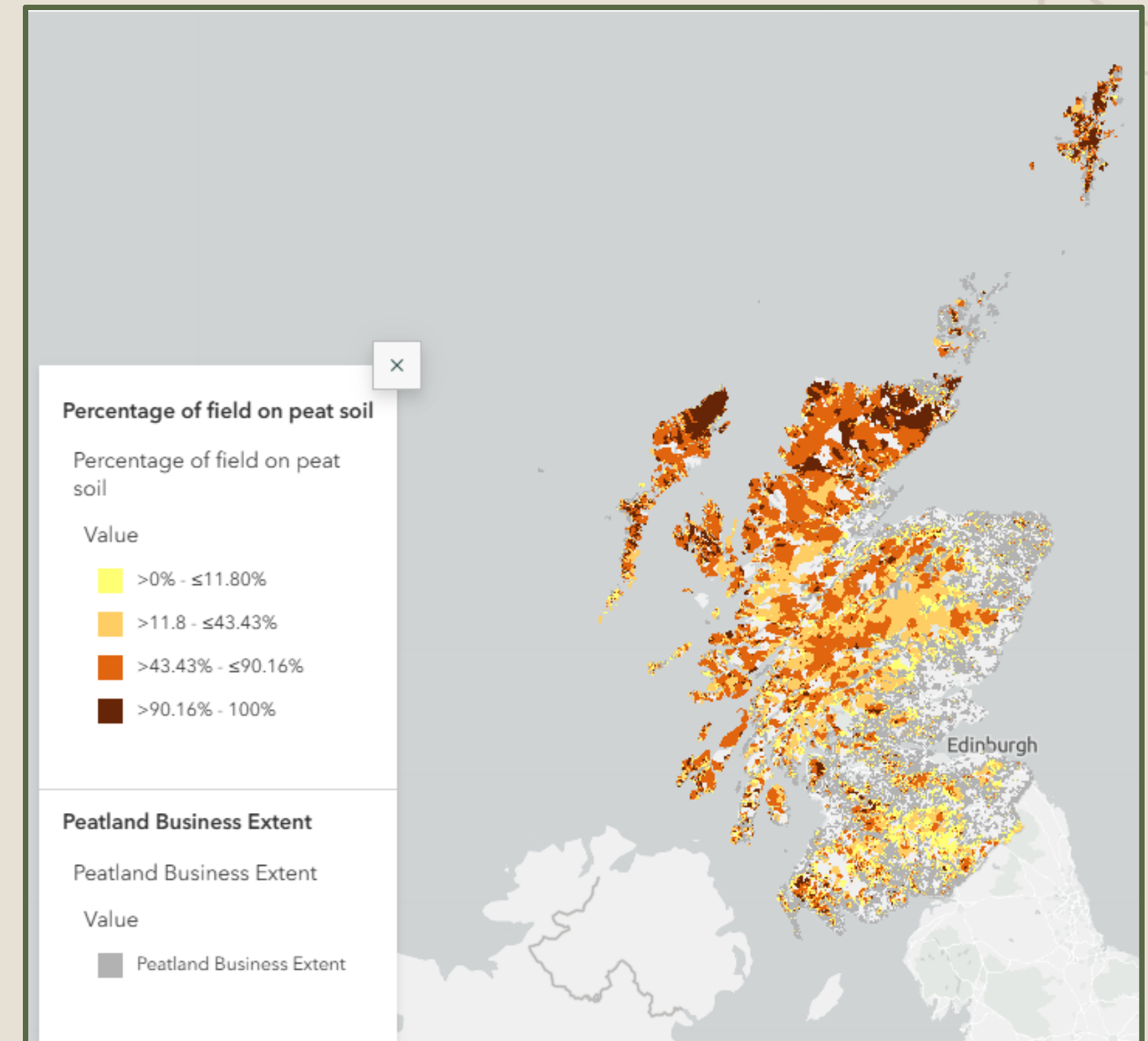
- Total ~ 2 million hectares of peatland
- Two types: lowland raised bog (only 17,200 hectares) and upland blanket bog.
- 1.7 million hectares of peatland need to be restored
- 38% of peatlands needing restoration have agricultural activity (compared to 4% that is woodland)
- Over half of agricultural businesses are exposed to peat
- 69% of such businesses are sheep/cattle farms and crofts



