



UNESCO Global Geoparks contribute towards the UN sustainable development goals

September 2025 new target date for UNESCO Global Geopark status

Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark's strong backing to reach goal

We explained in our last newsletter about the “deferred” application for UNESCO Global Geopark status. And that the Geopark aimed to report back to UNESCO on the recommended points during summer 2024. The situation now is we will take the full allowable period through to summer 2025 to address the recommendations and report back then to UNESCO with the relevant evidence. One key reason for this is, we haven't yet received official confirmation from UNESCO of the specifics we are required to address. They are likely to be similar to the recommendations made by the UNESCO evaluators last summer, but might not be identical. So the Irish committee for UNESCO Global Geoparks and the agency funders agree we should utilise the full period through to 2025 and will support the process. The alternative of trying to submit the report this summer runs the risk of not quite being ready, which would block a new application for two years. The agency funders have reiterated their financial and strong overall support for the Geopark and the target of achieving the status – which should be in September 2025. The Geopark's communities are very enthusiastic too. Readers will remember, this will be the first UGG in Connacht, the only Irish Geopark which includes a Gaeltacht (a third of the area). It will be a fantastic achievement overall, boosting local business and jobs, notably through sustainable tourism.



L to r: Michael Hegarty (JCWL Geopark), Kirstin Lemon (Irish UNESCO Geoparks Cmtt vice chair), Gráinne O'Connor (Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark), Trish Walsh (JCWL GeoEnterprise communities rep) with others at UGG Conference Morocco, Sept 2023

Main elements to address to secure UGG status

... a brief reminder

The evaluators' mission report in summer 2023 had many positives. They also listed a number of recommendations. The main ones to address are: improve visibility / signage, including exhibition spaces spread across various locations; develop a more strategic education programme suitable for locals and visitors, based on broad stakeholder engagement; secure a stronger funding base; further development of networks of communities, business, education, and increased links with the Global Geoparks Network (now over 200 world-wide). The Geopark is confident about reporting on those points to UNESCO in summer 2025 including photographic evidence, and being accepted in September 2025 as a UNESCO Global Geopark. The assessors do not need to visit again.

Stay up to date through the geopark website www.joycecountrygeoparkproject.ie and social media / facebook Twitter and Instagram [@JCWLGeopark](https://www.instagram.com/JCWLGeopark)



Business group from MGS Geopark taking in the sights at Ballintubber Abbey

Mourne Gullion Strangford UGG visits JCWL Geopark ahead of return trip

Down & Armagh business interests continue fruitful North-South exchange

The month of March saw the start of the second part of the Shared Island project collaborations between Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark and Mourne Gullion Strangford Geopark. A small but eclectic group of business interests from that new UNESCO Global Geopark gave a fascinating account of their businesses, their challenges and successes. We heard about: Bridie Smyth's award-winning [Pine Tree Hollow Glamping](#) in the Slieve Croob area of County Down; artist Jeanette Keenan's [basket weaving experience](#) in the environmental paradise of Bluebell Lane, in the Ring of Gullion; John Keating of adventure activity providers [LifeAdventureCo](#), based in Castlewellan Forest Park in the Mournes; the pub and restaurant hospitality businesses of Stephen Magorrian; and John McComb of the [Turnip House](#) café – John makes the best lemon drizzle cake this side of the black stump!

They were also mightily impressed with the sample of enterprises visited during their whistlestop tour of JCWL Geopark. Starting point was a warm welcome and light lunch in the scioból in Ballintubber, followed by a delightful tour of the [Abbey](#) and grounds with the fabulous guide Pauline Dixon. A tour of [Loch Measc Distillery](#) doubled as a stop to admire a view of the stunningly beautiful Diercs geosite landscape, part of the Partry Mountains. Trish Walsh, director of [Petersburg Outdoor Education and Training Centre](#), Clonbur, gave a potted

history on a walk around this former estate that is a thriving centre for life-long learning for all ages. After overnighting in [Ryans Hotel Cong](#), day 2 began with a trip along the Inagh Valley, arriving at [Kylemore Abbey and Victorian Walled Gardens](#) – in great splendour despite the horizontal rain – and a tour of the Abbey expertly hosted by guide Anne Burke, experience manager Eithne O Halloran and marketing manager Jessica Woods. Shorter but no less interesting stops in Leenane included [Killary Adventure Centre](#) with Shane Young, and the [Sheep and Wool Centre](#) with proprietor Greg Thompson. The half day and overall visit were wrapped with a light lunch in the atmospheric [Hamilton's bar/restaurant](#) in the heart of Leenane.

