

Southern Saimaa Lake area: a potential new Geopark in Finland

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The Geological Survey of Finland (GTK) has worked for several years with the clear aim of spreading knowledge about geological heritage to the public, to the tourism sector, and to places of education. GTK also provides professional help to the authorities and the local projects in their work to create new Geoparks in Finland. GTK also has a representative in the national Geoparks committee established in 2013.

Rokua, the first Finnish Geopark, has increased interest in the Geoparks Network and its benefits to tourism in Finland. Currently, there are several areas in Finland that want to join the Geoparks Network.

The furthest developed regional Geopark project at the moment is the Saimaa Lake Geopark project in southeastern Finland. The objective of the project is to demonstrate the geological development of the lake scenery and geological sites related to it. An important goal is also to develop the tourism in the area. Cities of Imatra, Lappeenranta and Mikkeli and five municipalities are part of the project area.

Southern Saimaa is one of the most representative lake areas in Finland. It is located in the intersection of geological key sites where the Vuoksi River that regulated the development of eastern Finland's Lake District intersects with the arch-shaped Salpausselkä end formations. The Salpausselkä end formations were formed during the cold climate periods 12,500–11,500 years ago. When satellite images became more common, they were thought to be the most beautiful terrain formations created by glaciers on the northern hemisphere.

During the lake phases of Saimaa, humans arrived in the area. They were fishers and hunters. They left behind rock paintings that can be seen in Astuvansalmi. The Astuvansalmi rock paintings are the largest collection of rock paintings found in Scandinavia, comprising about 70 paintings. The oldest paintings were made about 3000–2500 BC. The Saimaa ringed seal is among the most endangered seals in the world. The only existing population of these seals is found in Lake Saimaa. The population is descended from ringed seals that were separated from the rest when the land rose after the last ice age. The Saimaa ringed seal has been protected since 1955.

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