

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere

Scotland's **First**

Background to the Biosphere

1. What are UNESCO Biospheres?

Biospheres are places with world-class environments that are designated through the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Programme on Man and the Biosphere (MAB). In order to be designated a Biosphere, a candidate area must be nominated by a national government and approved by the MAB Programme and must be able to promote and demonstrate a balanced relationship between people and nature. The World Network of Biosphere Reserves is the largest network of protected areas in the world. There are currently 580 biosphere reserves in 114 countries.

Biospheres are places which value and promote conservation and sustainable development on a regional scale. They are created to protect the biological and cultural diversity of a region while promoting sustainable economic development. They are places of cooperation, education and research where local communities, environmental groups, and economic interests can work collaboratively on conservation and development issues. The world network of Biospheres allows opportunities to demonstrate and learn from the best examples of people working in harmony with nature for the benefit of both.

2. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire is the first 'new style' Biosphere in Scotland and only the third in the UK, it has been recognised by UNESCO as a new style Biosphere because of its unique combination of special landscapes and wildlife areas, rich cultural heritage and communities that not only care about their environment and culture but want to develop the area sustainably. Biosphere status will help us all understand, define, sustain and enhance those special qualities. As an internationally recognised marketing brand for superb natural environments Biosphere status offers new



opportunities for individuals, businesses and communities to demonstrate how to live, work and play in a world class environment.

Cairnsmore, Silver Flowe and Merrick Kells were first designated as Biospheres in 1976, changes made by UNESCO in the 1990s meant that the Biosphere concept has been broadened to become one aimed at sustainable regional development. Existing Biospheres have to either re-apply under the new criteria or withdraw. Following extensive local consultation on the suitability of the concept and opportunities that UNESCO status could bring, a Biosphere Partnership in Galloway and Southern Ayrshire has now successfully applied for and been granted formal UNESCO Biosphere status for a new style Biosphere covering a much enlarged area – some 5,200 square kilometres. Biospheres have three main functions:

- Conservation
- Learning /research,
- Sustainable development,

The biosphere status involves no new legislation and brings no new regulation of activities or land within the area.



www.gallowaysouthernayrshirebiosphere.org.uk



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere
member of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves

3. Why have a Biosphere in Galloway and Southern Ayrshire?

The Biosphere covers a large part of South West Scotland. It is an area of considerable social, economic and environmental diversity and has significant assets and opportunities in terms of both people and nature. Galloway and Southern Ayrshire are recognised as special places to live, work and to visit – special for its people, its culture and its outstanding environment. However there are also a number of significant challenges affecting the people, communities and environment.

In response to this range of social, economic and environmental challenges, common across rural South West Scotland the Partners agree that UNESCO Biosphere status presents a real opportunity. It is the most appropriate mechanism for providing a new focus, vision and impetus to realising the clear opportunities that exist for economic development, regeneration and capacity building, based around the natural assets and talents in the communities and individuals within the area. Through the Biosphere it is anticipated that Galloway and Southern Ayrshire will be able to contribute more fully and positively not only to its own and Scotland's future but also to the future of the planet.

4. Where are the boundaries of the Biosphere?

The area which makes up the new Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere reflects the physical characteristics of the natural environment and the way people use it. Biospheres are living ecosystems and this is reflected in the boundary. The Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere is based on the upland area centred on the Merrick which acts as a water catchment for a large part of south west Scotland and which feeds water flowing from its source via the rivers to the coast and out to sea. It is these upland catchments which contain the main areas internationally recognised for their biodiversity interest.

The area of land that catches the rainfall which feeds a river is known as the catchment. In the case of Galloway and Southern Ayrshire with the exception of the southern end of the Nith, most people living in the areas drained by the river catchments of the Cree, Fleet, Ken-Dee, Nith, Doon, Water of Girvan and Stinchar are within the Biosphere.

The Biosphere area is a geographically and culturally coherent area extending to some 5,269 square kilometres. It is largely rural in appearance, with approximately 94,000 people at an overall population density of 0.34 persons per hectare. The area is characterised by a large number of small towns and villages, and all have fewer than 10,000 residents. Ayr, Dumfries and Stranraer are three larger urban areas lying outside the boundaries, but because of proximity have links to the Biosphere, providing services and employment for many people and communities.

