



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Landscape Advice Note: Use of Peat Policy for English Heritage Properties



www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/advice/advice-by-topic/parks-and-gardens/

Peat forms naturally throughout the world. It is formed when *Sphagnum* moss species in bogs (moss peat), or *Carex* species in fens (sedge peat) are prevented from decomposing completely by the permanently wet conditions. The unusual characteristics of these sites create unique habitats for plants and animals, and often contain archaeologically important deposits. Only four per cent of the lowland raised peat in the United Kingdom survives undamaged.

INTRODUCTION

The rate of peat accumulation is very slow, and is sensitive to climate changes. For a number of years there has been concern that the demand for peat is leading to the destruction of important peat bog habitat, and the rare species which are dependant on it. Despite this concern, annual use of peat (including some imported from Ireland and countries around the Baltic Sea) is rising.

The rise in use of peat is due mainly to increased amateur interest in gardening, which accounts for the vast majority of growing media use.

Peat is mainly cut for use in the horticultural and landscape industries as a growing medium and as a component of composts for growing plants. It can also be used as a mulch and as a soil conditioner. In addition peat is extracted in some areas as a fuel, which although traditionally done on a small scale, could exacerbate the impact of large scale extraction for horticultural purposes.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Peatlands both emit and capture carbon dioxide depending on the condition of the peatland. In addition to carbon dioxide, peatlands can be sources of methane and nitrous oxide, which are more powerful greenhouse gases than carbon dioxide.

Peatlands are important stores of carbon formed when plants were prevented from decomposing completely and the carbon within them became locked within the peat. Extracting peat releases the carbon back into the atmosphere and results in substantial carbon emissions. Estimates calculate that in the United Kingdom extracting peat and the degradation of peat

releases three million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year (Natural England 2010).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

Because of the chemical properties of peat bogs and fens, important archaeological and palaeo-environmental remains can be preserved within them. Probably the best known examples are the well-preserved human remains and wooden trackways discovered in various bogs over the past few decades.

Peat deposits also contain a unique record of local and regional environmental and human history that can extend back over thousands of years. This is because pollen from surrounding vegetation falls annually onto the peat surface and is preserved as the peat grows. Similarly insects from the surrounding habitats are also preserved. As a result, each slice of peat is a time capsule that may contain evidence of the first farming in an area or the use of fire by prehistoric hunters. Peatlands may also be diaries of climatic change and volcanic activity. Such evidence is a valuable and non-renewable resource, and is best protected by being left in situ. Once exposed to air, decomposition may occur rapidly. Therefore, it is essential that a high water table is maintained to prevent these vulnerable remains from being lost.

English Heritage can only protect an area of peat bog under its present statutory powers where archaeological remains are known to exist. The definition of a monument under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 does not extend to deposits of solely paleoenvironmental importance - some sort of structure or work must be involved.

BIODIVERSITY CONCERNS

Lowland peat bog is a rare and endangered habitat, and that the continued demand for peat is threatening remaining sites.

Large scale extraction of peat involves the lowering of the water table to allow the peat to dry out. This process can cause damage to the wildlife habitats beyond the mined area.

Natural England is the statutory body responsible for the protection of peatland habitats in England. Under their statutory powers they can designate peat bogs as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). However, a number of large peat extraction operations in England are on sites which received planning permission before being designated SSSI.

One of the main strategies for protecting peat bog sites has been to work with extraction companies,

01



02



FRONT COVER

Vinehouse pot plants at Audley End House where plants are grown in a traditional John Innes soil based compost that is based on a ratio of 7 soil: 3 peat: 2 grit, this formula holds on to moisture better and requires less feed than plants grown in 100 per cent peat compost © Marianne Majerus/English Heritage Photo Library

IMAGE 01

Peatland at Egton Moor in the North York Moors National Park. There are 12,000 recorded archaeological sites of which 700 are Scheduled Monuments © English Heritage Photo Library

IMAGE 02

View into the Vinehouse at Audley End House © Marianne Majerus/English Heritage Photo Library

encouraging use of less ecologically important areas, and rehabilitating sites where peat has already been removed. Of course archaeological or paleoenvironmental losses cannot be re-created. Once excavated they are lost.

It is not currently possible to tell at point of purchase whether peat has been extracted from sites designated as SSSIs.

