

# Project Title: Cultural-Historical Geographies of European Peatlands in Changing Climates

**Lead Institution/Department:** University of Bristol, School of Geographical Sciences

**Primary Supervisor:** Naomi Millner

**Co-Supervisor:** John Morgan



*Figure 1 The Bog-workers, by Paul Henry (1876-1958)*

**Scholarship:** A fully funded PhD studentship including UK fees (it may be possible to apply for further cover if international fees apply), annual stipend, and a research budget, is available at the University of Bristol. Study will begin in September 2025 and is funded for 3.5 years. The deadline for applications is 1 April 2025.

## Project aims and methods

This PhD project investigates the cultural-historical geographies of climate in European peatlands, with a specific focus on case studies where human communities have long resided. The central aim is to examine how these landscapes were historically understood, shaped and governed, focusing on both “folk” and emerging scientific perspectives on the relationships between peatlands and environmental change, including place-based and site-specific understandings of climates and weather. A key and linked dimension of this research is to interrogate how far peatlands were characterised as “empty” spaces, or places devoid of labour, and the impact these imaginaries had on subsequent rounds of management and land use change. This will involve uncovering everyday practices of work, commoning and care that were historically bound to these landscapes, and potentially using these to unsettle and challenge reductive notions of peatlands as unproductive or marginal environments, and sites of extraction, which have been reproduced ever since.

The project explores these dynamics through case studies likely drawn from historically significant peatland sites in Scotland and Ireland. The historical timeline for the case study is set to the past 200 years, a period of deep and rapid anthropogenic change in both climates and peatlands, with options for in-depth exploration in specific moments within and beyond this timeline. Part of the studentship will entail a wider review of historic shifts in the governance of peatlands, leading to the identification of specific case study sites for further investigation, in relation to their significance within wider processes of environmental and social change, including the rise of agrarian capitalism, colonial land management practices, the mechanisation of agricultural labour, and shifting perceptions of conservation value. This will lead to the development of an appropriate methodology for the development of research questions in relation to the chosen sites and time periods, integrating sources that may include logbooks, local weather records, and institutional archives, alongside cultural materials such

as folk narratives, oral histories, and land management manuals. These materials will provide a foundation for reconstructing the socio-ecological histories of these landscapes and their role in shaping responses to changing climates. The project will consequently draw on a range of research methods, depending on the chosen focus and the student's research background including a combination of some (or all) of the following:

- **Archival Research:** Historical records, including estate records, local court records, letters and diaries, agricultural reports, and meteorological data.
- **Material culture:** Objects and artefacts from peatlands, historic and contemporary landscapes.
- **Interdisciplinary Timelines:** Drawing on historical and biophysical data, timelines will be constructed to identify critical tipping points in the governance and ecological transformation of peatlands.
- **Oral Histories and Ethnography:** Interviews with local communities, particularly those with generational ties to peatlands, will document lived experiences of environmental change, traditional knowledge systems, and the labour practices tied to landscapes.
- **Comparative Case Study Analysis:** Case studies in Scotland and Ireland may be set in relation to understand regional variations in peatland governance, labour practices, and cultural narratives.
- **Creative Outputs:** The research will contribute to the creation of "The Peat Archives," an online repository that integrates historical, ecological, and cultural data related to peatlands. This platform will serve as a resource for academics, policymakers, and local communities, fostering interdisciplinary engagement and public dialogue.

#### *Summary of PEATSENSE: Diverse Knowledges and Sensing Practices in Peatlands for Inclusive Climate Futures*

This 3.5-year studentship is part of the interdisciplinary PEATSENSE project, funded by the European Research Council, which investigates the transformation of peatlands in Latin America and Europe as new global institutions and actors arrive as part of transnational climate mitigation action. PEATSENSE sets out to document implications of these transformations as well as identifying pathways towards just and inclusive governance. The premise of PEATSENSE is that the arrival of these new imaginaries, technologies and actors stands to further exclude the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP&LC) and associated forms of Indigenous and Local forms of Environmental Knowledge – but that this is not inevitable. The wider project sets out to analyse the sensing practices and multispecies relationships play in peatlands across a set of case studies under transformation via large-scale climate mitigation interventions and to implement a participatory decision-making process in and beyond the case study areas to inform future policymaking.

#### *How the studentship fits within the wider project*

This studentship is integral to PEATSENSE, linking cultural and historical insights with the project's broader objectives of inclusive and effective peatland governance. The four key contributions of the PhD to the wider project are:

1. **Illuminating cultural-historical knowledge practices:** By tracing the evolution of weather-related and environmental knowledge in peatlands, the research will contribute to understanding how past governance models have influenced present-day exclusionary practices and environmental degradation (as well as conservation practices).