The area's many small towns: Castle Douglas; Gatehouse of Fleet; Newton Stewart; Wigtown; Girvan; Maybole; Dalmellington; New Cumnock; Cumnock; Sanquhar; Thornhill and their surrounding villages are in the Biosphere and just

as important to its existence and well-being as the National Nature Reserves of Cairnsmore and Silver Flowe and the Merrick Kells SSSI which are its Core Areas.

The Biosphere recognises the strong cultural and local identity of Galloway and Southern Ayrshire and the common thread of water connecting the natural environment, landscape and everyone living and working in the area and on which they all depend. It is through water that everyone living and working in the Biosphere is connected with everyone else.

The Biosphere boundary does not have a close fit with existing administrative boundaries which tend to divide the area along watersheds. To deal with an entire upland catchment and the communities which rely on it as a single bio-geographic unit has required a new approach to cooperation amongst the three local authorities and public sector agencies involved in the process so far. The confirmation of Biosphere status by UNESCO will consolidate, add impetus and move this process forward.

5. What is Galloway and Southern Ayrshire's Biosphere trying to achieve?

The real value of the Biosphere is for the benefits it can bring. *Biosphere (status) is not an end in itself but is only of value for what it can do for people and nature.* Biospheres are not statutory designations or nature reserves. They require no new legislation nor do they impose any additional regulation. They are administratively and resource light. Crucially they are test beds and exemplars for innovations in sustainable development practice within areas of high environmental quality. Dissemination of good practice and learning is a priority. The worldwide network of Biospheres provides opportunities to learn from best practice and demonstrate to others what we can do. Opportunities for new thinking, new linkage, new resources and new collaborations can be brought to bear on some old as well as current and future challenges.

The central purpose of the Biosphere is to demonstrate that the stewardship of highly sensitive environments can be the driver for economic and social development, and that the communities and commercial interests dependent on them can support their continued protection and appropriate management. The ambition is to see the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere develop and embed approaches to management and partnership that will have powerful lessons for agencies and communities far beyond its boundaries.

Biosphere designation provides Galloway and Southern Ayrshire with a unique opportunity to take a lead in developing more sustainable ways of living that will benefit the environment, economy and community of the area and ultimately act as an example of best practice within UNESCO's worldwide network of Biospheres. If this exciting vision is to be achieved then everyone will need to play their part, whether as communities, organisations, Councils, businesses, individuals and Government.

Galloway and Southern Ayrshire's Biosphere has the 3 fundamental, complementary functions required of a UNESCO Biosphere (Conservation, Learning and Research and Sustainable Development) that support the core purpose of 'testing and demonstrating sustainable development on a regional scale'. The critical issue of what benefits Biosphere status can deliver for Galloway & Southern Ayrshire is something which the Partners have given particular attention. For many people the potential benefits to the natural environment perhaps appear to be more obvious. However the social and particularly the economic benefits were felt to need more critical scrutiny if the concept were to gain wider support for the tangible benefits it could bring to people's lives. Consultants were engaged to explore and test the concept more fully and confirmed the initial expectation that Biosphere status would bring significant additional benefit to the area (*Mackay Associates, 2008*).

A Biosphere Vision and Strategic Aims has been now been developed. An Action Plan will also be developed as a priority, setting out a portfolio of actions identified by the Biosphere Partnership to address those aims.

6. How will it happen?

The Biosphere is not a thing or an end point it is in essence a process to guide change towards a more sustainable future. A process which can help guide and manage change in thinking, behaviours and actions to deliver more sustainable development and lifestyles. Public policy and programmes will play a central role in supporting the necessary changes but the private sector, individuals and communities will be key in deciding on change and implementation.

A general consensus has gradually emerged across a broad range of stakeholders in the area that the Biosphere idea is a good one:

- Offers a logical and common sense approach
- Recognises that the public sector cannot deliver everything
- Resources available to the public sector will be constrained
- Community and other stakeholder resources, talents and enthusiasm will be required
- A partnership approach means that decisions will be acceptable for the majority
- The Biosphere hits a wide range of policy "buttons" at Scottish, UK and EU levels and chimes well with the stated vision of most local and national governance.

