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TIONSCADAL GEOPHÁIRC

Dhúiche Sheoigheach & Lochanna an Iarthair

JOYCE COUNTRY & WESTERN LAKES GEOPARK PROJECT



Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark Project ... it's happening!

The Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark Project officially began in the third week of January 2020.

A 2-year, €1.19 million project supported mainly by the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund in the Department of Rural & Community Development (part of Project Ireland 2040) and in collaboration with national, regional and local bodies, the project started in January 2020 and follows on from 10 years of heroic volunteer work.

Its aim is to develop a geopark in the area surrounding Joyce Country on the Galway-Mayo border and Loughs Mask, Carra and Corrib, with the intention of applying for full [UNESCO Global Geopark status](#). The area has fabulous beauty and impressive heritage but is little known. Geoparks are places of internationally important geology which are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and economic development. UNESCO Global Geopark status carries no additional legal status or planning restrictions to those already in place by local, national or EU legislation. The intention is to better promote the area and in doing so boost jobs and income in its 20 communities.

Geological Survey Ireland is the lead partner, with significant financial and in-kind support also committed from Údarás na Gaeltachta, Mayo and Galway County Councils, Coillte and a cross-community group JCWL Geoenterprise. The project manager in Geological Survey Ireland is Dr Siobhán Power. Financial details are attached, including main budget lines, partner contributions and planned timelines. A project Steering Group provides oversight. The Steering Group meets quarterly, is chaired by Koen Verbruggen, Director, Geological Survey Ireland, and is composed of representatives of the other collaborating partners Údarás na Gaeltachta, Galway and Mayo County Councils, Fáilte Ireland, Coillte, JCWL Geoenterprise and one representative each from the regional farming and tourism sectors. The project team make regular reports to the Steering Group. The project runs for two years to the end of 2021 and is currently based in the tourist office Tourmakeady, Co Mayo.

Four staff have been contracted through public tender. Michael Hegarty

(Geopark Manager), Dr Benjamin Thébaudeau (Geopark Geologist), and Dominic O'Morain (Tourism Officer, funded by Údarás na Gealtachta) are based in Tourmakeady, while Amrine Dubois Gafar (Project Geologist and Administrator) is based in Geological Survey Ireland in Dublin.

The main activities so far have included: development of a new logo and brand identity; contracting for a modern interactive website; preparing tenders to provide training on social media and tour guiding to local communities and entrepreneurs; development of orientation and geology maps; development of other written content on geology, landscape, local heritage and culture. All communities in the area have been introduced to the project and provided feedback, including physical meetings before the Covid-19 lockdown and subsequently by videoconferencing. Further details are in other news items below. An official launch of the project is anticipated for later in 2020.

Community connections

During March, April and May 2020 the project undertook initial consultations with all the communities of the planned geopark area.

The sessions included a Power Point presentation about the project, followed by a Q&A session, and completion and return to the project team of a brief questionnaire for each community. The early meetings were in each local community centre, then after Covid-19 restrictions were introduced the meetings were by videoconferencing. From the returned questionnaires, a useful snapshot of local development actions and challenges and how they hope to engage with the geopark project.

An impressive range of developments have taken place and are planned by the 20 communities of the area – including playgrounds, trails, community and heritage centres, sports and exercise facilities – and more are planned. Challenges they face include weak broadband, need for public transport, parking and litter, climate change and biodiversity loss, and concerns about planning restrictions arising from designations.

A fantastic range of tourism services and features are already available in the area and some business networks exist – but there's a whole lot more potential to provide new jobs and alternative sources of income for people of all ages and backgrounds. Heritage services development is somewhat ad hoc in many communities, with good options for more structured planning. There is plenty of interest in communities for participating in a short course about geology and landscape and heritage promotion. And for training in a range of areas including more effective use of social media, business start-ups and networks development. In the hospitality sector there is particular interest in knowing more about Fáilte Ireland's new Welcome Standard and related training.

Overall, there continues to be strong support for the idea, aims and proposed actions of the JCWL Geopark Project. There's now more awareness of the need to support local development, particularly in light of the effects that the Covid-19 restrictions are having on employment and the local economies. And the communities are keen that the planned project activities and supports are made available as soon as possible.



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Brand new image

Image is important. And so, the project has developed a new logo and brand image (above and at the top) to help promote the geopark idea and the Joyce Country and Western Lakes area overall.