A return visit by a selection of JCWL Geopark businesses to Mourne Gullion takes place in April. These two-way exchanges are gratefully supported by the Shared Island Fund, an initiative to bring communities together North and South, funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs.



Richard Weston (Tandem) taking notes at Moore Hall, listening to local heritage expert Seán Hallinan with Michael Hegarty (JCWL Geopark)

Fáilte Ireland in boost to Geopark signage

Expert Tandem eye to enhance visitor experience

Fáilte Ireland, in support of the Geopark, has commissioned Tandem Design to redesign the information panels located at the Geopark's main geosites.

Temporary signage has been in place since 2023 and these new designs will replace those with more durable corten steel, lectern-style comparable to the Wild Atlantic Way discovery points. People from the various geopark localities are providing insights and historical notes on the landscape to complement the panels' geological narrative. The panels will be presented to all geopark communities before approval this June and installation later in the summer.



Community representatives on familiarisation tour of the Geopark

Expanding community representation in Geopark governance

Coiste Treorach to have 2 further local representatives

The Geopark structure has three groups responsible for aspects of governance. The **Funders Committee**, meeting quarterly, is the oversight body, consisting of senior representatives from Údarás na Gaeltachta, Mayo and Galway County Councils and Geological Survey Ireland who provide much of the core funding. The **Coiste Treorach** has an advisory role, meets quarterly, and includes representatives from a wide range of agencies including Fáilte Ireland, Coillte, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Inland Fisheries Ireland, Údarás na Gaeltachta, Mayo and Galway coco's (Heritage Officer level), Geological Survey Ireland, plus CDS (Geopark host organisation), farming, business, Thuar Mhic Éadaigh (hosting the Geopark office), and the cross-community representative group GeoEnterprise which also provides funding through philanthropic sources. Thirdly, the **Operations Management Group (OMG)** meets monthly to report on and monitor operations and consists of the Geopark host representative (CDS), Údarás na Gaeltachta, GeoEnterprise and the staff – manager, geologist and tourism officer. The UNESCO Global Geoparks model emphasises bottom-up, community-driven, sustainable development by partnering and engaging with state agencies and other partners. And so, it has been agreed to boost representation on the Coiste Treorach by adding two representatives from the Communities' Liaison Group. This will be on a rotating basis, so eventually all 20 Geopark communities will have a turn.



Group starting the Mám Éan geotrail from the Maam valley side

Launch of the Mám Éan Geotrail in Maam

The story of our rock connection with North America

The Mám Éan Geotrail was launched in January at Ionad Pobail an Mháma with two guest speakers in front of a small but enthusiastic audience. This roughly 3km long section of the Western Way links the Maam Valley and Joyce Country to the Inagh Valley and Connemara over the Maumturks. Brian McConnell, retired principal geologist at Geological Survey Ireland, highlighted the extensive geological connections with North America. Frank Conroy, of Maam community, gave a fascinating account of the local history and folklore linked with Mám Éan and its use down through the ages by the local community in Maam.

The launch was followed the next day by a well-attended guided walk over the length of the Geotrail led by Benjamin Thébaudeau the Geopark geologist, Brian McConnell, and Carole Reynolds, education officer of Connemara National Park. The three guides provided insights at various points, highlighting the local rocks, biodiversity and archaeological features on display. Great coverage of the event featured on RTE Radio 1 on the Countrywide program and in local newspapers and social media.



