



Symposium 'Veen in Vlaanderen'

19 November 2020, 10u -11u30

Organised by Natuurpunt together with University of Antwerp (UA)
and the Institute for Nature and Forest Research (INBO)

Report

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Report

Report of workshop with policy makers on peatland policy in Flanders (Belgium), and possibilities to improve these strategies and approaches.

Contact

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1. Purpose

As part of the Interreg Care-Peat project, Natuurpunt organised the symposium 'Veen in Vlaanderen' (Peat in Flanders). Over the span of 1.5 hours, Flemish peat experts from the University of Antwerp (UA) and the Institute for Nature and Forest Research (INBO) told the 180 registered participants via Zoom about the opportunities and obstacles that stand in the way of successful peat restoration. As part of the webinar, an interactive exchange between participants and experts took place, during which necessary levers for successful peatland restoration in Flanders to realise nature and climate benefits were identified.

Initially the intention was to have this workshop take place in one of the most beautiful peatlands of Flanders: the Valley of the Zwarte Beek in Beringen and Lummen. The plan was to let policymakers and peat enthusiasts experience the site with their own eyes, introducing them to its reed peat, sedge peat and bog peat, and their sponginess.

These plans had to be adjusted to meet COVID-19 regulations, turning the planned hands-on experience into a webinar. Which still provided a great start to the planned following peat initiatives. Hopefully at some point we can include some field experience again.

The symposium, including all presentations, can be viewed again on the YouTube channel of Care-Peat: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XcostGt_zCk&t=563s.

2. Aims and goals

“The main goal of this workshop is to connect policy makers to what we do and what problems we come across in the facilitation of rewetting of peatlands, as well as to connect them to (best) practices from other countries.”

After all, the environment policy document of the Flemish government makes clear: our wetlands and marshes, particularly peatlands, are an area of opportunity and have the great potential to contribute to positive change. In addition to providing critical services such as flood protection, drought prevention and purification of drinking water, these systems are critical to the protection of the water biodiversity and combating climate change. Peatlands are the most efficient carbon storage system, covering only 3% of the world’s land surface, but capturing more than a quarter of all carbon in the ground.

3. Structure

Welcome and introductions

- Short introduction of the area which was supposed to be visited, the Valley of the Zwarte Beek in Beringen and Lummen.
- Changes of plans due to Covid19, which unfortunately prevented participants from being able to experience the restoration site, but also allowed a higher number of people to be able to join the workshop online.

Brief overview of the Care Peat project (background)

- Quick overview of why we want to re-wet and restore peat
- Some background information on peatland and the role of Natuurpunt

Presentations by three experts (see below)

Question and answer round

- Participants could ask questions and received questions from the Care-Peat team and the peatland experts

4. Presentations by experts

Rudy van Diggelen (University of Antwerp) - Restoring the ecosystem services of a underrated landscape type

The symposium started with peat expert Rudy van Diggelen. Rudy works as a professor for the Ecosystem Management research group at the University of Antwerp. He had previously worked as a scientist at Utrecht University Groningen University in the Netherlands, until he then in 2008 joined the Moerdijk, moving to Antwerp in Belgium. Despite all the moving, bogs and nature conservation and restoration has always been a constant throughout his career.

Rudy took on the topic area "science" in his presentation. He set the scene for the following presenters by introducing the audience to what peat is, ecosystem services from peat to nature and climate, and threats to the Flemish and international peat ecosystems. Rudy also provided a closer look at initiatives that include peat protection outside nature reserves, for example Paludiculture. The presentation ended with the conclusion that the preservation and recovery of Flemish peatlands is extremely urgent. Which implies protection of all non-drained bogs and rewetting of all drained bogs.

Jan Wouters (INBO) – Peatlands in Flanders - Where are they, what drives them, why are they there?

The second speaker was Jan Wouters who has been working at INBO for 17 years, currently as part of their Environment and Climate team. Within the team, he mainly focuses on site selection research: he examines which environmental factors explain the occurrence of certain types of nature in a specific region.

Jan has been fascinated with peat bogs from an early age on and tries to be actively involved in restoration work in his spare time. In his presentation he focused on the rather critical state of Flemish bogs, but also on the encouraging outlook including possibilities to develop and recover peat land.

Kris Decler (INBO) - Peat recovery in Flanders - (Doom and gloom) challenges for policy

The symposium ended with Kris Decler. He is a landscape ecologist at INBO as part of the Landscape Ecology and Nature Management team and is involved with Care-Peat as a peat expert. In the past Kris has worked at INBO as scientific advisor on area-oriented nature policy. And he too has a special interest in the management and restoration of wetlands. His publication Decler et al. (2016), is a in policy circles frequently used guide for area-oriented peat restoration.

Kris covered the policy section of this webinar and focused on the levers that we should overcome, and which instruments we need in Flanders to make peat restoration a success.

5. Next steps and conclusions

- Peatlands are unique ecosystems and Flanders has a great responsibility to protect them
- To minimise the contribution of drained peat soils to global warming, peaty soils need to be preserved, for which the land needs to stay saturated. This translates into the need for adapted land use including for instance a ban on drainage, switch to Paludiculture, etc.
- The next step is to expand and restore peat areas by rewetting them and the restoration of the hydrological system at the landscape level. Meaning that peat bodies need to receive sufficient water, either through seepage or from rainwater and that drainage should be minimal. Which in turn implies the need, for example, for setting up buffer areas with specific measures (such as slower drainage).
- In order to optimally focus on peat conservation in Flanders, a policy with sufficient possibilities to impose measures and allocate financing should be developed
- There is the need for a "Flemish peat platform" with the aim of working together with multiple stakeholders to create jointly supported initiatives. We strive for a consortium in which the commitment to peat restoration is paramount to all parties. This way we would hope to:
 - Sharing and exchange of knowledge, linking science and practice
 - Identifying bottlenecks at the policy level and establish what will be needed to eliminate these and to create an integrated policy
 - Drawing up a working framework for regional / local consultation and realisations