Flanders Moss, Carse of Stirling. Credit: Miranda Geelhoed



North Dell Common Grazings, Lewis. Credit: Jill Robbie



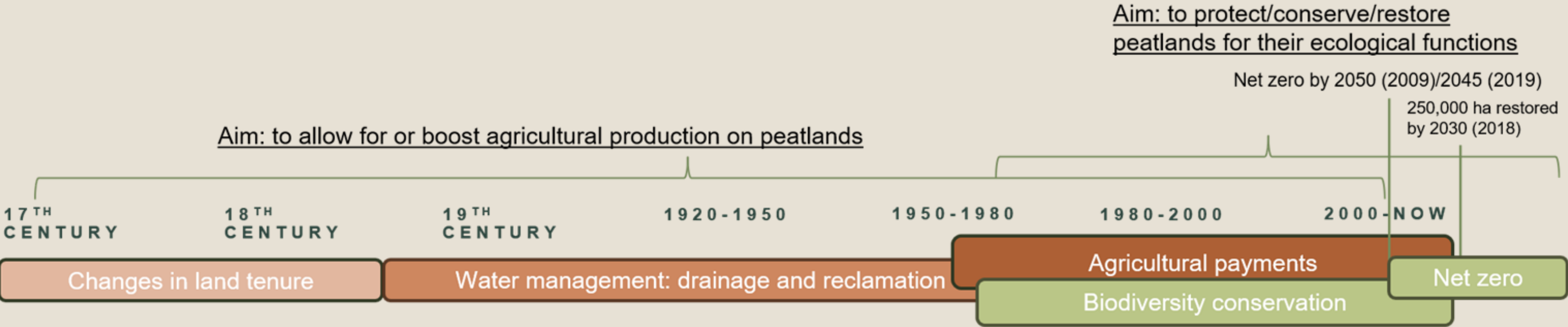
Source: Open Stacks Peatland Conditions Mapping (2024) by the Land Restoration Institute

From restoration targets to fair outcomes: a bumpy road

Statutory just transition principles
Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019

Key statutory target: **net-zero emissions by 2045** (compared to UK target by 2050)
Climate Change Plans: 250,000 hectares (2030) and 400,000 hectares (2040) of peatland restored

Just transition challenges: **historical legacy of past policy ‘wrongs’**



Clearance of collective land users

(State or private) powers to drain land even if landowners objected

Public financial support for drainage

Drainage orders and collaborative structures that still exist today



From restoration targets to fair outcomes: a bumpy road

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Just transition challenges: **fragmented policy space and lack of strategic direction**

