

## **Peatland Actions: Questions of Scale**

**Notes for ArtCOP at The Stove, Dumfries, December 7 - 12, 2015**

**Kate Foster with Nadiah Rosli**

At Submerge, we bring together two considerations of peatland - from the Solway and South East Asia. This is also a celebration of the form and function of bog-moss, *Sphagnum*. These are notes from work in progress.

The colours of my own Solway investigation are mainly brown, sometimes blue, with vivid green and russet strands of *Sphagnum*. My prompt was that very few complete Mosses survive - for example only 15% of Lochar Moss remained as moss by 1973, compared to its extent in 1889. Knowing that exposed peat releases greenhouse gases, I wanted to think more about a sack of peats from Lewis that I was given, and the industrial scale of peat extraction that I pass by on the A75 from Carlisle. Until recently Mosses have not been valued for their 'ecosystem services' but peatbogs are the most effective carbon sinks known. Peatland Action is a government initiative whose aims include climate mitigation, so some peatbogs have been partly restored. *Sphagnum* is a kind of aqueous super-hero, because it allows bogs to soak up flood water and release it slowly. The peaty core of a bog offers an environmental archive reaching down to the last ice age, and its living surface forms a carpet whose colour and form become wondrous with a closer look.

Nadiah Rosli's palette is necessarily darker: her project "5000 Shades of Grey" refers to the thick toxic haze from fires in Indonesian carbon-rich peatlands affecting countries in South East Asia, including her home country of Malaysia. This year is one of the worst years on record, and it has become a strange annual ritual for Nadiah's family and friends to wear face masks and to stay indoors when the air pollution is particularly bad. The scale of this smoky haze can be seen from space, and huge carbon emissions result. It remains to be seen if the UN talks in Paris can require the Indonesian government to take action against this illegal burning of forest, that makes space for plantation monoculture.

Meeting Nadiah, now a postgraduate student in Dumfries, I learned why she urgently wants us to know about 'extraordinary injuries ... committed through deliberate acts'. Distance makes her realise the damage more acutely, but changes how she communicates. Her compelling essay takes us into the emotional space of people for whom "Haze" has become an everyday weather condition, that can kill. Images of children in face masks at school compare with instagrams rejoicing at the sight of blue sky.

Nadiah also registers impacts on wildlife, including how a third of the world's orang-utan population has been smothered, ancient rainforests withering in the heat, and skies silenced of birds. Muslim belief calls for responsible stewardship: the fires choking the region can be seen as a transgression, directly committed by shareholders of multinational palm oil and pulp paper companies and indirectly by those who consume their products.

Set next to each other (sketches, images, and quotes), extracts of our investigations pose questions of scale. This research period has prompted thoughts about the comforts and discomforts of distance (in both space and time). Also, how in relatively short periods ecological damage to slowly formed natural heritage can become 'normal'. We will explore these themes at the Questions of Scale evening event.

Sphagnum has to have central place! As you can see for yourself, it can be repeatedly submerged to absorb perhaps 20 times its own weight of water, and then dried out. Sphagnum's unique structure includes cells that hold water. I have collected individual strands of Sphagnum species, mostly from Kirkconnel Flow. Another statistic: a peat bog is perhaps 98% water and 2% moss. Bog and moss experts make me enthusiastic about this rootless plant that survives only in dense upright mats - as a community - but collectively has created the Mosses that I love to see when travelling to the Stove.

*Notes prepared by Kate Foster, December 5 2015*

**Exhibition: Submerge** will run from Monday 7th December to Saturday 12th December, from 10am to 5pm daily, with an evening opening on Monday 7th at 6pm

**Event: A Question of Scale** - an evening of conversation and debate on artistic responses and approach to global and large scale issues such as climate change.  
December 10 @ 6:00 pm - 9:00 pm

**@ The Stove** 100 High Street, Dumfries, Scotland, DG1 2BJ  
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**Further information about Kate Foster's artwork:**

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