



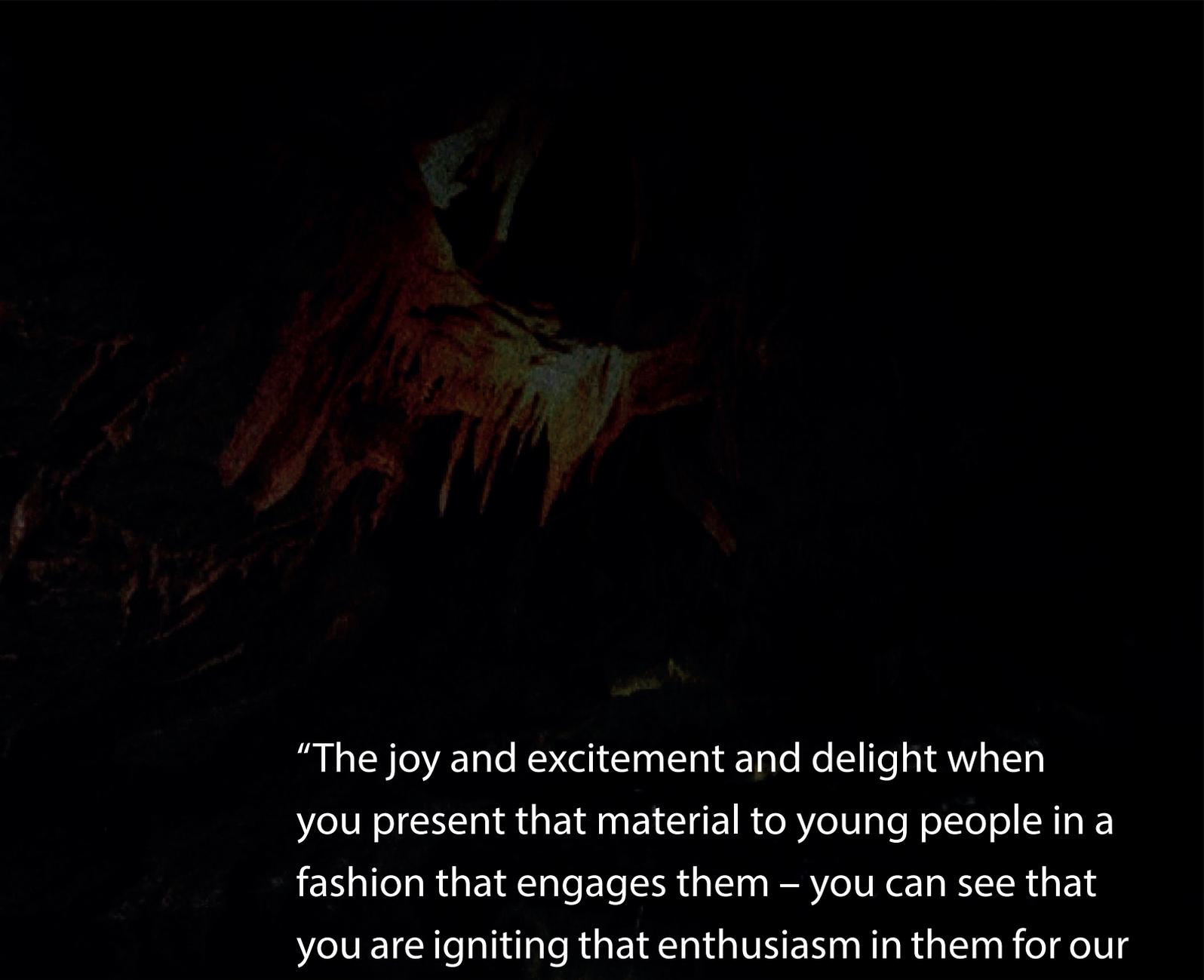
The Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark

Established across nearly 20,000 hectares of public land in Counties Fermanagh (Northern Ireland) and Cavan (Republic of Ireland), Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark was the first cross-border Geopark in the world and is dedicated to telling our planet's story through its unique natural, cultural and geological heritage. Its cross-border nature forms a crucial part of the Geopark's outreach and engagement programme.

“It brings people together from both sides of the community and anywhere in the world. That is really important. But no more so than on the island of Ireland. [...] To learn about their shared heritage, their shared geological landscape is one of the few ways that school children on the island of Ireland can come together from both sides of the border.”

→ Dr Kirstin Lemon, Geological Survey of Northern Ireland and the British Geological Society

Formal education is a key aspect of this programme and one of its most popular events in this field is Science Week. This popular four-day event is packed with interactive and earth science-linked workshops to engage primary, secondary and tertiary schoolchildren in shared learning about the earth. Twice a year, Science Week invites 500 students to engage in hands-on experiments and the study of local rocks and geological processes. ‘We find that children are more enthusiastic and they’re more receptive to those types of learning,’ says the Geopark’s Development Officer Martina O’Neill. It is this enthusiasm and engagement that Martina finds particularly fulfilling.



“The joy and excitement and delight when you present that material to young people in a fashion that engages them – you can see that you are igniting that enthusiasm in them for our geological heritage and that they want to find out more.” She remembers one particular event when a young boy, following her workshop, came back to show his family the Geopark. “That is just the most rewarding thing to know that you have actually made a difference. The young boy said to me that his dream now was to become a geologist.”

→ Martina O'Neill, Marble Arch Caves Geopark Development Officer



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The schools' demand for Science Week in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has rocketed but the lack of resources restricts the Geopark from hosting it more often, according to O'Neill.

“We could easily run the programme four times a year if we had the resources. We would sell it on every single occasion, and we're not living in an area that is densely populated.”

→ Martina O'Neill, Marble Arch Caves Geopark Development Officer

“The word has spread amongst our local schools that this is an activity that is well worth investing the time and money in. Paying for substitute teachers to come into the school to allow their students to participate to the point where we're now getting requests from entire schools to come on the one day because they want all their students to experience this programme. It's been hugely successful and rewarding on all aspects. From a legacy and a capacity-building perspective but also on a personal level.” *Martina O'Neill*

To facilitate and support schoolchildren's geological education, the Geopark has strong links with schools, local businesses, organisations and especially teachers. To ensure that its programmes are in line with the Irish and Northern Irish curricula, the Geopark works closely with the education authorities in both countries.

Teacher training, teaching material and other outreach activities also form a large part of the Geopark's education programmes and have been hugely successful. According to O'Neill, the Geopark has 'had a huge surge and increasing demand for that particular service in schools.' These training sessions and resources, which range from information sheets to lesson plans and fieldwork activities, give teachers the confidence and knowledge to engage their students in geology and earth sciences.

What becomes very clear, not only from the positive feedback but also our conversation with O'Neill, is that Marble Arch Caves UNESCO Global Geopark places education truly at the heart of its work. Its commitment and enthusiasm for fostering a better understanding of the planet that we all share is palpable, and a compelling example of what UNESCO designations are doing in this field in the UK.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Wider Value Interview (phone call) with Martina O'Neill, 2019, London