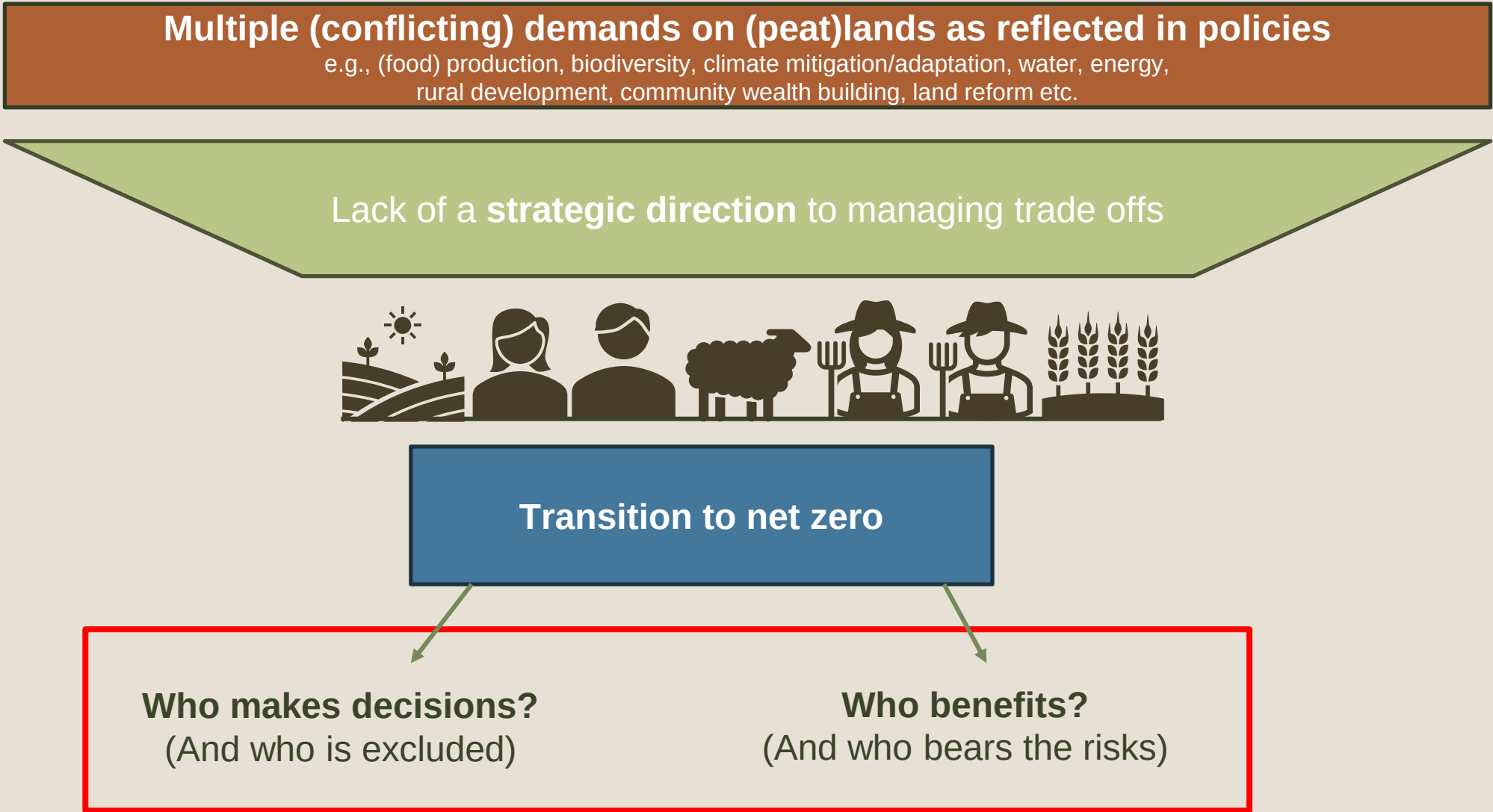


Geelhoed, Robbie and Naylor, 'Realizing a just transition towards the restoration and sustainable management of agricultural peatlands in Scotland' (2026) 38(2) JEL 222.

From restoration targets to fair outcomes: a bumpy road

Key statutory target: **net-zero emissions by 2045** (compared to UK target by 2050)
Climate Change Plans: 250,000 hectares (2030) and 400,000 hectares (2040) of peatland restored

Just transition challenges: **concentrated control over land**



Geelhoed, Robbie and Naylor, 'Realizing a just transition towards the restoration and sustainable management of agricultural peatlands in Scotland' (2026) 38(2) JEL 222.



Thank you

For more information: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/respect/>
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Discussion

- Current challenges for a just transition
- Envisioning change – best practice and lessons for the future
- Collective feedback: one key challenge and one promising idea



Peatland near Oughterard, Ireland. Credit: Miranda Geelhoed



Current challenges for a just transition

- Are there tensions between environmental ambition and social justice in your country/local context? How are they showing up?
- Who are the groups most affected by peatland restoration?
- Whose voices are often missed from peatland decision-making?
- Who stands to gain the most from peatland restoration? Who is at risk?



Envisioning change – best practice and lessons for the future

- Are there examples of projects that you are aware of that have effectively integrated diverse values in peatland restoration?
- How can participation processes be made more empowering?
- What governance/finance/policy mechanisms could help rebalance power and support the integration of diverse values?



Feedback



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