



Celebrating UNESCO status at The Larches, Lough Nafoeey Valley

We are a UNESCO Geopark!

Celebrating this Global Geopark milestone

Good things (even great things) come to those who persevere. And so, after nearly 20 years of effort, patience and resilience, on Thursday 23rd April 2026 Joyce Country and Western Lakes Geopark received its UNESCO Global Geopark accolade. It's a first UNESCO Global Geopark in Connacht, and the fifth on the Island of Ireland. It also includes the only Gaeltacht region in a UNESCO Geopark on this island and globally. To mark this historic milestone, a number of Geopark communities came together over four days to celebrate and host events dedicated to the character, spirit, culture and heritage of the Geopark's 20 communities, and looking to a bright and sustainable future.

While the official announcement that day was during a closed session of the UNESCO Executive Board meeting in Paris, the Geopark community celebrations unfolded in the afternoon of 23rd. These included a launch of showcase videos of all 20 Geopark communities at CDS Corr na Móna with music from the Craobh Dhúiche Sheoigheach of the Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, followed by a stunning music, drumming, song, dance and lacemaking demonstration event in Headford. On Friday 24th Oughterard's Scoil Chuimín & Caitríona NS and St Pauls secondary school hosted a workshop delivered by Corrib Beo, Dr Sadhbh Baxter of University of Galway and the Geopark geologist. The Larches bar in Finny gathered people from near and far for music with the Luke O'Malley trad band, dance, storytelling as Gaeilge, and local food – against the backdrop of fabulous Lough Nafoeey scenery. Cong Crossroads Centre held the largest of the evening events, including speeches, fabulous food provided by Cong Food Village (to launch their Food Festival 11-12 July), and plenty of ceol agus craic.

Saturday 25th brought Geopark cheers from its three Parkruns– Oughterard, Clonbur and Tourmakeady. Historical Ballinrobe hosted a guided tour, and Clonbur, Tourmakeady and The Neale each organised well-attended heritage events. Oughterard GeoFest made a “long weekend of it” with four days of publicity in the town and cultural events at the beautiful Courthouse. Keep an

eye out, as several other Geopark communities plan celebrations during local festivals this summer.

Geoparks in Ireland and globally

JCWL Geopark joins an impressive network of UNESCO Global Geoparks on the island of Ireland including: The Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, Co Clare, The Copper Coast, Co Waterford, Mourne Gullion Strangford, Co Down and Co Armagh, and Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark straddling Co Fermanagh, Northern Ireland, and Co Cavan on the border. The accolade recognises the outstanding work of local communities, dedicated staff and partner agencies Údarás na Gaeltachta, Geological Survey Ireland, Mayo and Galway County Councils, a community representative group GeoEnterprise and the local development co-op Comhar-chumann Dhúiche Sheoigheach Teo. Other significant partners include Fáilte Ireland, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Coillte and Inland Fisheries Ireland. There are now 241 UNESCO Global Geoparks in the world in 51 countries. Annually the world's geoparks attract around 60 million visitors globally – from people with specific interest in geology, to those who appreciate, respect and want to enjoy beautiful landscapes, the local heritage and the activities available in the great outdoors. They provide opportunities for local business development and jobs. Importantly, UNESCO Global Geopark status does not add further planning regulations to those already in place. This UNESCO status is valid for four years and can be revalidated in 2030 if the quality of community work and visitor experiences is maintained.

Stay up to date through the geopark website

www.joycecountrygeoparkproject.ie and social media / facebook and Instagram @JCWLGeopark





