

Earth Heritage Article Scotland's First Geopark – The North West Highlands

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*Glaciers, grinding West, gouged out
these valleys, rasping the brown sandstone,
and left, on the hard rock below – the
ruffled foreland –
this frieze of mountains, filed
on the blue air – Stac Polly,
Cul Beag, Cul Mor, Suilven,
Canisp – a frieze and
a litany.*

From “A man in Assynt” by Norman MacCaig
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The landscape of Assynt, which so inspired the poet Norman MacCaig has become part of Scotland's first Global Geopark – the North West Highlands. It received this accolade in October 2004 at the annual meeting of the European Geopark Network in Sicily. Stretching from Achiltibuie and Knockan in the south to Cape Wrath and Loch Eriboll in the north, this 2000 km² area encompasses some of the finest mountain and coastal landscapes in Britain and contains a wealth of classic geological localities. It includes the iconic mountains of Suilven, Arkle and Stac Pollaidh, the pristine beaches of Sandwood and Balnakiel, and dramatic coastal cliffs such as those at Cape Wrath, mainland Scotland's most northwesterly point.

Geopark status was awarded to the area on the basis of its outstanding geology and landscape, the strength of its partnership approach to sustainable economic development and its existing geological interpretation facilities. The rich natural heritage of the North West Highlands is recognised in the high number of designated area and sites: the Assynt-Coigach and North West Sutherland National Scenic Areas, 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.

Equally significant, the area contains many historic and archaeological sites, including scheduled monuments and listed buildings. From early evidence for human habitation in Scotland, through to Norse settlements, the Lordship of the Isles to the Clearances, crofting and recent land reform, the human story can be traced in the landscape for over 9000 years.

Geology

The Geopark contains some of the most important and diverse geological and geomorphological features in Britain. Geologically, the area is dominated by the internationally important Moine Thrust Zone, which runs from north to south. To the west lies the Lewisian Gneiss Complex, containing some of the oldest rocks in Europe; to the east are the enigmatic rocks of the Moine Supergroup.

The North West Highlands have a unique landscape, which strikingly reflects the underlying geology and geomorphology. Along the line of the Moine Thrust Zone are craggy peaks of Torridon sandstone and Cambrian quartzite, shaped by the action of glaciers during the Quaternary Period. Between the mountains are secluded glens, some of them floored by the largest areas of limestone in Scotland. Caves in the limestone have yielded fossil evidence of Pleistocene ‘ice-age’ fauna: reindeer, polar bears and wolves. To the west of the mountains lies a stretch of Lewisian gneiss with its typical rugged ‘cnoc-and-lochan’ landscape. Where the coast is formed by Lewisian gneiss there are numerous small coves and craggy headlands; unusual machair sands with their associated rich flora cover lower areas. In contrast, high cliffs and occasional sea stacks such as the Old Man of Stoer

characterize coast formed by Torridonian sandstone. East of the mountains is the wild, boggy country that has developed on the rocks of the Moine Supergroup.

The North West Highlands is also a key area in the historical development of geological science. Famous geologists of the 19th century, such as Roderick Murchison, Archibald Geikie, Benjamin Peach and John Horne, cut their geological teeth on the rocks of Sutherland. For much of that century, the so-called 'Highlands Controversy' raged over the relationships of these rocks, finally ending with the recognition of the complexities of the Moine Thrust Zone. Research into the rocks, structures and geomorphological features of the North West Highlands continues to this day, and hundreds of geology students from around the world visit the region every year.

What is a European Geopark?

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 tourism. Other areas that have secured Geopark status have seen considerable benefit from it, through increased nature-based tourism. Established in June 2000, the Network now consists of 17 members in nine member states of the European Union. In February 2004 the European Geoparks Network was formally integrated into the UNESCO-endorsed Global Geoparks Network. For more details see: www.europeangeopark.org.

Future Action

Hopes are high, therefore, that the accolade of being 'Scotland's first Global Geopark' will herald exciting new initiatives in Earth science interpretation, education and conservation throughout the North West Highlands. A Geopark Action Group has been established to oversee the running and policy direction of the Geopark. This comprises advisors from the Highland Council, British Geological Survey, Scottish Natural Heritage, and the local Enterprise Company together with a range of local stakeholders whose aim is to raise awareness of the North West Highlands Geopark locally, nationally and internationally in accordance with a marketing strategy. In addition, the Sutherland Partnership – as applicant organisation – will appoint a Geopark Officer whose role will be to identify, secure and develop community-led projects linked to the Geopark initiative. Funded by the Highland Council, Caithness & Sutherland Enterprise and the EU LEADER+ Programme, this three-year post will be instrumental in delivering the benefits of Geopark status as part of an integrated approach to sustainable economic development in the North West Highlands. Three years may only be the blink of an eye in geological timescales, but in this beautiful and remote part of Scotland it will hopefully be an exciting window of opportunity for locals and visitors alike.

Acknowledgement

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