UNESCO evaluators with Mayo and Galway County Councils representatives on the Geopark governance group, cathaoirligh and councillors, Kylemore Abbey July 2023

Mayo and Galway County Councils' strong engagement with JCWL Geopark

Opportunities for joint collaborations are being explored

As JCWL Geopark moves closer to UNESCO Global Geopark status, engagement with the two local authority partners is increasing all the time. For example, in recent months Geopark staff have been invited to make new presentations to Mayo and Galway County Councils' tourism sections to share ideas about the opportunities for collaboration on tourism initiatives. A recent presentation was also made to Mayo's strategic policy committee for Tourism, Recreation, Food and Sustainable Community – at which councillors, private sector reps and the council staff all voiced strong support for JCWL Geopark as a significant contributor to economic and social development in the two counties and wider Connacht. A similar discussion will soon be held with Galway County Council's tourism SPC. At local level in the geopark communities we see increasingly strong engagement through both Councils' Public Participation Networks (PPNs), especially on funding opportunities for enterprise and community development and a wide range of supports for environmental initiatives. Underpinning all this, both Galway and Mayo County Councils are committed to providing core funding for geopark operations, and individual councillors have contributed some funds particularly through Claremorris-Swinford and Castlebar municipal districts.



Project group picture at inaugural meeting in Norway

Erasmus+ GeoSite project with partners across Europe

Engaging with our local teachers

Work on this education focussed European project is continuing with our partners from Norway, Italy and Romania. To date, we have surveyed local teachers and some local students in the 4 geoparks about interaction with their respective geoparks, teaching outdoors and the use of digital tools in education. The results from this survey will help the partners to build an educational digital tool that is useful and worthwhile for all educators and learners. Work on the project continues in April with a working meeting and a tour of sites, businesses and communities taking place in our JCWL Geopark over three days.



Participants at the Leenane event Stars and Strategies for a Sustainable Tourism Business

Astronomy week event links with GLOW 2.0

Enjoying our dark nights

A recent sustainable tourism event entitled 'Stars and Strategies for a Sustainable Tourism Business' took place in Leenane, Co. Galway during Irish Astronomy Week. Organised in partnership with Údarás na Gaeltachta and [GLOW 2.0](#), a European INTERREG Northern Periphery Project, it explores the opportunities offered by dark skies tourism in north-western Europe. Local and visiting enthusiasts and professionals from all walks of life came together, sharing a common curiosity for the night sky and sustainable tourism practices.

The event included an informative session with an engaging workshop from Ged Dowling of [Terra Firma](#) tour guiding company based in Mayo, exploring the intricacies of stargazing as a business and the enchanting tales of celestial wonders. The main highlight was the guided stargazing walk to the new amenity park in Leenane on the shores of Killary Fjord, where participants immersed themselves in the beauty of the night sky. The weather was perfect, with one of the clearest skies of the year. Expert guides shared insights into constellations, planets, and celestial phenomena, leaving everyone in awe.

We're proud to have emphasized the importance of 'Dark Skies Tourism,' shedding light on innovative strategies to extend the tourism season and support local businesses and jobs. Together, we're helping to shape the future of sustainable travel!



Ed Coulson and members of the Headford Lace Project at launch of the audio trail

Headford Lace Trail wins international prize

Top achievement in Sound Walk Awards

Big congratulations go to the Headford Lace Project for taking top prize in the 2023 Sound Walk September Awards for their fabulous Headford Lace Trail. The awards, run by the organisation 'Walk Listen Create', celebrate the skills of those composing audio, listening, and sound walks around the world. Headford Lace Project are "pure delighted" including for producer Ed Coulson to have this work recognised like this. In practical terms, what it means is anyone can do the walk anytime you like - all you need is a smartphone, headphones and weather-proof clothes. All the information is available in the leaflets in Anglers Rest Hotel or on the Headford Lace Project website. The Headford Lace Trail features music specially arranged and performed by composer and clarinettist Matthew Berrill, and stars actors Emma O'Grady, Mary McHugh, and Sophie Morrow – who also sings – plus the guiding voice of Eilís Nic Dhonncha of Headford Lace Project. The walk includes interviews with locals Teresa Eagleton, Pat Monaghan, and Margie McNamara, as well as historian Norma Owens. It was commissioned by Headford Lace Project and supported with funding from Galway County Arts Office.



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**Dhúiche Sheoigheach
& Lochanna an Iarthair**

JOYCE COUNTRY & WESTERN LAKES GEOPARK PROJECT



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