In addition Biosphere status offers an extra dimension in terms of international recognition of quality, enhancing pride in the area and delivering direct benefit to businesses at no cost. As the only global recognition and accreditation for an area demonstrating excellence in sustainable development practice, the Biosphere offer is unique. Biosphere status requires no new legislation, imposes no additional regulatory burden on activities and involves no onerous bureaucracy. It therefore offers the potential to be extremely cost effective.



As a locally embedded bottom-up process of self selection, rather than a top down designation, UNESCO Biosphere status is more likely to have the capacity to positively influence a far greater range of people, to develop their potential and their ability to find specific solutions to local problems and global challenges and to develop their capacity to cope with change.

The Partnership's vision for Biosphere status is for a bottom up stakeholder driven and partnership led initiative to link people and their natural environment aimed at bringing tangible benefits and increased confidence to the communities of the area. The ultimate goal being to explore, pilot and test innovative approaches to sustainable land use and development and to work towards a model for regional development in South West Scotland which fully integrates people, communities, jobs, culture and nature in a way which is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

7. Who will deliver the Biosphere?

A Biosphere Partnership has been formed representing a broad range of interests and who, by working together collaboratively, will guide the process as we go forward. The Partnership, has identified a Biosphere Vision, Aims and Charter which we hope can be used to steer and judge progress. The intention is to carefully define a route-map to achieve the aspirations of the Biosphere without recourse to additional demands on scarce public resources as we believe that a bottom-up process which galvanises and engages the talents, skills, enthusiasm and resources in the area will drive the process forward. Facilitating this will be a crucial aspect of our work. Above all our aspiration for UNESCO Biosphere status is for it to make a tangible difference to the lives of the people who live and work in the area as we experience increasingly rapid economic, social and environmental change and pressures on our land resource.

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The Biosphere covers a very large area and most of the thinking, planning and actions will be carried out through local and community initiatives, partnerships and organisations. The private sector, especially land owners, land managers, farmers and businesses, as well as larger companies such as power, water and mineral companies who take important decision on the management and use of land will play an absolutely key part in making it happen.

It will be vital to continue to inform and develop the support from communities and other stakeholders. Their active engagement and encouragement, as we go forward will

be essential. We do not underestimate the task ahead but we are optimistic and determined to succeed. We know that resources will be very tight over the next few years, particularly from the public purse. We also know that if the obvious potential of the natural assets and the people in the area are to be realised and developed, a partnership approach where everyone is working together to identify new and innovative approaches to some new and some not so new challenges will be essential. UNESCO Biosphere status offers a new opportunity to help us do this. With your support and encouragement we think we will stand a better chance of success.

The scale of ambition and therefore the change required is considerable. To ensure the process is up to the task and sustainable over the long term will require effective leadership and active support from across the Partnership. There needs to be a shared willingness among all partners to work collaboratively within the framework set by the Charter and Vision towards a better future for the area. There needs to be an acceptance that we may have to do things differently, that new and innovative approaches will be needed if we are to bring about the scale and nature of change we aspire to.

8. How will we measure progress and achievements?

It is important that we know what is happening in the Biosphere and how things are changing. Economic, social and environmental conditions will need to be monitored. Baseline data will be recorded near the time of UNESCO's decision on Biosphere status to establish the current situation.

Key performance indicators will be agreed which will enable changes to be tracked over time. This will indicate the current situation at any one time and be a measure of how things are changing and the progress we are making as a result of our actions. Importantly it will allow us to assess how we are doing in relation to our stated intentions. The Biosphere Partnership Board will oversee this process and ensure that the assessment is made available to all stakeholders. It is the intention that a 'State of the Biosphere' document, identifying progress, will be produced every two years and will be the focus for a public Biosphere Forum event where progress and achievements will be reported. This wider engagement will allow scope to review and re-focus efforts as necessary.

Our expectations are that given the nature of the challenges and that the Biosphere is essentially about managing change, it will inevitably be a long term process which will grow and develop but which over time, through collaborative partnership working, will be able to deliver significant benefits for both people and the environment. However opinions regarding the value of the process and judgements on progress and achievements are likely to have a much shorter timescale and it will therefore be vital that there is early action which can be seen to deliver clear, tangible benefits on the ground.