

Scotland's Geoparks: helping local communities to benefit from their internationally important geoheritage

Scotland's Geoparks are areas of important and valuable geodiversity, where local communities are working in a variety of ways to promote their local geology and landscapes for tourism, and to enhance awareness of environmental and sustainability issues.



In 2015, the member states of UNESCO (the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) ratified the creation of a new label, the UNESCO Global Geoparks, to promote the importance of managing outstanding geological sites and landscapes in a holistic manner. Scotland has two UNESCO Global Geoparks, in Shetland and the North West Highlands.

Geoparks – what are they and why are they important?

A UNESCO Global Geopark is an area with internationally important geology and landscapes, all of which are managed responsibly for tourism, conservation and education. Whilst geology may be their foundation, UNESCO Global Geoparks build upon that, bringing it together with other aspects of heritage, such as archaeology, history, culture and biodiversity, all of which are intricately linked with the ground beneath our feet.

Geoparks are important for:

- **Tourism** Geoparks are places of thriving responsible tourism and development, where people live and work. They act as catalysts for community enterprise, innovation and business for the benefit of everyone.
- **Conservation** UNESCO Global Geopark status does not offer statutory protection and places no restrictions on development or on farming practices. Instead, Geoparks work in conjunction with existing designations to promote the protection of our local environment.
- **Education** Geoparks are outdoor classrooms and living laboratories, where the stunning landscapes inspire learning and discovery, contributing to environmental education that deepens understanding of the world.

What's going on in Scotland's Geoparks?

Shetland UNESCO Global Geopark –

www.shetlandamenity.org/geopark-shetland

Shetland was awarded Global Geopark status in 2009. Its geology spans almost 3 billion years and is more diverse than any similar-sized area in Europe. Shetland's UNESCO Global Geopark status is managed by Shetland Amenity Trust, a local charity that strives to preserve, enhance and promote the islands' rich cultural and natural heritage.

Through the work of Shetland Amenity Trust and its partners, and with financial support from Shetland Islands Council and Shetland Charitable Trust, Shetland UNESCO Global Geopark delivers a wide range of natural and cultural heritage projects, events (such as the Shetland Nature Festival and Shetland Wool Week) and educational programmes catering for all age groups, from pre-school sessions to post-graduate research. Shetland Museum and Archives, along with a network of local heritage centres, tells Shetland's fascinating geological story and highlights its connection to all of the islands' heritage.



Eshaness Coast, Shetland. Photo: © Billy Fox

North West Highlands UNESCO Global Geopark –

www.nwhgeopark.com

The North West Highlands Geopark was the first in Scotland. Since its entry to the Global Geoparks network in 2004 it has been an active member, hosting the 7th International Conference on European Geoparks in 2007.

UNESCO Global Geopark status in the North West Highlands is managed as a local charity whose vision is for the North West Highlands "to be a thriving and sustainable rural economy capitalising on the assets and people of the Geopark in partnership with local government, relevant agencies and local businesses."



Pebble Route Geopod

The management body and partners have recently been focusing on the development of infrastructure to promote geodiversity to a broad audience. A Local Geodiversity Audit and Action Plan, Geocentre Feasibility study, interpretation points (Geopods) and self-guided trails form the core of these activities. The charity has also facilitated educational programmes, hundreds of Geoheritage festival events and academic research into Cultural Soils. A small community-run visitor centre and Earth Science exhibition opened in 2015 and now contains an AR Sandbox exhibit and a VR Time Machine.

The staff and volunteer team regularly contribute to documentary films across Europe and value the opportunity this brings to broaden the recognition of the region, both as a Sustainable Tourism Destination and for its internationally renowned geodiversity. UNESCO Global Geopark status has given the region a powerful external motivation for local and regional collaboration, reduction in stakeholder conflict, resource sharing, learning and fortitude.

Lochaber Geopark – lochabergeopark.org.uk

The Lochaber Geopark project started in 2004. It is a community-led, registered Scottish charity, run by volunteers with the aid of one full-time employee, supported by the HIE/Scot Grad scheme. The Geopark covers the whole of Lochaber, including Glen Coe, Glen Roy and the Small Isles. To promote the fantastic, world-class geology of the area, the Geopark offers geological walks and talks to schools and societies, locals and visitors. The 'Geotours' programme is promoted internationally by focused advertising and via the web and social media.

The Geopark's two Visitor Centres are largely self-supporting through sales of publications and local crafts. The i-sand box in the Fort William Visitor Centre is very popular with children of all ages, as is the 'fossil dig' for younger budding geologists. Work with local schools has expanded through various STEM activities, including school clubs, primary STEM fairs, staff conferences and by supporting the British Science Week. The network of interpretation panels, for geology and landscape, continues to grow. The Geopark runs a 'Friends of Lochaber Geopark' membership scheme.



Field trip investigating dykes emplaced in Moine metasediments, Morvern. Photo: Jim Blair.

Arran Geopark – www.arrangeopark.co.uk

Arran Geopark is now established and is working towards UNESCO Global Geopark status. Three Geopark information and activity centres have been created, at Lochranza Field Centre, Brodick Castle Ranger Centre, and Arran Heritage Museum. There has also been a focus on improving access to the island's most spectacular geosites. Six self-guided geology walks are in preparation, visiting world-renowned geological localities such as Hutton's Unconformity, the Drumadoon Sill, and the Corrie shoreline. There will also be a number of interpretation boards at various geologically interesting sites.

The Geopark offers a packed programme of events on the island, with regular guided walks led by the Geopark Ranger, wildlife and geology 'Land Rover Safaris' alongside the Arran Ranger Service, and an Arran Geofest weekend each autumn. There are also plans for the Geopark to engage with the island's schoolchildren, landowners, and accommodation providers. Our aim is to provide locals and tourists with an accessible and enjoyable introduction to earth science and the formation of Arran, and give those with some geological experience opportunities to access up-to-date and relevant information.

Scotland's Geodiversity Charter presents a vision that geodiversity is "recognised as an integral and vital part of our environment, economy, heritage and future sustainability to be safeguarded for existing and future generations in Scotland". The Charter was first published in 2012, and refreshed in 2017. It is supported by 93 signatory organisations. Further information at scottishgeodiversityforum.org/charter/.



Arran Geopark information and activity centre at the Lochranza Field Centre.

