



The bogs are alive: how art is healing Scottish peatlands

An ambitious project is restoring areas of blanket bog in the heart of the Flow Country in northern Scotland that have been damaged by forestry planting

by [Murdo MacLeod](#)

Main image: Kathy Hinde leads a session of 'deep bog listening.'

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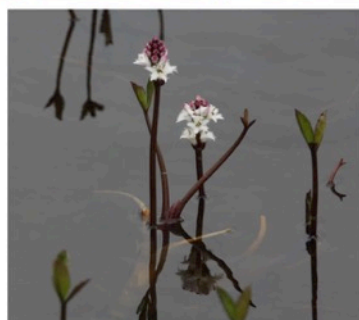


A commission to produce a series of visual, sonic and kinetic installations has been awarded to Cryptic, a Glasgow-based arthouse, as part of the [Peatland Partnership's](#) Flows to the Future Project in conjunction with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. The work will be shown in the gardens during the Edinburgh festival in August.



The visitor centre at Forsinard in the Flow Country

The installations are inspired by one of Scotland's most extraordinary and unsung natural features: the blanket bog of the Highlands. Cryptic's project, *Below the Blanket*, is centred on Caithness and Sutherland's Flow Country - a 16,000-hectare (40,000-acre) expanse of deep peat, dotted with bog pools, which play a crucial role in fighting the effects of the climate crisis. *Below the Blanket* features artists Kathy Hinde, Luci Holland, Hannah Imlach, Heather Lander, Matthew Olden and the composer Malcolm Lindsay, who have made work responding to the Flow Country's wildlife and soundscape.

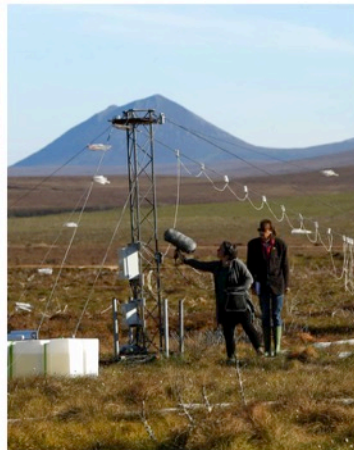
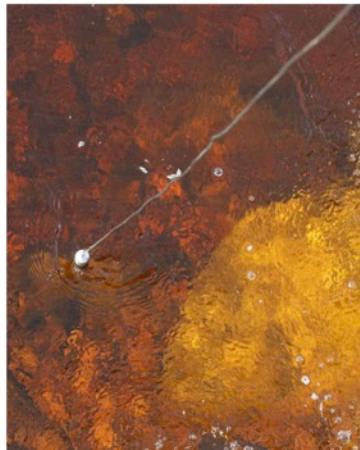


The pretty flowers of bog bean appear in spring

The Flow Country is a vast landscape in the far north of [Scotland](#), dominated by blanket bog, a rare type of peatland. It is the largest expanse of blanket bog in Europe and the best example of its type in the world. About 3% of the world's land surface is peatland, but only a tiny percentage of this is blanket bog. These environments form cool, wet places towards the north and south poles over thousands of years, generating a distinctive and significant habitat.



Artist Kathy Hinde led a session of "deep bog listening", using specialist audio equipment with local people. A hydrophone or contact microphone is lowered in the bog enabling the listeners to hear the bog breathing liquids and gasses in its mossy mass.

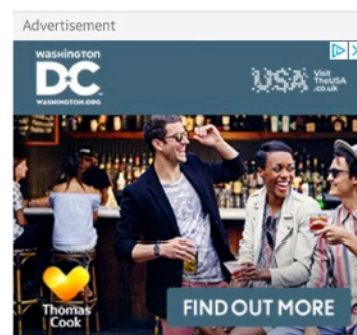


Perhaps the most significant plant species in the Flow Country are perhaps the sphagnum mosses, which thrive in the cool and wet environment. Due to the acidic, waterlogged conditions, they do not fully rot down on dying. Instead they form peat, preserving plant material and storing carbon.



Artist Matthew Olden with data-gathering flux towers near Forsinard. Olden will build a soundscape with a 100-plus speaker system. The soundscapes have been created with data concerning "bog breathing" and relating to the surface ebb and flow of water within the bog.

The function of the bog as a carbon store is invaluable in helping to mitigate the effects of climate breakdown. Parts of the Flow Country are being restored by RSPB Scotland land managers and other organisations. This involves removing the forestry plantations, blocking drainage ditches and allowing the original water levels to return.



In some places, the peatlands look like a Persian carpet

Large areas of the Flow Country were planted with non-native forestry in the 1980s using government tax incentives. Much of this forestry is on deep peat, severely damaging the peatland habitat. The rolling moor is studded with shining bog pools, called *dubh lochans* (black lochs) in Gaelic. In the damp, peaty soil, very special communities of plants flourish.



Deer on the peatlands

In some places, the peatlands look like a Persian carpet, because they are covered in colourful bog mosses and lichens. The pretty flowers of bog bean appear here in spring; the lovely scent of bog myrtle wafts over drier areas, and carnivorous plants such as sundew and butterwort wait silently, hoping to attract and trap unsuspecting insects.

It is hoped that visitors to the Below the Blanket installations in [Edinburgh](#) will encounter artworks that are evocative, contemplative and beautiful - and will come away enlightened about this unique Scottish landscape.

