

Panel:

John Bradley, Clare County Council (JB),
Colum Bunce, Burren Outdoor Education Centre (CB),
Margaret Comman, NUI Galway (MC),
Sarah Gatley, GSI (SG)
Carol Gleeson, Burren Connect Project (CG),
Seamus Hassett, Burren National Park (SH),
Joanne Hayes, Cavan County Council (JH),
Ronán Hennessy, Burren Connect Project (RH)
Tina Keating, Copper Coast Global Geopark (TK)
Kirstin Lemon, Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark (KL)
Colum McDaid, Environment and Heritage Service (CMcD)
Cormac McGuinley, Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience
Patrick McKeever, GSNI (PMcK);
Brendan McSherry, Louth Council Council (BMcS)
Pat O'Connor, GSI (PO'C);
Catherine O'Hara, Clare County Council (CO'H)
Sophie Préteseille, GSI (SP)
Derry Scanlan, Cavan County Council (DS)
Mike Sweeney, Copper Coast Global Geopark (MS)
Charlie Troy (Cnoc Suain – An Spideal) (CT)
Trish Walsh, Petersburg Outdoor Education Centre (TW)
Katherine Webster, Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience (KW)

Apologies: Michael Smith, Kerry Group, Sneem.

Opening remarks: Dr Patrick O'Connor (GSI)

Welcomed all; apologised for the absences of directors, Dr Peadar McArdle (GSI) and Garth Earls (GSNI); introduced himself and Dr Patrick McKeever as the GSI and GSNI representatives.

**First session: Aspiring Geoparks
Chair: Dr Patrick McKeever (GSNI)**

PMcK introduced himself – GSNI; European Geoparks Network (EGN) co-ordinator and UNESCO Geoparks Bureau member.

1. The Burren and Cliffs of Moher - Carol Gleeson & Dr Ronán Hennessy

Presentation

- Use of Google Earth models (to show geology, soil, terrain) – makes Burren very accessible to schools;
- Actions/Initiatives include Geopark leaflet campaign, wide distribution in North Clare, addressing many local concerns; 'Burren Rocks' week – May;
- 30 potential geosites, concentrating on 10 initially;

Discussion

- Are the 10 chosen sites the most publically accessible ones? (SG)
- 4 of the sites aren't, but mostly we are going with the accessible ones. (RH)
- We are using the 'Walking Scheme' template – TW will talk about this later. (CG)

- There is a linkage with the NEED project and synergies with the CCG re. working with older people. (MS)

2. The Joyce Country – Ms Trish Walsh

Presentation

- Trish Walsh- Director, Petersburg Education Centre – public body under Galway CC;
- Lough Nafooeey (S Mayo Trough) is in the centre of the aspiring Geopark area;
- Geology ranges across Dalradian folded marbles; Ordovician volcanics, tuffs, pillow lavas; Silurian marine fossiliferous sequences; Carboniferous limestone pavement (Coillte land, no access problem) and fossil horizons; Glacial moraines, valleys and erosional features;
- The Life Project: removal of all non-native species to re-establish native woodlands, with trails and signage;
- Ecology – e.g. wetlands; Archaeology – e.g Cong Abbey, stone circles; Botany – several orchid species, e.g. 'bird's nest' orchid;
- Cong Canal – cut through Carboniferous Limestone – will be close to the planned heritage centre; walks/trails planned to link old villages;
- Management Structure – local public meeting Apr 09; formation of subcommittee to oversee project; support from local Minister Ó Cuív;
- Mt Gabriel Pilot Scheme re. access – farmers building car parks at controlled entry and exit points; closure on, e.g. sheep-moving days;
- Walking Scheme – for walkers but aim to get geology, archaeology into it in future; CG (Burren) has also put in submission to Minister Ó Cuív, so the 2 areas can combine their energies;
- NUIG – bringing 2 extra weeks of teacher-training;
- Planned heritage centre is Petersburg Church; good tourist office in Cong;
- The geology (Parkes/Simms paper) should bring in additional tourists; Joyce brochure supported by Coillte and LIFE;

Discussion

- This has the advantage of a great variety within a small area, enabling easy management. (CG)
- The area is about 300 sq km plus. (TW)

