



## The International Day of Women in Science

Eilidh Stirrup, Peatland Project Officer, Lochaber Fisheries Trust



My background as a woman in science began at the University of Aberdeen, where I attained a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology. I have always had an interest in the environment and natural world, so zoology provided me a great foundation to delve into specific areas of interest and research, as my degree progressed. I ended up choosing subjects that focussed on ecology, marine biology, land management and conservation science.

I discovered I was practically minded and like to apply research in the field, so quickly found myself seeking roles in ecological fieldwork and conservation management. I worked through RSPB internships towards seasonal ecology work in Scotland, then on to a permanent position as an ecologist for a small independent consultancy before moving into an environmental consultant role with a company that focussed on gathering ecological data for environmental impact assessment reports in the renewables sector.

In order to describe my current job role some background context is needed. In 2012 NatureScot (formerly SNH) launched a project called Peatland Action which aims to restore much of Scotland's degraded peatland habitat. Peatlands within the highlands are mostly found in upland habitats and when in near natural condition, accumulate carbon through plant remains, therefore, are one of the UK's greatest natural carbon stores. Historic draining, land uses, and grazing pressures have ultimately led to modified peatland-forming conditions through decreased water table levels which reduces resilience,

functioning and biodiversity of this ecosystem. A Peatland Project Officer's role within Peatland Action is to advise, develop and facilitate restoration projects with landowners and managers. In short, we help to design projects that are robust and sensitive to contributing environmental and land-use pressures.

Day-to-day this means using skills that I have transferred from all previous job roles towards developing successful projects. These include knowledge of upland ecology and species identification, field work in remote areas, environmental monitoring and functional data collection, identifying health and safety and access issues in remote environments, report-writing, effective communication with individuals from varying backgrounds, using GIS programmes and project management.

So, how is restoring peatland related to fisheries work? In a nutshell, peatlands, the water table and surrounding catchments are intrinsically linked. Restoration of degraded peatland increases water quality in the surrounding catchment, controls PH and reduces sediment flow into river systems where salmon eggs and freshwater pearl mussels are particularly vulnerable. As many scientists are already aware, mitigating the effects of climate change is imperative to maintain biodiversity and protect the functionality of natural ecosystem processes and peatland restoration is one method towards achieving this.

On a parting note: as a woman who has developed a career within the environmental science sector - which was historically male-dominated -, I have been fortunate that in every one of my job roles and opportunities I have been managed by or part of a team that includes a woman in a position of leadership and/or authority. I can reason that - without being actively aware - this has had a momentous impact on my confidence and ability to pursue roles with greater responsibility and leadership. In other words: it's hard to be what you can't see. An important statement relating not only to female representation but supports the need to maintain and generate diversity in the scientific field.

[Find out more](#) about the organisation Eilidh works with.