

Manuscript - Scottish Planner

The North West Highlands – Scotland’s first Geopark

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A new park has arrived in Scotland – the North West Highlands Geopark received formal status as a European and UNESCO Global Geopark in September 2004 and was officially launched on 12 September 2005 at the Knockan Crag National Nature Reserve Visitor Centre in Assynt.

Professor Manning, presenter of the BBC's “Talking Landscapes” and “Earth Story” programmes launched the Geopark with a lively and enthusiastic speech in praise of the geology and landscape of the North West Highlands. In a message of support, Jack McConnell, Scotland’s First Minister, said, "the award acknowledges the unique geological character of the area, its rich cultural heritage and a strong partnership for sustainable economic development. This is an achievement for Scotland as a whole."

The launch, attended by almost 300 people, was enlivened with music, Gaelic songs and poetry performed by local school children. Several million uninvited *Culicoides impunctatus* (Highland midge) also attended on this warm, overcast and windless day – speeches were short and attendees kept on the move!

Planners need not fear yet another designation from Europe – a Geopark is not a statutory designation. In essence it is a quality-assured award from the European Geopark Network, endorsed by UNESCO Division of Ecological and Earth Sciences. However, designated sites within a Geopark are important and the two National Nature Reserves, 54 Geological Conservation Review sites, 26 geological Sites of Special Scientific Importance, 17 Special Protection Area sites and 11 Special Areas of Conservation within the area contributed to the Geopark award.

Exciting new initiatives in Earth science interpretation, education, conservation and geotourism throughout the North West Highlands are planned. A thorough consultation process is enabling the Geoparks inhabitants to contribute their own ideas for strategic development. Local people have been presenting their ideas with regards to publicity, interpretation, business development, geotourism, youth action and so on. The results of this consultation process will form the basis of the new strategy of the Geopark.

What is a Geopark and why the North West Highlands?

A European Geopark is a clearly defined area with a geological heritage of particular importance in terms of its scientific quality, rarity, aesthetic appeal and educational value. The key functions of a European Geopark are to protect geological heritage, promote geology to the public, and to use geology and other aspects of its natural and cultural heritage to promote sustainable economic development, normally through geotourism. Established in June 2000, the Network now consists of 25 members in ten European countries. In February 2004 the European Geoparks Network was formally integrated into the UNESCO-endorsed Global Geoparks Network. For more details see: <http://perso.wanadoo.fr/resgeol/egen.html>

Geopark status was awarded to the North West Highlands because this outstanding area contains some of the most important and diverse geological and geomorphological features and stunning landscapes in Britain. The park stretches from Achiltibuie and Knockan in the south to Cape Wrath and Loch Eriboll in the north. Geologically, the area is dominated by the internationally important Moine Thrust Zone, which runs from north to south. In the 19th century, the Moine Thrust Zone puzzled geologists who found that older rocks were seen to be lying on top of younger rocks, a situation they then could not easily explain. The recognition that packages of rocks were 'thrust' over long distances on top of younger rocks centred around Knockan Crag, now a National Nature Reserve with a dedicated visitor centre, owned and managed by SNH. Thrusts are now recognised in rocks around the world, including those in the Himalayas and the Alps – but are rarely as accessible as the Moine thrust at Knockan Crag. The rocks in the Geopark also record the last 3000 million years of history for the landmass that we now know as Scotland. The North West Highlands Geopark also recognises the diverse natural heritage of the area, local culture and the rich array of historic and archaeological sites. To help manage the Geopark, a local Steering Group has been established and, under the auspices of The Sutherland Partnership, a part time Geopark Officer is now based in Lochinver, Sutherland. For further information see: www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk.

The North West Highlands Geopark Steering Group gratefully acknowledges the generous support of a number of local sponsors and agencies, including, the Sutherland Partnership, the Highland Council, the British Geological Survey, SNH, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise, the LEADER+ programme, and Coigach, Assynt, Scourie, Kinlochbervie and Durness Community Councils.

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Map by British Geological Survey © NERC



Oblique aerial view of Suilven and Canisp, inselbergs or island mountains sitting on undulating Lewisian gneiss with its typical rugged cnoc-and-lochan landscape. P827, British Geological Survey © NERC



North West Highlands Geopark launch celebrations. Photograph by Hugh Barron, British Geological Survey © NERC