Photo montage of community celebrations



Media coverage of UNESCO status has been widespread

Publicity support for UNESCO ratification

Fantastic local, national & international media coverage

Outlet	Interviewee	Broadcast date	Other detail
Connemara FM	Greg Forde	Frid 17/04	Breandán O'Scannail Show
Raidio na Gaeltachta	Gearóidín Ní Ghrúinéil	Mon 20/04	Admhaidin
Galway Bay FM	Benjamin Thébaudeau	Thurs 23/04	Morning news
Raidio na Gaeltachta	Sinéad Seoighe	Fri 24/04	Paddy Ó Griofa – Admhaidin
Connemara FM	Benjamin Thébaudeau	Thurs 23/04	Breandán O'Scannail Show
Midwest radio	Michael Hegarty	Fri 24/04	Sco Stevens interviewer
RTÉ Radio 1 news	Trish Walsh	Fri 24/04	News at 1
RTÉ 1 TV news	Trish Walsh, Michael Hegarty, B. Thébaudeau, Sinéad Seoighe	Frid 24/04	Pat McGrath News at 1pm, 6pm, 9pm
Raidio na Gaeltachta	Éamon Ó Cuív, Sinéad Seoighe, Seán Whelan, Geraldine Morrin	Sat 25 Apr	Treasa Bhreathnach Iris Aniar on Monday 27 th
Midwest radio	Cllrs Peter Flynn, Seán Carey	Mon 27 Apr	Sco Stevens On Cer ficate ceremony in Paris
Cúla 4 nuacht, TG4	Margot Thébaudeau, Áine Caitlín, Tomás Ó hÉanacháin	Tues 28/04	6pm (& Cúla 4, 1pm & 5pm)
Countrywide RTÉ Radio 1	Benjamin Thébaudeau, Trish Walsh, Sinéad Seoighe, Colm Gavin, The Whileaways band, Oughterard walk (Moycullen resident and walker), Greg Forde, Clonbur community, current owner of "The Field"	Sat 02/04	presenter Philip Boucher Hayes, contributors Lorna Siggins, Treasa Breathnach



Some of the participants at the Geopark Business event in Headford

Annual Business Network event

Exciting new developments ahead for local business

Strong participant engagement was evident at the annual early season Geopark Business Network event on 24th February, at The Anglers Rest Hotel, Headford, Co. Galway. With UNESCO Global status due in April, there was great interest in the keynote presentation by Gráinne O'Connor, general manager of Cuilcagh Lakelands UNESCO Global Geopark. Gráinne outlined the journey in Counties Fermanagh and Cavan, as the world's first cross-border Geopark. Notable social and economic achievements include new business start-ups and development through network training programmes, increased jobs especially in tourism and hospitality, and leveraging UNESCO status to access funding. Alex Goor of Killary Fjord Boat Tours gave detail of the new visitor centre approved for construction in 2026. Suellen McKenna of Ballintubber Abbey Trust outlined detail of the plan to transform the derelict east wing into a state-of-the-art, three-storey cultural and heritage Visitor Centre. Anne Burke provided insights into tour guiding at Kylemore Abbey, Galway city, Connemara and Mayo. Sullivan's Country Grocer in Oughterard illustrated how they have used their sustainability fund for the development of the local Corribdale park.



Gráinne O'Connor, Cuilcagh Lakelands Geopark, and Sinéad Seoighe, JCWL Geopark tourism officer

Training for new business development

Key aspects of setting up and sustaining a business

JCWL Geopark expects to hear shortly if LEADER funding is secured to provide customised training in new business development. As noted previously, the funds would be within a cooperation project involving South-West Mayo Development, Forum Connemara, and Galway Rural Development. This in-person course, now planned for delivery during autumn 2026, would be for

those in the Geopark who have a solid idea for establishing a new business. It would include all key aspects of setting up and sustaining a business, plus a visit to one of the other established UNESCO Global Geoparks on this island. There's provision for up to 20 participants for the training, and a wide range of business types can be considered. Calls for Expression of Interest will be re-opened if/when funding is approved. We'll issue a special news item about what it involves.



TIONSCADAL GEOPHÁIRC

Dhúiche Sheoigheach & Lochanna an Iarthair

JOYCE COUNTRY & WESTERN LAKES GEOPARK PROJECT

Projects must actively incorporate and promote the Irish language

Pilot scheme for tourism in the Gaeltacht

Grants of up to €50k available

Údarás na Gaeltachta has announced a new pilot grant scheme designed to support tourism businesses and community organisations in the Gaeltacht. With €350,000 in funding approved for this pilot phase, grants of up to €50,000 are available. The application deadline is 30 June 2026. Applications can be submitted from:

- Private enterprises (SMEs) with fewer than 250 employees and a turnover under €50m — grant rate of 50%
- Community organisations registered as a CLG or co-operative with a governance structure — grant rate of 75%

Eligible projects include visitor experiences, tourism infrastructure, digital marketing, community tourism initiatives, and training and development programmes. A central requirement of the scheme is that projects must actively incorporate and promote the Irish language, which carries the highest weighting in the assessment process.

