Reducing the horticultural use of peat in England

A Wildlife and Countryside Link response

March 2011

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) brings together over 30 voluntary organisations concerned with the conservation and protection of wildlife and the countryside. Our members practise and advocate environmentally sensitive land management, and encourage respect for and enjoyment of natural landscapes and features, the historic and marine environment and biodiversity. Taken together our members have the support of over 8 million people in the UK and manage over 690,000 hectares of land.

This response is supported by the following 15 organisations;

- Amphibian and Reptile Conservation
- Buglife – The Invertebrate Conservation Trust
- Butterfly Conservation
- Campaign for National Parks
- Campaign to Protect Rural England
- Council of British Archaeology
- Friends of the Earth England
- The Grasslands Trust
- The Mammal Society
- People's Trust for Endangered Species
- Plantlife
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
- Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust
- The Wildlife Trusts
- Woodland Trust

This response focuses on key priorities of collective concern. We would be happy to discuss the points below in further detail.

1. Rationale

Link agrees with the rationale for peat replacement. The cases for biodiversity, habitat, landscape character, palaeobotanical and archaeological protection are longstanding, robust and well known. Since the beginning of the 19th century, 94% of the United Kingdom's lowland raised bogs have been severely damaged or destroyed, and just 1.3% of England's raised mires retain their original vegetation largely intact[1]. Indeed, so critical is the situation in many European countries, that the Council Directive 92/43/EEC *On the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora* (the 'Habitats Directive') places an obligation on member states to select "*degraded* raised bogs still capable of natural regeneration" as sites for designation as SACs as part of the Natura 2000 network, the only habitat for which the selection of degraded examples is permitted.

[1] UK BAP website, http://www.ukbap.org.uk/UKPlans.aspx?ID=20#1

The imperative to retain the carbon stored in peatlands and avoid its contribution to climate change via peat extraction is also clear, and this rationale sits well above uncertainties of the nuances of carbon chemistry and balances of either cut-over, re-wetted or natural bogs. Conversely, the current use of peat for horticulture in the UK results in the release of over 630,000 tonnes of CO^2 per annum, equivalent to the annual emissions of 300,000 cars.

The use of peat as a soil conditioner has now largely been eliminated over the past decade, but increasing evidence highlights the fact that peat is not an essential element of professional and amateur growing media:

- A wide range of nurseries have largely or wholly eliminated peat usage within their growing media. The Royal Horticultural Society's Plantfinder lists no fewer than 59 specialist retail nurseries that sell 'peat-free' plants, including many specialist leaders in their field[2]. Additionally, wholesale nurseries are increasingly becoming peat free. For example, containerised tree production at Hilliers has become peat-free[3].

- Major horticultural institutions are largely peat free. Peat accounts for less than 0.7% of all growing media and soil conditioners used by the Royal Horticultural Society[4]. Since 1989 and 2003, the Royal Botanic Gardens and the National Trust respectively, have taken the decision to use only peat-free composts, except in the cases of a few rare, significant historic or specialist acid loving plants (e.g. carnivorous and ericaceous plants).

- The high quality of retail peat-free composts has now been proven through trial: all the retail compost Best Buys recommended by Garden Which? in 2010 were peat-free.

2. Targets

Link welcomes the aim to end the use of peat in horticulture. However, we feel the time scales proposed are too long, both to drive effective peat replacement and to achieve the rapid reduction in greenhouse gas emissions required. Link therefore recommends:

- peat use in the amateur gardening sector is phased out over the next five years (i.e. by 2016);
- peat use in professional horticulture is phased out by 2020; and
- peat use by local authorities is phased out within two years (2013), in line with the suggested final phase out of peat use in soil conditioners.

Additionally, we believe that there is a need to identify interim targets towards the overall phasing out of peat. We should like to see milestones of 1 million m^3 by 2013, 600,000 m^3 by 2015 and 250,000 m^3 by 2018.

[2] http://apps.rhs.org.uk/rhsplantfinder/nurseryfinder2.asp?page=1&d1=0&txtSpec=pf
[3] http://www.hilliergardencentres.co.uk/environmentalissues.php
[4] http://www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening/Sustainable-gardening/Peat-and-the-environment/What-is-the-RHS-doing-

These targets may be challenging, but longer timescales will merely prolong the commercial viability of peat and so delay focussed effort on replacing peat, as we have seen to date.

3. Voluntary approach

Link believes that the voluntary approach has failed, by a wide margin, to achieve the previous Government's target for peat replacement. We therefore feel that it is unrealistic to expect this approach to achieve the proposed new targets.

Effective Government intervention is required to spur action on peat replacement and to level the commercial differences between peat and non-peat growing media. A full assessment of all potential interventions, which include a retail peat levy, penalties for failure to change, licensing any use of peat beyond the phase-out periods, quality standards for alternatives, engagement of retailers, and others, is urgently required. Government needs to oversee a dynamic focussed and committed group to drive peat replacement forward.

4. Alternative materials

Attention needs to be given to the supply of peat replacement materials. Measures should be explored to ensure adequate supply of woody by-products, green compost and coir, as the three main current alternative materials. Focus also needs to be given to developing new promising high quality alternatives, including paper wastes, rice husks, composted bracken and sphagnum farming.

5. Review

We welcome the proposed 2015 review of progress made in achieving peat replacement. Yet we also believe that an earlier review of actions taken, and identification of any difficulties arising, is needed to keep peat replacement on track, even for the proposed peat replacement targets: we suggest that this review should take place in early summer 2013.

6. Planning

Link welcomes the expectation that all minerals planning authorities will not grant any new applications for peat extraction, or indeed identify new zones for extraction within Minerals Local Plans and would like this presumption to take immediate effect and to include any applications currently in progress; we also urge Government to progress the route towards legislative prohibition of peat extraction. We have been concerned that recent planning issues relating to the zoning of new peat extraction areas in Somerset, and the renewal of lapsed extraction permissions at Chat Moss, Manchester, are still being considered by local authorities.

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