- Do you have support from both councils (Mayo and Galway)? (JB)
- Yes, from both Heritage Officers; the local [government] minister and local councillors are in support. (TW)

- There is a need to get council support in addition to 'ground-up' support. (CG)
- The Heritage Officers have committed help and educational support. (TW)

3. The Cooley-Gullion-Mourne Region – Mr Brendan McSherry

Presentation

- The Cooley-Gullion-Mourne region covers 3 administrative counties- Louth, Armagh and Down. Newry & Dundalk working together – have ‘National Gateway’ status;
- BMcS mooted idea of Geopark rather than contentious ‘National Park’ for the Mourne Mountains; applied in 2007 for Interreg funding – appealed successfully but no funds left; need €1 million plus to employ staff;
- Newly published book ‘A Geological Field Guide to Cooley, Gullion, Mourne & Slieve Croob’ by Sadhbh Baxter was launched by BMcS and copies were distributed;
- The book is aimed at secondary school teachers; copies to be sent to all secondary schools in Ireland; funded by Heritage Council and GSI;
- One of the objectives of the booklet is to aim for Geopark status; awaiting funding;
- BMcS works with Ring of Gullion group and has good relationship with landowners; lot of support from GSI and GSNI;

Discussion

- Is the term ‘Geopark’ an issue? (CG)
- It is only a problem with the English language. (BMcS)
- We should use ‘restrictions’ to our advantage and market them as ‘opportunities’. (TW)
- The problem is to increase farmers’ interest in tourism. (CG)
- Farmers need to think ‘outside the box’. (TW)
- Due to previous legislation and REPS, farmers think that the ‘Geopark’ path will put more restrictions on them, but it has proved beneficial to farmers. It is difficult to sell [Geoparks] to community groups. (An example is the restriction about building a 2nd house on farming land for the extended family). (JB)
- We will spend a lot of time with the community to allay fears, rather than rushing ahead. (TW)
- I endorse the need for community support. The EGN is the economic tool and brand. (PMK)
- But you can’t impose the EG status. (PO’C)
- The new Development Plan [Louth] looks at the Geopark as a tool rather than a restriction. I work closely with the planners. (BMcS)
- It is very useful at the beginning to have a good relationship with the Council (CG)
- Mike, what is the position regarding the Copper Coast Geopark? (PMcK)
- The council had a block on building on the seaward side, but there were the same problems with farmers regarding walks. Farmers are being told to diversify away from farming because of the end of EU subsidies, but there is still a dearth of B&Bs – because they are looking for grants. (MS)
- I agree that the mentality is still the same as it was 70 years ago. (PO’C)
- Farmers should welcome the change, for example for the winter months. (CG)

- Farmers want to make a living from farming, but they cannot live on that alone. There is a reluctance to change. (BMcS)
- I'm dealing with Monuments for Clare County Council and I've never been thrown off farmland yet. I offer advice to farmers and the young farmers welcome me and engage and have an interest in the archaeology of their farms. I am well known in the community. (JB)
- The food aspect of farming is important, for example, cheeses, and linking to tourism. (MS)
- Regarding SACs (Special Areas of Conservation), to turn them round as a positive – is there any change in attitude? [directed at SH] (CG)
- They may be refused by the local authority (SH)

Second session: Existing Geoparks
Chair: Dr Patrick O'Connor (GSI)

4. The Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark – Dr Kirstin Lemon

Presentation

- MA extension into Cavan in September 2008;
- Management – the 2 local authorities and joint committee of councillors, Heritage Officers, tourism officers, etc;
- Events Programme – Guided 'nature' walks – no use advertising as 'geology' because no-one will come!;
- Special education events – UK funding to give teachers training in earth science (mostly from UK/NI; some from Cavan); collaboration with Queen's University;
- Community events – very strong in Cavan; local agricultural shows well attended (10 to 20,000); community trips to learn about the Geopark;
- Future – to continue with events (30 in 2009), etc.

