

The east border region of Ireland: a new landscape

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The Mourne Cooley Gullion geotourism region straddles the Northern Irish – Irish border, midway between the cities of Belfast and Dublin. Geologically, it sits close to the Palaeozoic Iapetus suture and the Caledonian-Appalachian mountain belt, and hosts three distinct Cenozoic igneous complexes associated with the opening of the North Atlantic. Geomorphologically, the landscape was shaped by ice during the last glaciation and archaeologically, the region has an unusually high concentration of well-preserved Neolithic monuments as well as a richness of medieval fortifications and churches.

Much of Northern Ireland and the border areas lag behind the rest of Ireland and Europe in tourism development and marketing due to their late twentieth century history, but peace has brought an appetite for cross-community, cross-border development and tourism. Located within an hour of international airports and ports, our obvious markets are Europe and North America, but the beautiful north of Ireland is still not seen as a holiday or leisure destination by many in Ireland. The Geotourism project is funded by a section of the European Regional Development Fund specifically aimed at cross-border structural and trade improvements. In the past two years, we have established a strong geotourism presence and in addition to community tourism events, we have active education, Geoambassador training and Geoconservation volunteer programmes. Our capital investment programme is ongoing and we hope to have Geoareas developed throughout the region by 2015.

Inspired by the three Geoparks on the island, including the cross-border Marble Arch Global Geopark, we aim to achieve Geopark status. We have many similarities and there is much to learn from their work, but our narrative is unique to us. We hope to develop a tourism product that works well with our communities, our relatively new physical landscape and our new political landscape.

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