

Country's newest Geopark tells the tale of two oceans as full UNESCO Geopark status is granted

At the UNESCO Executive Board Meeting in Paris this month, Newry Mourne and Down's bid for full UNESCO Global Geopark status for Mourne-Gullion-Strangford was granted, recognising this area's unique landscape and geology. This landscape is varied and beautiful, shaped over aeons by the collision of continents, the appearance and disappearance of oceans, through tumultuous volcanic events, and the rough treatment of ice ages. It has shaped a rich biodiversity and a vibrant cultural life, which the new Geopark will celebrate.

The status of Geopark is hard won. Since 2012 the Geopark project team at Newry Mourne and Down District Council, in partnership with the Geological Survey Northern Ireland, has worked on an intense engagement programme with residents and stakeholders. As a result, the everyone involved is delighted that UNESCO has awarded Mourne Gullion Strangford the UNESCO Global Geopark (UGG) status in recognition of this work and the extraordinary landscape it praises.

A Geopark is a single unified geographical area, in this case, stretching from the waters of Strangford across the Mourne Mountains to the Ring of Gullion and beyond. A Geopark is a landscape that is managed holistically for the protection of its geology, the education of its people and visitors, and the sustainable development of its businesses. The Mourne Gullion Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark is about working together to make the most of our beautiful landscape through sustainable tourism, biodiversity improvements, geological education and outdoor recreation.

Mourne Gullion Strangford UNESCO Global Geopark is one of only **nine** outstanding landscapes worldwide awarded full Geopark status this year. The award recognises the area's internationally significant geological heritage, particularly the spectacular landscape of the District's three AONBs, the dramatic ancient volcanic landscapes of the Ring of Gullion, the high granite peaks of the Mournes and the rolling drumlins of Strangford.

The designation is an international standard, and a Geopark enjoys the same level of recognition as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. However, as the title has no legal status, there are no additional restrictions on planning, development or farming practices. Instead, the principal focus is on using the area's heritage to support its sustainable economic development - primarily through sustainable tourism.

Over 181,000 people live within the limits of the new Geopark, which follow the administrative boundary of Newry Mourne and Down District Council and extend out into the sea to encompass the Marine Protected Areas of Strangford Lough, Murlough Bay, and Carlingford Lough. Many of these people make their living from tourism or tourism-related activities; So becoming a Geopark was identified in the Council's 2017 – 2021 Tourism Strategy as a catalyst to support tourism growth sustainably. To meet this aim, the Council has involved the local community, tourism providers, government, education and environment sectors in promoting the benefits of Geopark status.

Mourne Gullion Strangford is unique amongst UNESCO Global Geoparks as it tells a tale of two oceans across over 400 million years of geological history. The geology of the area charts the closure of the ancient Iapetus Ocean, which brought together the island of Ireland's two parts. It follows the island drifting with the continents through tropical latitudes and then welcomes the birth of the modern North Atlantic Ocean. Finally, the last glaciation carved this ancient landscape into the fantastic place we see today. No other UNESCO Global Geopark has such a range of geological characteristics.

Speaking about what Geopark status will mean for the area, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Chairperson, Councillor Michael Savage, said,

"The status of UNESCO Global Geopark puts us on the world stage. It puts us firmly on people's bucket lists of places they must see. It demonstrates that our landscape is of global significance and is sustainably managed.

All the global geoparks have internationally important geology. But the community-led partnerships promoting an appreciation of natural and cultural heritage make our Geopark stand out. One of the fundamental Geopark principles is geological risk mitigation. One distinctive Mourne-Gullion-Strangford Geopark project is the fantastic dune restoration project at Tyrella Beach near Downpatrick. This tourist hotspot was at serious risk of erosion due to the loss of its dunes until local volunteers and Geopark staff got together with homegrown charity, 'True Harvest Seeds', to gather, grow and plant native dune grasses to capture the blowing sand. Within just a month of starting this project, there is already visible dune regrowth, protecting not only the lovely smooth tourist beach of Tyrella itself but the low-lying land behind it too."

Councillor Michael Savage continued,

"Geoparks are, above all else, about local people; without their passion and enthusiasm, they cannot thrive or flourish. Much work is needed to ensure this award delivers what we need: a sustainable community and a local economy boosted through conservation, education, interpretation and sustainable and regenerative tourism. I have great confidence that the people and businesses of this District will work together to make the most of their beautiful landscape."

Speaking after the award was announced, Laura Davies, Ambassador to UNESCO, added,

UNESCO Global Geoparks rightly enjoy strong international recognition. Years of hard work, often behind the scenes, is recognised through impeccable independent accreditation.

The new Mourne Gullion Geopark celebrates the story of our past, written into the land through geological processes; and focuses on the future of that landscape as it will be written by its people.

The best UNESCO designations bring communities, sustainable development and conservation together in real, grass-roots partnerships. From small, local projects

celebrating local geo-food, such as planting a community orchard in Newcastle, to major landscape-scale tasks like managing erosion on the peaks of the Mourne and the slopes of Slieve Gullion, the UK's newest Geopark does this in spades.

My warmest congratulations to all those involved in making it a reality!"

Marie Cowan, Director of the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland, commented,

"The tale of two oceans is clearly told in the unique geology of this area, and the variety of landscapes included in the Geopark make this area a potential honey pot for international geological and landscape-based tourism and education. To be able to see landscapes formed over 400 million years within such a compact area is exceptional, and the variety and sheer beauty of this Geopark make it one of a kind."

A special day of celebration **will** take place on the 25th May on the shores of Carlingford Lough at Cranfield and a packed programme of events and activities will take place throughout the year within the three AONBs.

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What is a Geopark? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auU4bnQ1atk>