Key conditions to be aware of:

- All applications must be approved before any expenditure is incurred
- Projects must be completed within 12 months of approval
- Applicants must be tax compliant and sign a De Minimis declaration
- At least three quotes are required for expenditure over €5,000



Colin Roxburgh, Star Development Scotland, speaking at the event

A Scottish-Mayo model of community development

Exploring options for expanding Community Futures

The Community Futures local area planning approach, supported by Mayo County Council since 2007, has helped deliver over 60 local plans for 40+ communities in 20 years. The success of the approach in Mayo prompted the Geopark voluntary representative community group JCWL GeoEnterprise to organise its 2026 annual Forum on Sunday 1st March around this theme, to consider if and how it could be expanded further. The strong line-up of presenters included Colin Roxburgh, a member of Star Development in Scotland where the approach has had considerable success. Colin used the example of how 24 communities across four local authorities in Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park have planned and delivered their own identified priorities to benefit the communities and the wider National Park. Achievements include river conservation, heritage restoration, paths networks, play areas, community ownership of forests, housing, pubs, cafes, shops, garage, post office, a hydro scheme, information and community centres and skills development. Other presentations at the Forum included from Mayo Community Futures, Ballinrobe Community Development, Tourmakeady, and from Galway communities' endeavours that followed a similar concept from Clonbur and Headford. A representative from Community Section of Galway County Council outlined their approach to community development. The 40 participants, including presenters, engaged enthusiastically in discussions about broadening the reach and effectiveness of community development in counties Mayo and Galway.



Education workshop in Oughterard with teachers from St Pauls Secondary School and Scoil Chuimin agus Cairtriona as well as member of Corrib Beo and Dr Sadhbh Baxter of University of Galway

Geopark Education programme activities

Exciting activities for learners of all ages

The Geopark education programme is run by the Geopark geologist who offers free interaction with primary and secondary schools in the Geopark and beyond, either in the classroom or on site. These interactions focus on the local geodiversity and how different rocks form in different ways and what that can tell us about the history of the region. It also introduces how geological heritage influences our natural habitats, our cultural heritage and the way we live and will live in the future. An education workshop was organised on Friday 24th April (during the UNESCO celebration weekend) in Scoil Chuimin agus Cairtriona in Oughterard where the 5th and 6th class and about 30 TYs from St Paul's College interacted with members of Corrib Beo, Dr Sadhbh Baxter of the University of Galway and the Geopark geologist on several aspects of people's interaction with their landscape. They were also given some pointers on university courses they could take in the future.

3rd level education also features on the programme with the geologist delivering presentations to the University of Galway Environmental Sciences final year students and welcoming 2nd year Earth and Ocean sciences students to the Geopark. Similarly, Atlantic Technological Institute holds a week-long field school in the geopark every year for its heritage students. This year, the Geopark was also presented to an English language school operating from Ballinrobe for Latin American students.

Beyond school visits, the Geopark offers a free Geopark ambassador course for anyone interested. The course runs a few times a year and includes two online lectures and a field trip. Attendants get some insights on the local geological heritage and how the geopark is showcasing it at various sites. If you know of anyone interested, do contact the geologist directly at geologist@jcw/geopark.ie

Geological Timeline tool

In 4.5 billion years, our planet went from an inert cloud of dust and gas to a thriving living planet with continents and oceans, plate tectonics and an atmosphere, and life in every habitat including ourselves. This tool highlights the main steps in our planet's development at the global stage, and also in the 4 partner UNESCO Global Geopark regions. Select which of the story you want to explore and click on each step to learn more.



Screen capture of geological timeline tool from GeoSite website

Erasmus+ project near conclusion

Tested new tools to share for European Geoparks

The GeoSite Erasmus+ project developing educational digital resources will conclude in October 2026. Under the leadership of the University of Westlands in Norway, it saw the cooperation of two Norwegian universities and four geoparks in Norway, Italy, Romania and Joyce Country and Western Lakes over three years. The project involved a review of existing resources used by European Geoparks and the consultation of teachers and students in the four territories to build a tool that would promote outdoor education. This led to the development of several digital tools hosted in a website that also contains further tips and information for teachers and other educators taking students to the outdoors. The website is still being tested by local teachers until the end of the school year and will be launched officially at the final work meeting in August. Further dissemination of the tool and the findings of the review and feedback will be made at a European Geoparks Network Education event during the meeting.