Discussion

- How many people and how are they involved in the management structure? (KW)
- There are 2 dedicated Geopark staff and other council staff, so there are about 8 in total. (KL)
- Who is involved in site management? (KW?)
- Each local authority [Fermanagh and Cavan] looks after each area. I inspect the area periodically (once per week or month) and report any damage to the engineer. (KL)
- What are the key objectives of the events? Revenue? (KW)
- Any revenue generated is only to cover costs. (KL)
- It is better to charge a nominal fee, for example €2. (CO'H)
- I concur with that – don't provide the event for nothing. (TW)
- We charge £2 for the science workshops to cover costs. (KL)

- What do you do regarding the protection of sensitive sites, for example, limestone pavements? (I'm thinking of the graffiti on the Joyce Country limestone surfaces). (TW)
- No sites are fenced off – if you put up barricades, then you tempt the 'undesirables' in. (KL)
- We will remove the graffiti and use other sites to detract from the 'honey pot' site. So there will be sites for the public and those for scientific research. (TW)
- There should be the distinction made with research sites and other 'fragile' sites – these wouldn't be publicised by Geoparks. The Cavan 'Burren' area is very fragile archaeologically. It is forested by Coillte and an open access policy opens up the possibility of damage. (PMK)
- [TW to discuss further with P'OC and KL regarding practical application to Joyces Country.]
- It is difficult to educate large groups, especially at fragile sites, in order to make sure they understand the site value. (KW)
- The Cavan 'Burren' is very remote, but it would be easy to do damage once there. (PMK)
- There seems to be a focal point for the centre in any Geopark – where will The [Clare] Burren's be? (SH)
- It will be more a network of centres. Beoburren could be the educational centre and other centres according to their strengths. (CG)
- The Cliffs of Moher (CoM) Centre stands out in terms of visitors – it is essential to reach as many as possible. (PO'C)
- But it [the centres/visitors] has to be spread out. (KW)
- I thought that the Geopark was extended to include the CoM because of its visitor centre? (SH)
- No, the CoM was included for its geology. (PO'C)
- The Geopark boundaries are not set, because they are different for the geology, the botany etc. (JB)
- Many visitors to the Burren end up at the Cliffs of Moher, anyway. (CG)
- The Carboniferous geology extends the Burren Geopark to the CoM. (KW, PO'C)
- Simple issues should be explained in a simple leaflet on arrival at the Geopark re. the dos and don'ts (as in Canadian National Parks, re., for example, the bears!) – e.g. not building little stone cairns. (JB)
- With 70, 000 visitors, are there any visitor management issues in the Marble Arch Caves? (KW)
- It is well known what the number limits are so it is well managed. There are no issues apart from very busy days when all tours are booked; in which case, groups are sent to an alternative activity. (KL)

5. The Copper Coast Global Geopark – Dr Mike Sweeney and Ms Tina Keating

Presentation

- 3 staff employed; rest are community volunteers; 2000 visitors in a good year;
- Heritage Centre – Bunmahon Church: roof & floors replaced; planning permission for extension granted;
- Local management team extended, includes local accountant; new FAS employee; continued support from GSI, MHTI, Waterford County Council.

- 4 Interreg project applications on the go for funding; new business plan on the back of market evaluation/sustainability report by CHL;
- Community Centre extension to church (Bord Failte partnership) to create 'living' experience – concept to include 'children's mining experience' which should bring the adults in; also hoping for 'underground' experience at Tankardstown - to bring in 20 – 40,000 visitors per year;
- Long term extension of the CCG to include the Comeraghs – glacial features, human linkage (dolmens);
- Activities 2009 – encompassing geology, botany, archaeology – combining education & entertainment;
- Educational activities – link to WIT;

