The Muirburn Code 2017 – Supplementary Information 7

Muirburn and Peatland

Why are peatlands important?

Peatlands provide multiple benefits to Scotland's people. They support an internationally important wildlife habitat, and are a valuable archive of our past.

They capture and store carbon, improve water quality, help to alleviate flooding, provide grazing for livestock and deer, and are used for sport and recreation.

Peatland Vegetation

The naturally occurring vegetation on an intact, wet peatland is a mix of *Sphagnum* mosses and other vegetation, including some heather, other dwarf shrubs and sedges. In these conditions:

- The *Sphagnum* mosses have access to water and light, and have space to grow;
- The heather grows slowly and in patches, as a result of the high water table, and needs little, if any additional management to maintain productivity; and
- There is some grazing value in this mix for low densities of domestic and wild livestock.

Sphagnum mosses are an integral component of peatland and their presence should be seen as beneficial to grazing and sporting enterprises.

Sheep can graze the sedges, such as cotton grass, especially early in the season.

Grouse do well on *Sphagnum* rich vegetation. The high moisture levels allow a rich source of insect life to thrive, which is a vital food source for chicks.

Management of Peatland

When peatland is in good condition, it will require little or no management, and any work that does take place should aim to have a very low impact. The presence of heavy grazing or drainage may threaten the achievement of the objectives for management. The Peatland Condition Assessment Guide details how you can carry out an assessment of your peatland.

Peat burns. It is widely used as a fuel. A burning peatland benefits no-one.

Good practice, as defined by the Code, makes it clear that burning of peatland should not take place, except as part of an approved habitat restoration plan.

Any burning that takes place, should only use low severity fires, which are often referred to as 'cool' fires. These are normally burnt with the wind, when the litter under the canopy is moist.

For habitat restoration, burning will usually be associated with efforts to raise the water table, such as ditch blocking. The habitat restoration plan will have specific, ecological objectives, but the plan will also take into account the opportunities for restoration work to provide benefits for a range of land uses, and the potential impact of the work.

This approach to the management of peatland aims to encourage landowners and managers to think carefully about the management of their peatland, as it is clear that more sensitive management of these areas will have widespread benefits.

Planning for Management

In the past, some management practices have not taken the needs of these sensitive areas fully into account. As a result, much of Scotland's peat resource is in poor condition. The drive for improved management practices on peatland seeks to reverse their decline and maximise the benefits that these areas provide.

In areas where there is a mix of drier moorland and wetter peatland habitats, muirburn effort is better focused on the drier, more productive parts. Exceptions will be identified in the approved habitat restoration plan where clear benefits can be demonstrated; for example, control of woody shrubs, rank heather or moss mats to encourage re-colonisation by *Sphagnum* mosses.

The most effective ways to improve peatland condition will be site specific, and specialist advice should be considered before commencing the work identified in the approved habitat restoration plan. Help to prepare such a plan may be obtained from NatureScot, or a peatland restoration specialist.

Other Sources of Information

The Peatland ACTION project has webpages providing more information about peatland.

The IUCN UK Peatland Programme has a range of information available on its website.

To determine the condition of peatland, reference can be made to the Peatland Condition Assessment Guide, which aims to allow people without specialised knowledge to identify the peatland condition categories on the basis of various indicators.