Post with QR code at Killary Fjord geosite

Audio Trail at 3 Geopark sites

Another tool to engage visitors

The Geopark benefitted greatly from its involvement in the GLOW 2.0 project of which Údarás na Gaeltachta was a partner. The aim of this European funded project was the development of dark sky tourism at community level and particularly in the Gaeltacht. One of the major project deliverables for the Geopark was the development of audio tours at three of its main geosites: Killary Fjord, Cong and Tourmakeady. The development was carried out by Trail Audio and the design, scripting and recording of the audio tours was done in partnership with the Geopark team and Údarás na Gaeltachta. The audio tours are available in Irish, English, French and German directly from the trail audio website (see links below). Posts with a QR code for the website have been installed at the three sites.

<https://www.trailaudio.ie/killary/>

<https://www.trailaudio.ie/cong/>

<https://www.trailaudio.ie/tourmakeady/>



Boulders along the Tourmakeady Wood trail

Geological Survey Ireland geoheritage fund

Understanding and interpretation of our landscape

Funding from the Geological Survey Ireland Geoheritage Grant Scheme has allowed the Geopark to develop specific infrastructure and tools to help with the interpretation of our landscape and education. The 2025 grant led to the development of the geodiversity trail in Tourmakeady Wood where 10 boulders of the main types of bedrock around the Geopark have been placed along the walk from the carpark to the waterfall. This is a great way to explore how rocks can be different and what their presence in the landscape tells us about past events that shaped our landscape. The trail will be launched officially in June.

This year's grant is focussed on the limestone pavement site on the shores of Lough Mask in Clonbur. A repeat high resolution drone survey was commissioned to explore any changes in the site over the course of the year. A people counter is also to be added at the entrance of the site allowing a clearer understanding of the traffic there. The first survey took place at the end of March with the repeat planned in October. The results from the study will be presented at a public event later in the year.



JCWL Geopark partnered MGS Geopark in a Shared Island project 2023-2024

Peace Plus application successful

JCWL Geopark is a project partner

A new Peace Plus project bringing together UNESCO designated sites and their communities across the island of Ireland is about to start. Entitled 'UNESCO Together', it will address several shared challenges experienced by UNESCO designated sites including World Heritage Sites, Global Geoparks, Biosphere Reserves, and Creative Cities. **Joyce Country and Western Lakes Global Geopark** is one of the five Geopark project participants. Despite their common status and unique value, these sites have limited collaboration and cross-border engagement. While Geoparks have formal networks and some UNESCO sites in Northern Ireland have cooperated through programmes like Local to Global, there is no all-island network connecting the full diversity of UNESCO sites and communities. Addressing threats from climate change, biodiversity loss, and socio-economic pressures requires collaboration at a community level across the whole island, not isolated actions. And so, the project's **overall objective** is to build a sustainable, cross-border, community-driven UNESCO network. This will be achieved through co-designed, participatory activities, creative residencies, intergenerational workshops, youth exchanges, storytelling circles, and environmental action events, bringing people together to collaborate, reflect, and co-create. Mourne Gullion Strangford Global Geopark is the project lead partner. The project is part of the Change Maker Funding Programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and overseen by Pobal, with Co-operation Ireland, Rural Action, and East Border Region providing hands-on support. Keep an eye out for more info.



Corrib 471 Art installation at Kilbeg pier on Lough Corrib

Creative arts in Ireland's UNESCO Geoparks for climate action

Engaging communities through art

An application for funding has been made to Creative Ireland, led by Limerick School of Art & Design (LSAD). The project would use creative arts to engage communities with climate action across Ireland's five UNESCO Global Geoparks. From 2026-2029, creative artists from LSAD and Belfast School of Art would collaborate with climate scientists, relevant local authorities and community organisations in the Geoparks to facilitate public engagement events in the form of arts *meitheals* (workshops, living labs, participatory exhibitions). These would help address the Geoparks' need for climate action, education, and sustainable development of their natural and cultural heritage. The project aims to translate climate science into accessible public experience, support behavioural and cultural change, and strengthen long term collaboration between Geoparks, communities and the creative sector. It would also generate shared learning, evaluation evidence and policy-facing outputs for future replication. The result of the application is expected in early this summer.



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Global Geopark



Halla Thuar Mhic Éadaigh, F12D990, Tuar Mhic Éadaigh

P: (+353) 094 9000245

E: info@jcwIgeopark.ie

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