

# *In Our Hands, Beneath Our Feet?*

## Trans-disciplinary Engagement and the wicked ‘Problem of Peat’ in the Republic of Ireland

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The Climate Crisis threatens to overwhelm both global environmental systems, and humanity’s ability to recognise and respond to these threats and challenges. This parlous situation is complicated further by tensions that can arise between attitudes towards ‘wise use’ of ‘natural resources’ and associated contestations between different forms of identity and manifestations of cultural heritage (O’ Connor and Gearey, 2021). How can these problems be framed, communicated and tackled? What might collaborations between and across disciplines offer, especially the interface between representation via the arts, and the forms of data provided by the ‘Sciences’? Is it possible to communicate without over simplification or condescension to younger audiences, who ultimately have the biggest stake in ecological rehabilitation/recovery? In this paper we focus on the ‘problem of peat’ in The Republic of Ireland. Rehabilitation/restoration of these largely damaged and degraded environments, is a critical component of EU policies around biodiversity, and especially net carbon sequestration. However, the sociocultural context of peat cutting in Ireland, is highly complex and tied to particular expressions of rural identities and intangible cultural heritage, leading to extended, and at times bitter and aggressive debates (O’ Connor and Gearey, 2021). This has led to the Irish State being referred to the European Court over failures to protect Special Areas of Conservation (SACs)<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the extraction of peat has destroyed several thousand archaeological sites, erasing this form of tangible cultural heritage (Gearey and Everett, 2021). We present a case study of collaborative work, involving NGOs, the academic sector, visual artists, and other communities of practice in the ROI. This intersection of expertise, interests and different forms of cultural practice, has developed diverse approaches to communicating and addressing aspects of the ‘problem of peat’. The most recent stage of work, took the form of an educational programme organised by the Glucksman Gallery, Cork City, inviting school groups to engage with contemporary art works and to produce their own responses to the environmental and social challenges around climate change and peatland restoration<sup>2</sup>. This culminated in an exhibition of over 800 artworks entitled *Beneath Our Feet*. We outline the processes, results and lessons from this ongoing collaboration.

### References

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1 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_24\\_1232](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1232)

2 <https://www.glucksman.org/events/beneath-our-feet-exhibition>