

Opinion & Analysis

Destroying bogs to produce uneconomical energy



**JOHN
GIBBONS**

You'd struggle to come up with a way of producing electricity as environmentally criminal as peat-fired power stations

THE LAW'S the law, right? Applying this facile logic, then the Burmese military junta, which this week extended the detention of pro-democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was acting lawfully.

"One may well ask: how can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" said civil rights leader, Martin Luther King. "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. One has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

Environmental group Greenpeace engaged in direct action this week by dropping dozens of large boulders in the Kattegat strait between Sweden and Denmark. This is a last-ditch effort to save important feeding and breeding grounds from hugely destructive bottom trawling by giant fishing vessels.

Whether or not it's within the law, would you consider this form of action moral? Britain's 1971 Criminal Damage Act allows damage to be caused to a property in order to prevent greater destruction – such as a fireman breaking down your front door while attempting to put out a blaze. This law was tested last September, when six climate activists were charged with criminal damage for breaking into the Kingsnorth coal-fired power plant in Kent, and daubing a slogan on its chimney. A jury found they had a "lawful

excuse" to damage property to prevent the far greater damage wrought by the millions of tonnes of emissions emanating from the plant.

The trial heard direct evidence from Prof James Hansen of Nasa that the earth is in "imminent peril" from dangerous anthropogenic climate heating, with plants like Kingsnorth – similar in scale to the Moneypoint station in Clare – directly contributing to the mounting toll of climate-driven damage.

Shortly after the Kingsnorth decision, former US vice-president Al Gore publicly urged young people to engage in civil disobedience in a bid to block the construction of new coal plants.

Luckily, Ireland doesn't have any significant coal deposits to burn. What we have instead are some of the world's most important bogs. Peatlands comprise almost a fifth of Ireland's land cover, and lock away a massive 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon. They are also home to around half our endangered bird species and around a quarter of endangered plant species. Peat bogs are amazingly efficient carbon sponges. A healthy bog typically stores 10 times more carbon per hectare than any other system, including forests. Peatland protection, according to the UN Environment Programme is "among the

Peatland protection is among the most cost-effective options for mitigating climate change

most cost-effective options for mitigating climate change". Damage to peat bogs is now producing the equivalent of over a tenth of total global fossil-fuel emissions.

If peatlands are our ecological golden goose, Ireland's collective response has been to wring its neck. In recent years, as other countries woke up the immense value of intact peatlands, three brand new peat-burning power stations were brought online by the ESB and Bord na Móna and now burn over three million tonnes of peat a year.

You'd struggle to dream up a dirtier, more inefficient, idiotic and environmentally

criminal way to produce electricity. Unless, that is, you choose to support this madness by way of hefty subsidies from the taxpayer to help cover the cost of destroying our bogs to produce uneconomical electricity. Peat generates three times more emissions per megawatt produced than even dirty coal.

"If you talk about cutting down rainforests, people rightly get upset, but a pristine bogs does exactly the same thing," Dr David Wilson of UCD told me. Destroying our bogs for electricity and horticulture is, he says, "outrageous".

Some 32 bogs designated as special areas of conservation should now be protected from cutting, after the expiry of an Irish derogation from a 1999 EU habitats directive, but this appears to have been once again fudged by the Department of the Environment – and so the wreckage continues.

The peat scandal is one of the very worst examples of the collusion of local politics and special interests. "What in Ireland isn't driven by vested interests?" asks Ian Lumley of An Taisce, which fought and failed to prevent these plants being licensed.

He is even more alarmed at the widespread unregulated peat extraction taking place beyond EPA supervision "in the guise of so-called traditional hand cutting". Dr Wilson

concur, adding: "JCBs are literally hacking off the edges of bogs, causing absolutely hideous damage to entire systems".

Despite its dire history, Bord na Móna's new management does now seem determined to chart a genuinely sustainable path, reckons environmental broadcaster Duncan Stewart.

If Martin Luther King were alive today, he might well be rolling up his groundsheet and leading the march to Shannonbridge, Co Offaly, which this Saturday hosts Ireland's first climate camp, located in the shadow of the local peat-fired plant. The overriding aim of the camp, which involves a week of education and awareness, is to promote climate justice, according to spokeswoman, Molly Walsh. "There has been a great history of struggle against injustice by direct action, be it the land league, the anti-Apartheid movement or the suffragettes."

Highlight of the camp is a day of direct action on Saturday 22nd. The aim of organisers is "peaceful civil disobedience". Close liaison with gardai should help avoid the confrontations that have marred some similar events in the UK.

Whether or not this is understood, the climate campers are not just fighting for their future, they're fighting for ours too – and our children's.