Peat, horticulture and environment

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Peat-based growing media underpin the horticultural industry in the UK, although production sites cover less than 0.5% of the total peatland area. In recent years Peat Producer's Association members have released over 20% of their holdings to English Nature, representing virtually all the areas of current conservation value. The Association is now engaged in the assessment and development of restoration measures.

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Introduction

Globally, peatlands cover over 400 million ha of the land area and are found in all parts of the world except where conditions are too dry or too cold for plant life (Bather and Miller, 1991). Although rates of peat formation vary greatly, it is generally recognized that accumulation exceeds, by a considerable margin, the amount extracted for fuel, horticulture and other purposes, which currently totals some 75 million tonnes per year on an air dry basis. The difference is such that, coupled with adequate conservation and rehabilitation measures, acceptable levels of sustainability can probably be achieved in many areas.

In the UK, deep peat covers 1.58 million ha or about 7% of the land area. Much of this is comprised of so-called blanket bog, which is particularly widespread in the north and west, though by no means confined to hills and uplands or indeed to areas of high rainfall. The areas of more local basin, 'raised mire', fen and related types have been considerably reduced over the last 200 years, firstly by a long period of reclamation for agriculture and more recently by extensive peatland afforestation, which is not restricted to blanket bog areas as some media reports have suggested. Raised mire types are now thought to account for some 9% of the peatland area although this is probably an underestimate.

The UK peat industry

In the UK, the extraction of peat for horticulture is now confined to some 5400 ha (less than 0.5% of the total peatland area) of which about 65% occurs on raised mire sites and 35% on blanket bog, lowland sedge moor and other deposits. The area contrasts sharply with the 200 000 ha of peatland currently used for forestry (Pyatt, 1993) and with the even greater area now or about to be protected by special sites of scientific interest designation and other agreements. It is noteworthy that between 1960 and 1990 only
541 ha of peatland, some of which had previously been worked, have been brought into production by the industry. In fact, most of the current peat workings in the UK have occupied the same sites for generations, some for over 200 years.

Over 98% of peat production in the UK stems from holdings owned or leased by members of the Peat Producer's Association (PPA). At present, the industry satisfies only two-thirds of the UK market demand for 2.5 million m³ annually and has to balance conservation concerns with the equally important requirements of professional growers and amateur gardeners for a consistent, high quality and safe growing medium. With annual imports running between 800,000 and 1,000,000 m³ and the European Community barely self-sufficient in peat supplies, for which the demand will almost certainly increase, any reduction in UK output could have very serious repercussions on growers, gardeners, amenity providers and the horticultural trade in general, especially in terms of price, security of supply and increasing importation of quality plants in peat growing media.

Development and conservation

While the industry disagrees with conservationists over the impact of its operations on peatland resources and the availability and quality of alternatives to peat in horticulture, it does recognize that there are genuine issues of concern. The Peat Report, published in 1990 by the Royal Society for Nature Conservation on behalf of the Peat Consortium, (Barkham, 1993) called for action in five areas:

(i) protection of all UK peatlands of conservation importance;
(ii) development of a peatlands conservation strategy;
(iii) development of alternatives for peat in horticulture;
(iv) review of planning consents for UK peat extraction;
(v) rehabilitation of damaged UK peatlands.

Protection of UK peatlands of conservation importance

Although the precise nature, extent and classification of the peatland resource require further clarification, the industry's position on sites of high conservation value is clear and consistent with English Nature's policy. In November 1990, the PPA agreed with the then Nature Conservancy Council that, pending development of a peatland strategy, member companies would not seek planning consents on sites of special scientific interest (SSSI) or on candidate SSSIs. It was recognized that, in effect, this agreement removed any threat of peat extraction from these areas thus safeguarding all the most important mire conservation sites remaining in the UK.

The industry is also committed to protecting the majority of sites on old workings where the regrowth of mire vegetation has created areas of high conservation value even although these may contain valuable peat reserves with valid planning consent. This commitment is illustrated by a recent agreement in which Fisons donated all its freehold peatland areas (approximately 3200 ha) in Somerset, Yorkshire and Cumbria to English Nature, thereby guaranteeing their future use for conservation. All the areas of current conservation value, which total 1120 ha, will be managed immediately as nature reserves.

These and other voluntary agreements, as in Somerset where wetlands of international significance are being created by the extraction of peat from former pasture land, have