

Scottish Natural Heritage Consultation on Scotlands National Peatland Plan

Response from IUCN UK Peatland Programme

September 2014

As Director of the IUCN UK Peatland Programme I am writing to provide a response to the above consultation document on behalf of the Programme's Steering Committee.

The IUCN Peatland Programme was established in 2009 in response to growing pressure for more action to protect and restore peatlands. A strong partnership of policy, science and practitioners has helped develop a sound evidence base through the Commission of Inquiry on peatlands together with various briefing and networking activities.

The recognition of the importance of peatlands in Scotland and the urgent need to protect and restore them is welcomed. One of the key conclusions of our Inquiry was the lack of clear strategic steer to allow a focus for partners across government and the private sector. To that end we greatly appreciated the Scottish Environment minister's inclusion in the joint UK ministerial Statement of Intent to Conserve Peatlands¹. The strong vision in the NPP should help the Scottish Government both reinforce that commitment and encourage delivery of action towards the 1,000,000ha target for peatlands in the UK to be in good condition or under conservation management by 2020. This is not just an aspiration but an essential goal if we are to avoid the huge costs to society from damaged peatlands as identified by the UK Committee on Climate Change. The establishment of a National Peatland Group to help in overseeing effort towards the overall vision is a welcome proposal and the IUCN UK Peatland Programme would be happy to assist this group as a stakeholder.

One of the lessons we have learned is that to deliver action there needs to be ongoing strong leadership and a clear focus for partnerships with and between the public and private sectors. This includes giving firm signals to developers and other landusers about the Governments intention to protect and restore peatlands. Allowing damaging developments on peatlands sends a conflicting message to landmanagers and other partners who are aiming to help conserve and restore them.

At a local level the partnership projects across the UK, including the Flow Country have served as demonstrations of good practice in providing leadership and support to enable various statutory agencies, NGOs and individual land managers to achieve lasting peatland conservation outcomes. These have served as exemplars that are now being shared across the globe in our UK and global Demonstrating Success case study reports². With Scotland's peatlands covering a high proportion of

¹ UK Ministers Statement of intent to conserve peatlands. February 5th 2013. <http://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/news-and-events/news/uk-environment-ministers-announce-action-peatlands>

² UK Peatland Demonstrating Success and Global Peatland Demonstrating Success. <http://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/publications/demonstrating-success/uk-peatland-restoration-demonstrating-success>

the country it is hoped that such partnerships can be extended as a lasting initiative beyond the Flow Country building on the expertise of the Peatland Action project leaders currently managed by SNH.

Funding is one of the key aspects for ensuring peatland conservation. Before our more enlightened times, peatlands were only considered of value when drained and exploited in ways that caused damage. We are now in a new era for peatlands where the values of healthy peatlands and the costs of damaged peatlands to society are better understood. The challenge now is to reflect that value to society in supporting landmanagers for sustainably managing peatlands. Ongoing support from government grants is important as well as looking at new private sources of funding through the Peatland Code. The IUCN UK Peatland Programme welcomes the Scottish Government's support and assistance for this work including funding under Peatland Action to help progress the Code. With CAP funding still one of the mainstays of Scottish Government grants for peatlands, this increasingly restricted source does need to be extended and now would be a good time to explore other opportunities for funding with the European Commission.

With regards research, we have identified in the Inquiry a number of areas where further research is important to help in refining policy and in securing funding from both public and private sources. Clearly we have enough evidence to confirm that peatlands are important but there is some more detailed work required, for example to better understand the impacts of specific activities such as windfarms or forestry restocking and to quantify the carbon water and biodiversity benefits of peatland restoration. This work will be essential in informing private funding of peatlands under the Code and in accounting for greenhouse gas savings under national climate plans. The costs savings for water customers from peatland restoration are another area of potentially beneficial research.

One of the major difficulties in interpreting the science on peatlands has been the lack of a centre of excellence on peatland structures and ecosystem functions, able to provide advice and training. Much of the research is focussed on the ecosystem services without a common understanding of the type or state of the peatland under study. Hopefully this is an issue that the proposed research coordinating group can address with SNH.

Scotland is rightly recognised as one of the great peatland nations of the World and how it sets about conserving and restoring them is of considerable interest to decision makers in other countries. The National Peatland Plan presents a real opportunity to demonstrate leadership and put in place solid policies and funding for peatlands that will hopefully inspire action both in Scotland and in over 183 partner peatland countries.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Clifton Bain', written in a cursive style.

Clifton Bain

Director IUCN UK Peatland Programme