GOVERNMENT POLICY

Under the current government policy is *Making the food and farming industry more competitive while protecting the environment* (2013) the Government is encouraging the horticulture industry to aim to stop using peat altogether and instead rely on environmentally and economically sustainable growing media. The *Natural Environment White Paper* (2011) set targets that peat used in bagged growing media should be phased out by 2020 for the amateur gardening market and by 2030 for professional growers. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has launched a new initiative to help end reliance on peat. The initiative includes:

- A five year research programme to investigate how to overcome the barriers to alternatives and demonstrate the viability of new products
- A fund to develop demonstration projects to show the public sector the benefits of using sustainable growing media
- A new Growing Media Panel to oversee and coordinate the delivery of plans

The National Planning Policy Framework states that when determining planning applications, local planning authorities should not grant planning permission for peat extraction from new or extended sites. It also determines that in preparing Local Development Frameworks, local planning authorities should identify and include policies for extraction of mineral resource of local and national importance in their area but should not identify new sites or extensions to existing sites for peat extraction.

PEAT ALTERNATIVES

A wide range of alternatives have been used successfully as mulches or soil conditioners. These include chipped bark, cocoa shell fibre, spent mushroom compost, paper waste and garden waste. Many of these products are more effective than peat for this purpose.

A number of alternatives to peat as a growing medium are also available, including products made from coir (coconut husks), bark or other wood fibres and

seaweed. So far none of these products have been proved as versatile or reliable as peat but research is continuing into their development.

One way of achieving more reliable growing media while reducing peat consumption would be to sell mixtures of peat and alternatives. The peat industry has initially proposed adding 10 per cent alternatives to some peat mixtures, but there is evidence that up to 40 per cent alternatives could be added without affecting the quality of the product. (Department for Environment Transport and the Regions, 1999) Even at the 10 per cent level, there could be a significant reduction in demand for peat.

FUTURE WORK

English Heritage and Natural England have complementary interests in the protection of remaining peat bogs and fens and will continue working together to ensure that an holistic approach to protecting this cultural and natural resource is pursued despite the continuing demand for peat.

ENGLISH HERITAGE'S HISTORIC PROPERTIES

English Heritage owns or manages over 400 historic properties (approximately 2,660 hectares) throughout England. The estate includes a number of gardens including historically important sites like Audley End House, Belsay Hall, Brodsworth Hall, Down House, Eltham Palace, Kenilworth Castle, Kenwood House, Osborne House, Walmer Castle, Witley Court, and Wrest Park.

All public authorities, including English Heritage, have a duty to regard the conservation of biodiversity in exercising their functions under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.

Since 2000 English Heritage has been working to minimise its need to use peat at its own properties.

The English Heritage policy is:

- English Heritage will not purchase peat or peat products for direct use in horticultural or landscaping activities, including use in potting compost, as a soil ameliorant or as a mulching material, unless specifically required for a particular plant species where no suitable alternatives exist.
- English Heritage will specifically exclude the use of peat or peat products in any contract for horticultural or landscape works on our own sites.

- English Heritage will specify the use of peat alternatives in composts for all plants grown under contract specifically for our own sites.
- English Heritage will endeavour to obtain all other plants in peat free or reduced peat composts where these are available and economically viable and will work to encourage nurseries to increase the range of plants grown in peat free compost.
- If, in the future, it becomes feasible to determine the source of peat at time of purchase, English Heritage will avoid using peat extracted from areas of high ecological value or known archaeological interest.
- Where appropriate in advisory work, staff will explain the problems caused by peat extraction and recommend the use of suitable alternatives where these exist.
- English Heritage will specifically exclude the use of peat or peat products in any garden or landscape works supported by an English Heritage grant, unless there are overriding historical or cultural reasons for its inclusion.
- English Heritage will continue to seek statutory protection for anthropogenic deposits of all kinds.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Department for Environment Transport and the Regions 1999 *Peatland Issues - Report of the Working Group on Peat Extraction and Related Matters*. London: DETR

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English Heritage 2008 *Mineral Extraction and Archaeology: A Practice Guide* London: English Heritage
 Product code: 51415
www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/mineral-extraction-and-archaeology/mineral-archaeology.pdf

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www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/mineral-extraction-and-historic-environment/

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publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/80014

Natural England 2010 *England's Peatlands: carbon storage and greenhouse gases (NE257)*
publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/30021

WEBSITES

Royal Horticultural Society
www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening/Sustainable-gardening/Peat-and-the-environment

National Trust
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/article-1356393908414/

Moors for the future
www.moorsforthefuture.org.uk/

Intertidal and coastal peat database
www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/research/heritage-science/environmental-archaeology/Environmental-Studies-Resources/intertidal-peat-database/

Natural England
www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/englands/peat.aspx

English Heritage
www.english-heritage.org.uk/professional/advice/advice-by-topic/landscape-and-areas/minerals-planning/

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English Heritage is the Government's adviser on the historic environment with responsibility for all aspects of protecting and promoting the historic environment in England.

The role of English Heritage's Curatorial Department is to help everyone to be inspired and engaged by the Story of England through sites, artefacts and archives.

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