

The Burren as UNESCO Geopark?

Wednesday, 16 July 2008

A public meeting will take place in Ennistymon next week to discuss the proposed designation of the Cliffs of Moher and the Burren's distinctive karst landscape as a UNESCO Geopark.

Organised by the Burren Connect Project, the meeting will seek the public's opinions on the proposal, which supports the continued preservation of the area's geological heritage and the enhancement of a sustainable tourism base in the west of Ireland.

Geoparks have a UNESCO non-statutory designation and focus primarily on protecting geodiversity, promoting geological heritage to the general public as well as supporting sustainable economic development of geopark territories primarily through the development of geological tourism. A European network exists and has drawn together territories from across Europe that share these aims. This network has been able to access significant INTERREG funding to promote and develop its aims.

Ireland currently has two designated Geoparks: the Marble Arch Caves/Cuilcagh mountain park in Fermanagh and the Copper Coast in Waterford.

'Geopark designation does not bring with it any statutory requirements or limits. It is more an internationally recognised label that promotes geological landscapes and their communities, and encourages education, awareness and sustainable tourism', said Carol Gleeson, Project Leader, Burren Connect Project.

She continued, *'The idea of designating the Burren and the Cliffs of Moher as a designated European Geopark has been around for a few years and it is definitely an idea worth investigating, that is why we have invited Dr. Patrick McKeever from the European Geopark Network and Dr. Pat O'Connor from the Geological Survey of Ireland to speak at a public meeting. This meeting will be an opportunity for everyone interested in the issue to get detailed information, to look at the pros and cons of such a designation, and to have an informed discussion on the matter'.*

'The Burren Connect Project is interested in this concept as it ties in very well with our aim to link environment, community and tourism to conserve the Burren. The aims of the Geopark network are environmental protection, raising awareness of and respect for landscapes and their communities, promoting education and sustainable tourism. Network members also have access to European funding programmes to help implement these aims', added Ms. Gleeson

In recent years, questions have been raised about the impact or need for more designations for the Burren, particularly since Minister John Gormley announced the proposed World Heritage Site Status, also a UNESCO designation, at the Burren Life Conference in April.

According to Ms. Gleeson, *'This is one of the issues that needs to be discussed; what is the difference between the various designations, what is meant by non-statutory designation and what are the impacts of such a designation and also what time frames are we talking about.*

World Heritage Site status would take many years of planning and significant cost to achieve, and we have not even begun the discussion at local level yet, whereas Geopark status could happen within the next year or so.'

Commenting on the proposal, Katherine Webster, Director, Cliffs of Moher Visitor Experience, stated, *'We have an amazing array of geological heritage here in County Clare from the Burren to the Cliffs of Moher and the idea of seeking European Geopark status is definitely one that all of us who have an interest in the area should explore.'*

The upcoming public meeting will be held at the Falls Hotel, Ennistymon, on Thursday, 24 July at 8pm.

Dr. Patrick McKeever will present information on the UNESCO designation and the experience of the European Geoparks Network to date, while Dr. Pat O'Connor will outline the Geological Survey of Ireland's involvement in and support for such a designation for the Burren and Cliffs of Moher. The organisers say that the event will provide an opportunity for information sharing, discussion and debate on this issue.

*For further information on **Geoparks** please visit:* www.europeangeoparks.org

Links:

UNESCO - *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*
<http://www.unesco.org/>

UNESCO Global Geopark Network
<http://www.globalgeopark.org/>

UNESCO Earth Science Geoparks
<http://www.unesco.org/science/earth/geoparks.shtml>

Guidelines and Criteria for National Geoparks *seeking UNESCO's assistance to join the Global Geoparks Network (January 2007)*
<http://www.unesco.org/science/earth/geoparks/2007guidelinesJanuary.pdf>

IUCN - International Union for Conservation of Nature
<http://cms.iucn.org/>

INTERREG IIIC - *'new solutions to economic, social and environmental challenges.'*
http://www.interreg3c.net/sixcms/list.php?page=home_en

2008 - Year of Planet Earth
<http://www.yearofplanetearth.org/>

IYPE - Planetearth.ie
<http://www.planetearth.ie/>

International Year of Planer Earth - Northern Ireland
<http://www.bgs.ac.uk/gsni/iype/>