The new logo is just above. The image was professionally developed and is an adaptation of a photo of Lough Nafooy on the Mayo-Galway county border in the heart of Joyce Country. The colours are unusual ... we want it to be unique, "to stand out in the crowd". As for the blackface sheep ... well, it's an icon across much of our geopark area. The Irish language is one of the unique points of the area, and sets it apart from other UNESCO Global Geoparks, that's why it's so prominent in the logo. We are sure the project can be a boost

to consolidation and expansion of the Irish language.

For consistency, we have detail on how the logo should be used with partners in a particular activity, subject to permission. This includes info panels at sites of interest, on social media and other digital platforms, maps, clothing and other promotional material. Communities or businesses interested in using the logo should first provide details of the intended use and request permission from the project.

New website coming

A new project website is on the way. The current website www.joycecountrygeoparkproject.ie has served its purpose, but a fresher, smarter, more interactive site with more information is now needed for a diverse range of users.

Domestic and international tourists, scientists, teachers and students, local communities, and tourism service providers and NGOs will all be able to benefit. The site will have easily navigable features and functions and be compatible with mobile devices and social media platforms, including use in areas with poor internet speeds.

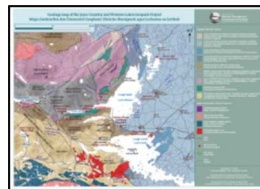
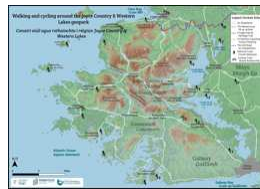
It will also be a hub for links to communities and tourism service providers in the area – hospitality sector, guides, crafts people, culture and heritage interests, music sector, etc. Aside from English, key information will be in multiple other languages including Irish, French, German Chinese, Dutch, Italian. Tourism sector businesses will be able to request links to their services. More details on how to go about this will be forwarded in the coming weeks to all the community councils in the geopark area.

Maps and more

Booklets of tear-away maps for locals and visitors will soon be delivered to the geopark project communities and activity and accommodation providers of the region.

A collection of tear-away maps highlighting the walking and cycling offerings of the wider western region and the geology of the geopark project territory have been developed for a “starter pack” to be delivered throughout the geopark project territory. Three distinct products will be offered: a **walking and cycling map** with information on the various trails on the back; a **geological map** with information on the various sites of interest on the back; and a version with **both maps back to back**.

The **orientation map** (below left) will position the Joyce Country and the Western Lakes area in the wider context of Iar-Chonnacht while at the same time display the great diversity of national trails for walking and cycling in the area including the Western Way and Tóchar Phádraig pilgrimage. A **geological map** (below right) will focus on the geopark project territory and highlight the great diversity of rock types and geological time periods that are present. Specific sites of interest where clear snippets of the region’s geological history can be uncovered will also be marked out. Booklets of the tear-away maps will be delivered to the 20 communities of the geopark project area and to a range of activity and accommodation providers for distribution to visitors from near and far.



Training for guiding

Very soon the geopark project plans to advertise a course to train certified tour guides. The procurement of a training provider is underway.

Availability of well qualified tour guides with good knowledge and capability on the tourism offerings of the Joyce Country and Western Lakes geopark area (including geotourism) will be important for growing visitor numbers. The aim is to provide an enhanced experience for locals and visitors – including people of all ages, backgrounds, interests and origins – to explore and enjoy the fantastic natural and cultural richness of the Joyce Country and Western Lakes. And at the same time provide jobs and income for guides.

Let's get networking

There's a lot to be gained from networks. They bring people with common interests together – including those who previously thought of themselves as competitors. When functioning well, they bring mutual benefits to those in the network. The key is putting in time and effort to get those benefits.

Creation and support to business networks is a key activity of this Geopark Project. It will also be an important part and outcome of the project's business development training and consultancy. One overall network is planned, made up of four sub-networks.

1. **Accommodation, restaurants, & retail network.** This will include representatives of hotels, B&B, self-catering, hostels; camping, glamping, yurt, pods; restaurants, bars, cafés; and small retail shops, service stations.
2. **Food, drinks, & crafts producers network.** Representatives include brewery, distillery, other drinks; home bakery, confectioners etc; textiles, jewelry, souvenirs, art, treatments etc.
3. **Activity services network.** Representatives include tour guides; angling, fishing, ghillie; hiking, walking, cycling, nature; action adventure (sailing, kayak, mountain biking, etc); museums, cultural centres.
4. **Education network.** This includes representatives of primary and secondary schools and 3rd level institutes.