2. **Integrating folk / local environmental knowledge and institutional knowledge:** The project bridges traditional and institutionalised knowledge systems, enriching the participatory ambitions of PEATSENSE by highlighting the diverse epistemologies at play.
3. **Contextualizing current interventions:** Historical timelines developed through the PhD will inform evaluations of contemporary mitigation measures, emphasising the conditions that fostered sustainable peatland use in the past.
4. **Expanding public engagement:** The student's contributions to "The Peat Archives" and interdisciplinary outputs will enhance the project's accessibility, fostering dialogues between academic, policy, and community stakeholders.

### **Candidate Requirements**

We seek a motivated candidate with a strong background in historical/cultural geography, environmental studies, environmental history, or related disciplines. Candidates will have strong written and oral communication skills and will enjoy working both independently and collaboratively in an interdisciplinary and international research team.

Ideally, candidates will have all of the essential qualifications and some of the desirable qualifications:

#### Essential Qualifications:

- A Master's degree in the social sciences or humanities (Human Geography, Environmental Humanities, Environmental History, Anthropology, or related) including training in Social Science and/or Humanities Research Methods;
- Experience with using qualitative research methods, such as archival methods, oral histories and/or document analysis;
- Prior research in related themes and/or case study regions;
- High level written and verbal communication skills in English.

#### Desirable Qualifications:

- A Master's dissertation undertaken in a broadly linked area (whether by empirics, theoretical approaches, or theme);
- Proficiency in, or interest in, learning Scottish and/or Irish Gaelic;
- Lived and/or research experience in one of the case study countries (Scotland; Ireland)
- Interest and/or experience in public engagement, participatory processes and/or scientific communication to a wider audience;
- Experience of working in an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or international team;
- Familiarity with Cultural/Historical Geographical and/or Environmental Humanities approaches.

### **Background reading**

Bresnihan, P., & Brodie, P. (2023). Data sinks, carbon services: Waste, storage and energy cultures on Ireland's peat bogs. *New Media & Society*, 25(2), 361-383.

Byg, A., Novo, P., & Kyle, C. (2023). Caring for Cinderella—Perceptions and experiences of peatland restoration in Scotland. *People and Nature*, 5(2), 302-312.

Fernández-Llamazares, Á., Lepofsky, D., Lertzman, K., et al. (2021). Scientists' warning to humanity on threats to indigenous and local knowledge systems. *Journal of Ethnobiology*, 41(2), 144-169.

Flint, A., & Jennings, B. (2020). Saturated with meaning: peatlands, heritage and folklore. *Time and Mind*, 13(3), 283-305.

Hulme, M. (2016). *Weathered: Cultures of Climate*. Sage.

Lourenco, M., Fitchett, J.M., & Woodborne, S. (2023). Peat definitions: A critical review. *Progress in Physical Geography: Earth and Environment*, 47(4), 506-520.

Morgan, J.E. (2015). Understanding flooding in early modern England. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 50, 37-50.

Naylor, S., Macdonald, N., Bowen, J. P., & Endfield, G. (2022). Extreme weather, school logbooks and social vulnerability: The Outer Hebrides, Scotland, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Journal of Historical Geography*.

O'Riordan, M., McDonagh, J., & Mahon, M. (2019). Unlikely alliances? Knowledge, power and the collaborative governance of Irish peatlands. *Geoforum*, 100, 188-198.

Stanley, T. (2024). Carbon 'known not grown': Reforesting Scotland, advanced measurement technologies, and a new frontier of mitigation deterrence. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 151, 103636.

Turnhout, E. (2018). The politics of environmental knowledge. *Conservation and Society*, 16(3), 363-371.

Yusoff, K. (2018). *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

## Useful Links

Please contact Naomi Millner (naomi.millner@bristol.ac.uk) for informal enquiries.

- <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/geography/courses/postgraduate/>

**How to Apply:** Please apply to the "Geography (PhD)" programme at <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/postgraduate/apply/>.

In your application, please include as an attachment a Research Statement of up to 1200 words (excluding references) in which you lay out:

- A. Your motivation for applying for this project studentship, including relevant experience and interests, skills and motivations (500 words);
- B. The analytical approach, case studies, methodology and timeline you would use to design your doctoral project in the context of PEATSENSE (700 words). You may also choose a different case study region than those suggested here for the purpose of the application – this will in any case be defined in the first year of the PhD.