Discussion

- Are the trained guides volunteers? (KW)
- Yes. (TK)
- How do you deal with management issues, for example, litter? (JB)
- Yes, this is a problem, especially at Bank Holiday weekends – the council has to deal with it. (MS)
- Local farmers have a problem with litter. Is Marble Arch Caves the same? (JB)
- Marble Arch Caves have no litter wardens. (KL)
- All litter bins are close to the centre [CoM]; here is a debate as to whether they should go along the cliff edge. You have to provide litter bins. (KW)
- There are bins encased in concrete blocks provided for eating areas – concrete so that they cannot be burnt. (SH)
- There is a need to look at examples in the Burren that illustrate parts of the Geography Curriculum, and then show this to the schools. (PO'C)
- This is already being done [in the CCG]. Students have a Geography investigation to carry out, and they come to the CCG to see, for example, the coastal erosion/depositional process. CCG knows which part of the Geopark can be used to demonstrate which part of the curriculum. But there is a problem with funding and with getting the teachers into the field. (SP)
- There is a problem with 'substitute teacher' funding. (MS)
- I work with secondary school teachers; [outdoor] teaching time was double time and was abused. Now only enthusiastic teachers take the classes out because the budgets are gone. (TW)
- A comment to the GSI: the Education Department have 'dumbed down' the curriculum and that's why you don't get geology students – because 'hard' geology is not going to get the [exam] marks. (TW)
- GSI produced the 'Schools Book' ['Understanding Earth Processes, Rocks and the Geological History of Ireland', 2004 - a teaching resource to facilitate the new Geography Leaving Cert syllabus] but GSI has no clout with [the Department of] Education. (PO'C)

6. UNESCO Global Network of National Geoparks - Dr Patrick McKeever

Presentation

- All relevant information is outlined in the presentation itself.
- Geopark is a brand, not a designation.

Discussion

- In relation to the UNESCO 'evaluation missions' during May to June in the application process, it was confirmed that the applicant is informed about the date of the visit. (KW, PMK)

General discussion

Chair: Dr Patrick McKeever

- Requests for PMK's presentation made (JB)
- All talks to be put on the GSI web at <http://www.gsi.ie/Programmes/Heritage/Projects/Geoparks.htm> (SP)
- Should we send an invitation to attend the forum to councillors? (JB)
- At a Croatian Conference on SE Europe geoheritage, it was recognised that Cliffs of Moher was an aspiring Geopark. (KW)
- That's good that they were aware of the Geoparks movement and the UNESCO qualification. (PMK)
- What is the position regarding areas wanting to use their geological heritage if they are not going to reach the EGN bar? (MS)
- It is up to each country to do its own thing, but how does the public regard 'Geoparks' that aren't UNESCO Geoparks? (PMK)
- How does UNESCO regard the 'National Geoparks [Ireland] Forum'? (SP)
- UNESCO is very pleased that we are promoting them on a national basis – acting as an information point – and not on an 'ad hoc' basis. There are similar Fora in Spain, Germany and Australia, for example. (PMK)
- Some aspiring Geoparks may never reach EGN status, but can such groups stay in the Forum or will there be a 'veto' on them? (SP)
- There will be no 'veto' but they will be discouraged from setting themselves up as 'Geoparks'. (PMK)
- The name 'Geopark' has no copyright. At national level, groups pursuing sustainable tourism have to call themselves something. (PO'C)
- But they have no right to call themselves a Geopark because they have not been through the UNESCO evaluation. (PMK)
- Is there another level of support? (?SH)
- There is no '2nd tier' to offer support. (PMK)
- If you can't make it to EGN status, what can you call yourself? (MS)
- GSI will support groups in Ireland to use their geological heritage for education or sustainable tourism – and that is our policy. The primary factor is the geological heritage value, and also management structure and sustainability. (PO'C)

- [UNESCO] 'Geopark' status is an economic tool. (PMK)
- Is there any limited number of designated Geoparks per country and any limited number of applicants per country? (KW)
- At any one time, only 2 active applications are allowed from any one country. All the time that 2 are in the system, a 3rd cannot be accepted. (For example, Germany has had 2 in the system for 2 years). (PMK)
- GSI is happy to support groups whether they become a full EGN member or not. All recipients here of GSI funding, will continue to receive it. It is important for outreach, education and sustainable tourism. (PO'C)
- The 3 talks from aspiring Geoparks given here exactly fit the [UNESCO] Geoparks application. They are doing all the right things at the moment. (PMK)
- Discussion regarding the timing of the next meeting of the Forum (PO'C, SP). It was suggested that it would be helpful to coincide/pre-date the timing of the EGN Application submission date, likely to be around the same time of the year next year. (KW)
- Discussion regarding the location (PO'C). PMK invited the Forum to the GSNI; TW extended the invitation to The Joyce Country. It was agreed on the Joyce Country and TW to confirm dates that would best fit in with their schedule.

The Forum ended at 6.30 pm