

On the Bog

Connecting the Past to the Future

Online Exhibition May 10th -21st
by Sarah O'Connell

This documentary photography exhibition, centred around the Ox Mountains Bog area, is a compilation of present-day images that lightly touches on how the concept of *On the Bog* has changed with time.

www.wildatlanticwaywildflowers.ie

Exhibition site page live from May 10th



CELEBRATING THE ARTS AND CREATIVITY AS WE AGE
Bealtaine Festival Sligo 2021

The Ox Mountains extend for 40km between Ballysadare in county Sligo and Ballina in county Mayo. A wide area of the mountains is protected under EU Directives aimed at preserving habitats and wildlife.

This series of images lightly examines how the relationship between Irish people and the bog has changed over time, and how our individual and collective connection to this wetland landscape, while evolving, is being retained.





A bog is complex water saturated ecosystem whose formation started between 7000 and 4000 years ago from the roots of trees and fully and partially decayed plants.



Bogach, which means *soft* in the Irish language was how our ancestors described the spongy black earth in the nutrient poor regions where bogland or peatland prevailed.





Blanket bogs are named because of how they coat the terrain like a blanket.

They are found in areas with high levels of rainfall and cooler climates, typical of the counties in the west of Ireland.

The Ox Mountain bogs are blanket bogs.

Working on the Bog ...historically speaking..

Irish bogs were important as a life supporting supplier of basic human needs for fuel and medicine for hundreds of years.

Especially since the 17th century, when Irish people were not allowed use woodlands for fuel, rearing turf was integral to rural community living and connecting people's lives to the cycle of the seasons. The feelings of duress at being tied to the bog for survival were mixed with an unspoken affection for working on the bog.

The process of harvesting the turf followed a predictable rhythm that engaged a set of different skills.

Cutting the Turf

The first step in cutting the turf was to remove the top layer of vegetation – and this was then often used as a base for thatching houses.

The effort involved in removing that top layer was described in the 1950s Walter Macken novel *The Bogman*.

... having been two days with the spade clearing away the top of it to a depth of two feet: two feet of heather and gorse, and the tangled roots of the ferns. A hard job, dragging away at nature like that, and she only doing a good job of covering the top of the bog, trying desperately to make it into good land....”



Before the days of machine cutting, the peat was sliced out in slabs and carried by hand or wheelbarrow to dry on the bank.



Gaelic words associated with the bog:

Móin = bog

Móna = bogland

Port = bank

Sleán = the traditional instrument for cutting turf



A turf bank could be many feet off the ground below following from the years of cutting.







Turf harvested and ready to be transported home.

..and the mode of transport from the bog ...



..the donkey



..So God be with old Ireland

And the Old Bog Road..

Teresa Brayton, Old Bog Road

Work of the present day - untying our bonds to turf cutting and strengthening our bonds to bogland ...

It is widely recognised that extensive turf cutting is among the practices that are gravely damaging to peatland...(also damaging is reclamation for agricultural purposes and afforestation).





Cutting into the bog to extract turf releases the moisture that creates the conditions for a bog to develop.



As the peat dries out, the plants compressed for thousands of years into the peat start to release their stored carbon as carbon dioxide..which is a greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming



Repair of damaged peatland in the Ox Mountains Bog

A bog restoration project is underway, in association with Birdwatch Ireland, in part of the Ox Mountain bogland which had extensive drainage channels dug before it was purchased by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the 1980s.

Life in the bog ecosystem



Sphagnum moss – a plant that is able to absorb many times its own weight of moisture .. and is a sign of a healthy bog.



Lichens on a sod of peat



Cladonia cristatella



Gorse or Furze ... a typical member of the bog ecosystem, though not a necessary component of a living bog



Bog water providing sanctuary for frogs to lay their spawn

Conservation of the Ox Mountains Bog habitats

105.7km(sq) of the Ox Mountains Bogs in Mayo and Sligo are protected in EU law to ensure the survival of vulnerable species and habitats. The National Parks and Wildlife Service assess these protected habitats, or Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) every 6 years.

Although, the overall conservation status of blanket bog has been assessed as Unfavourable-Bad in both the 2007 and 2013 Article 17 conservation status reports, work is being done at a national level to improve the conservation status of blanket bogs.

Also evolving is an appreciation of the bog landscape for reasons other than turf cutting ...















Poor soil quality and waterlogging make bogs unattractive for human settlement, but attractive to industries that need space that is unoccupied by people.



..traditional hospitality is provided for the next generation of fuel providers..



Drinking water is piped through the Ox Mountain Bog to the nearby village of Dromore West.

Many Irish people hold memories of days working on the bog in their minds and hearts ...and the bog, with its acidic, anaerobic conditions, reciprocates by preserving its own record of our collective past.



Ancient weathered Scots pine

Pollen that was preserved in soil samples from bog, indicates that Scots pine was widespread in Ireland thousands of years ago.









... and the youngest swinger in town..

Modern medicine has harnessed thermal properties of peat..





.... a place of mystery and secrets.



Work for the future of blanket bogs ..



Among current national projects addressing blanket bog restoration / conservation ...

Wild Atlantic Nature Project

In 2020, the Wild Atlantic Nature project, funded under the EU LIFE programme, was set up to protect and restore the Special Conservation Area network of blanket bog in northwest Ireland.

The project is taking place in the west and north-west of Ireland, focussing on 24 Natura 2000 sites (SACs) and will target the Annex I Habitats Directive habitat type Blanket bog.

Peatlands Community Engagement Scheme

.. whereby funding is available in association with Department of Culture, Heritage and The Gaeltacht to encourage local communities, groups and interested parties to engage with them in relation to the conservation and revitalisation of peatland areas...

...



“..the moorlands and the heather, and there’s forty shades of green..”

While admiring the colours in this photo taken during the preparation of this documentary, the words of the song *Forty Shades of Green* came to mind. When I looked it up,

I discovered that Johnny Cash wrote the song and it mentioned bogs!!

Forty Shades of Green was written after he had paid a visit to Ireland in the 1950s. He was captivated by the stunning landscape and released the song, which included the phrase ...

“...I long to watch the farmers drain the bogs and spade the turf..”

It is not so politically correct to say those words now, but all is forgiven, as draining the bogs may have seemed like a good idea in 1959!



*To discuss any of the photos please feel free to contact me at
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