INTERNATIONAL MIRE CONSERVATION GROUP

IMCG Resolution 2018 on drained peatlands, with special reference to The Netherlands

During the period August 20 - 31, 2018, in the 34th year of its existence, the International Mire Conservation Group (IMCG[1]) held its 18th International Field Symposium in the Netherlands, as part of IMCG's regular field assessments and symposia. An IMCG delegation from 23 countries and 6 continents, accompanied and supported by Dutch researchers and management professionals, travelled across the Netherlands studying the diversity and functionality of peatlands and the issues facing them, with a special focus on their restoration and wise use.

The experiences collected during and in preparation of this Field Symposium brought the IMCG General Assembly, held in Utrecht, August 31, 2018, to adopt the following considerations:

1. Peatlands drained for agricultural use have become large sources of greenhouse gases and contribute significantly to global warming, with SE Asia and the European Union as major global emission hotspots. Drained peatlands are furthermore subject to ongoing land subsidence, leading to increased flood risks, fires, salt intrusion, management costs, damage to rural and urban infrastructure, and eventually to the loss of productive land. These negative trends, which are expected to be aggravated by climate change, urgently necessitate adaptation of land use.
2. With respect to the Netherlands, IMCG is concerned about the widespread promotion of 'underwater drainage' in various modifications as an 'adaptation measure' and the planned large-scale implementation of these techniques. Adaptation measures with major consequences for future land use should only be implemented after their short- and long-term effectiveness has been convincingly demonstrated. IMCG wishes to point out that
    - The substantial reduction of subsidence and greenhouse gas emissions claimed by the proponents of underwater drainage is not substantiated by research of generally accepted scientific standards. The conclusions drawn from published studies are not supported by the respective data[2].
    - The proposed measures are too easily presented as ultimate solutions and distract from the real problem: the inherent unsustainability of all drainage-based peatland agriculture. Even if they would work, the measures are no long term solution, but only retard the degeneration process and continue aggravating the subsidence problem. Eventually –and preferably as soon as possible – measures have to be implemented that not only reduce, but stop and possibly reverse subsidence and minimize emissions. The current focus on subsurface drainage may frustrate the necessary transition to a more sustainable land use.

[1] The IMCG internationally promotes, encourages and, where appropriate, co-ordinates the conservation of mires and related ecosystems; and internationally enhances the exchange of information and experience relating to mires and factors affecting them.

[2] See for an in-depth meta-analysis of the research result and conclusions Couwenberg, J. 2018. Some facts on submerged drains in Dutch peat pastures. IMCG Bulletin June-July 2018, pp. 9 – 21. Available under http://www.imcg.net/modules/download_gallery/dlc.php?file=294

3. Research into alternative production systems on wet soils should be intensified. First results of paludiculture (cattail, reed, peat moss) are promising but need to be tested at the field scale and evaluated in the overall context of climate-change mitigation and adaptation.
4. A clear vision is needed for mitigation and adaptation in the Dutch peat meadow landscape. A pathway to reach this vision should be set-out, including a legal framework and effective incentives that prevent that short term farm-level gains are chosen above the long-term goal of a sustainable future for all.