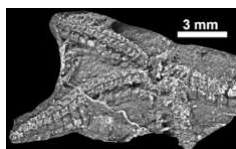
Competitive and innovative regional enterprises will be encouraged through providing information on small-scale business start-ups and expansions through new and existing clusters at local level about the opportunities for use of the UNESCO Global Geopark brand to create new products and services. Improved entrepreneurial innovation, skills, revenues and jobs will be generated through providing products and services for increased in-bound tourism. Education providers will be stimulated by sharing ideas and resources on geology, culture and heritage.

More details will be provided shortly through the geopark newsletter and direct contacts with community groups.

Colouring competition

What were the colours of ancient animals of which only fossils remain? Get creative and show us what you think the famous Joyce Country Brittle Star looked like in colour.

A species of Brittle Star (from the family of the starfish) that lived in the region 435 million years ago made the news a few years ago. Its only known fossil was discovered in the Maam Valley in the 1980s by Dr Eamon Doyle, the Geopark Geologist of the Burren and Cliffs of Moher UNESCO Global Geopark. It has since been named after him with the sweet-sounding name of *Crepidodoma doylei*. As we don't know much about the potential colours of the animal, a colouring competition was launched at the end of May through our [website](#) for children to show us what they think the Brittle Star would have looked like. Entries are still welcome. Print out, colour in and send to geologist@jcwlgeopark.ie and winners will be displayed on our website and social media.



Looking ahead - plans for the coming months

Several key project actions have been outlined in news briefs above, but there are others on the near horizon too.

They include: tear-out maps with information on the geopark area; preparation for signage panels at sites of interest; completion of four short promotional videos on the geopark area; a baseline survey of community businesses and ideas for expansion; training on Fáilte Ireland's Welcome Standard and on business development; and activities for Heritage Week.

- i. The **tear-out maps** will be part of a welcome pack for distribution to hospitality and other tourism service providers in the area. They include

an orientation map with hiking trails and main access roads, and detail of area geology.

- ii. **Signage panels** will be put up at a minimum of 10 sites of heritage interest. Similar in design to the signs of the Wild Atlantic Way and Connemara Wild at Heart, they will include brief information and illustrations on the relevant heritage and links to more info.
- iii. Four **30-second promotional videos** on the geopark area will be made available on facebook, Instagram, Twitter and on the project website, suitable for enticing visitors to experience and linger in the geopark area. Communities and tourism providers can also use these.
- iv. A **baseline survey** of community businesses and ideas for expansion. This needs to be done so that progress on achievement of objectives and outcomes can be monitored and measured during the life of this project. We need the support of local community development groups for the survey. More detail soon.
- v. Training on **Fáilte Ireland's Welcome Standards**. These are the Fáilte Ireland minimum standards for any non statutory tourism accommodation business wishing to work with Fáilte Ireland. They are aimed at tourist accommodation businesses who currently don't fit the existing Fáilte Ireland Quality Assurance system.
- vi. **Training on business development**. This will be both for existing tourism service businesses and for new start-ups.
- vii. **Activities for Heritage Week** 15-23 August. The project will help create a heritage network of the various heritage interests from the communities in the area. It would be great to hear of other ideas your communities have for Heritage Week – the project could help with coordination and publicity.

Re-opening Ireland

Fáilte Ireland has published sector specific operational guidelines for the tourism industry to ensure the safe re-opening of tourism businesses on June 29th.

The guidelines provide detailed advice on the necessary systems to be implemented in order to instil public confidence and reboot business while adhering to public health advice and Government protocols. They are the first in a suite of new supports being rolled out by Fáilte Ireland to help tourism businesses to recover and re-open safely.

The guidelines are live on Fáilte Ireland's dedicated COVID-19 Business Support Hub on www.failteireland.ie

Sector specific guidelines are available for:

- Hotels & Guesthouses
- Self-Catering businesses
- Caravan & Camping businesses
- Visitor Attractions
- Activity Providers
- B&Bs & Historic Houses
- Restaurants & Cafes

The guidelines will be regularly updated in line with Government public health advice as and when this advice evolves. See also Overview Guidelines to Re-opening (June 2020)
<https://failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Overview-Guidelines-to-Re-opening.pdf>

How to get in touch

The project welcomes contact from local communities, local and national and international schools and other education institutions, tourism service providers and other businesses.

Contact details are in the panel at the end of this newsletter and all subsequent issues.



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