

Wester Ross Biosphere Reserve: Eco-Tourism

→ Climate Action SDG13; Partnerships SDG17; Quality Education SDG 4; Life Below Water SDG 14; Life on Land SDG 15; Sustainable Cities & Communities SDG 11

Wester Ross, one of Scotland's two UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, has joined forces with other countries to develop an eco-tourism initiative that promotes the economic, environmental and societal wellbeing of the area.

Led by the University of the Highlands and Islands in cooperation with Karelia University of Applied Sciences in Finland, the three-year SHAPE project (Sustainable Heritage Areas: Partnerships for Ecotourism), forms an international network of sparsely populated, rural, protected areas that are rich in cultural and natural heritage.

The destinations meet and regularly convene to foster their network and share expertise. It offers Wester Ross, which became a Biosphere Reserve in 2016, the opportunity to exchange ideas, experiences and concerns with areas that face similar challenges.



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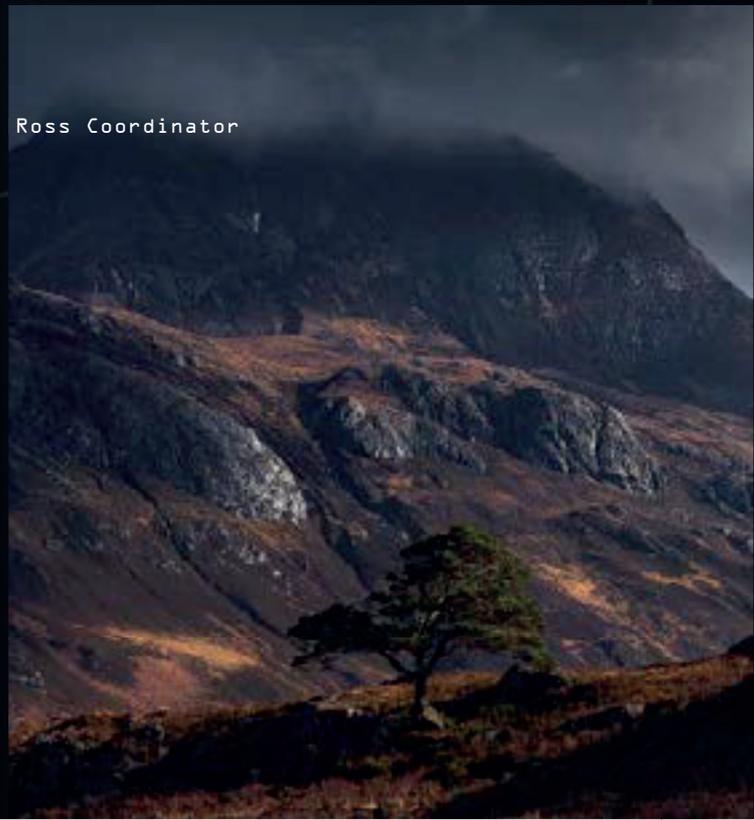


“The Northern network is particularly useful because we have shared challenges and opportunities including large expanses of land, more difficult climates, young people leaving and in some regions reconciliation with indigenous people. So, we tackle these issues together. We don't solve them all, but we get good examples of best practice from our friends and neighbours in these other biospheres which can be adapted and applied here.”

→ Natasha Hutchison, Western Ross Coordinator



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“What makes Wester Ross distinctive is our connection with the land and the sea. The biosphere celebrates the special relationship that people have with their environment. There’s a rich tapestry of natural and cultural heritage here and we try to demonstrate and remind people that all are intrinsically linked.”¹⁵⁵

→ Laura Hamlet, Geopark Coordinator at UNESCO Global Geopark North West Highlands



SHAPE also enables Wester Ross to network locally. The initiative is specifically geared towards connecting communities, authorities, conservationists and other partners to develop projects that benefit both the area and its people.

Before joining SHAPE, Wester Ross did not have an agreed set of actions on how to manage the destination. Now the Biosphere Reserve is taking a lead role in developing a destination management plan to which 126 businesses in the area have signed up and agreed to support.

Hutchison tells us, 'People are excited and want to work with us. They want to be involved in the planning process.' As an entirely community-led non-profit organisation, Wester Ross places community and its local identity at the core of its work.

The Biosphere Reserve is home to 8,000 residents, covers more than 5,000 square kilometres and attracts circa 100,000 tourists per year. Some of the community's most common concerns are that there will be too many tourists, not enough infrastructure and the degradation of the environment. That's why, according to Hutchison, 'The most important thing really is to take into account how the local communities feel about tourism and visitors.' Including the community in the planning process allows the Biosphere to ultimately promote sustainable development that is in line with everyone's interests - residents, visitors, and the environment alike. SHAPE has given us the foundation that we need to develop as an organisation and to deliver something that is not only tangible but what people want. They want to have a say, and they want to be heard. It's much more people-centric. And for us, it's just been the best way to really engage with our local communities and to raise the profile of the biosphere and get more support locally.'¹⁶³



¹⁶² Natasha Hutchison, Wider Value Interview, August 2019.



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