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Walk this way!



Stepping in the right direction!

Waterfall Country supports an immense richness of biodiversity and heritage. The importance of this area is acknowledged by the numerous designations heaped upon it.

It can boast two Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), one Special Area of Conservation (SAC), numerous Geological Conservation Review (GCR) sites, plenty of Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs) and listed buildings. Not only that but it falls within both the Brecon Beacons National Park and the Fforest Fawr Geopark. These combined designations not only reflect the international importance of this area but also afford large parts of this area protection through national and international law.

The immense beauty and interest of this area with its tree-lined gorges and roaring waterfalls inevitably draws to the area a huge number of visitors each year. In 2011 alone the area saw an estimated 166,000 visitors – the highest number to any one part of the National Park. People come not only to walk in the area, marvel at the waterfalls and drink in its natural beauty, but also to practice caving, climbing and gorge-walking.

The Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) have highlighted the fact that many parts of the SAC and SSSI's are in unfavourable condition as a result of this heavy recreational pressure, placing a requirement on Forestry ▶



Bwa Maen: celebrating our faults!

► Commission Wales and the National Park Authority as major landowners to demonstrate that they are taking steps to prevent further deterioration of the place as well as bringing the designated sites back into a 'favourable condition'. Accordingly the Waterfall Country Management Plan was published a couple of years ago together with a five year work programme which is now entering its third year. The key aims of the management plan are as follows:

- Provide and promote opportunities for safer recreation and a positive experience for visitors that fosters understanding and appreciation of the SAC, SAMs, SSSI's and surrounding area.
- Increase our knowledge and understanding of the area, its sensitivities and use.
- Preserve and restore the SAC/SSSI/SAM's as well as other valuable habitats and sites within Waterfall Country, and ensure that the SAC and SSSI objectives are supported in all projects.



Steady as you go

New non-slip surface for the Gunpowder Works bridge

A few years ago we installed a new bridge across the Mellte at the Gunpowder works. The bridge was designed to reflect the rich industrial past of the area. The bridge went in well, but there were problems with the bridge decking being slippery when wet or icy. Non-slip sheeting was installed along the length of the bridge deck to alleviate this problem with the assistance of a specialist rope access team.



The specialist rope access team assist with the installation of the non-slip sheeting; and the finished result



Walk this way!

Working with outdoor providers to develop a gorge-walking code for the Mellte

Following on from the success of the pilot project to introduce a gorge-walking code of conduct for the use of the Sychryd by outdoor groups, we have now begun the more complicated task of developing a gorge-walking code of conduct for the Mellte.

The Mellte gorge is more enclosed so there is less flexibility in the avoidance of more sensitive areas. It is also more sensitive in terms of the rare lower plant communities that it supports.

In the autumn of last year a group of representatives from the National Park Authority, FCW and SWOAPG spent a day in the Mellte documenting the way that the gorge is used by outdoor groups for gorge-walking. This detailed information has been transferred to a map which will be used by a lower plant specialist who is to survey the site in the spring.

In simple terms, he'll be providing guidance as to which areas should be avoided by gorge-walkers and from this a map of the area for gorge-walkers will be developed showing agreed access routes.



Latest Projects

The last six months have been a busy time in Waterfall Country with some major projects underway or completed:



The specialist rope team inspect the cliffs above the Porth yr Ogorf cave entrance at Cwm Porth

Men working overhead

Cliff inspections and de-scaling at Cwm Porth and Sgwd Clun-Gwyn

Cliff inspections are carried out annually at Cwm Porth and Sgwd Clun-Gwyn as they are busy areas in terms of visitors, and rockfalls have been known to happen due to the nature of the terrain. During the last cliff inspection some small scale de-scaling work (where the loose rock is prised away by the specialist rock access team) took place at Cwm Porth.

The Elidir Trail Project

Work began in December on major improvements to the Elidir Trail between Pontneddfechan and Sgwd Gwladus. This is a joint project between the National Park Authority and Neath Port Talbot CBC. New sleeper benches have replaced the remains of the old stone ones. Ditching, drainage and fencing around paths and old mine adits has been completed and hundreds of metres of path have been re-vetted and resurfaced. The work is due to be completed by April 2012.

Hardworking volunteers shifting the 10 tonne of gravel for re-surfacing works.



A farewell to mud

Bronwydd board walks

There is a footpath to the north of Waterfall Country that in recent years has become very popular with Duke of Edinburgh Award groups since it forms a useful link route between Sgwd Gwladus and Sarn Helen. However, there is a problematic section below Bronwydd Farm that has historically been very muddy and overgrown. Major improvements to this section of path have been carried out with the help of volunteers, mainly through the installation of boardwalks.

The path is now much improved though there are still a few days work left to complete the work.

Volunteers help install boardwalks along the 'muddiest footpath in the National Park'



Easier access

Improvements around Sgwd yr Eira

If visiting these falls, there is now less risk of a fall as you approach them. There have been some considerable improvements to the paths down to this most celebrated of falls in 2011. Forestry Commission Wales have completed the work to the path down the steep south side of the gorge with a new improved route being created to replace the old steps. The hand rails down to the falls on the north side have also been repaired and replaced.

Find Out More

If you'd like to keep up to date with what's happening in the area you can follow me on twitter. To follow me (Helen Pye) you will need a twitter account and my username is @BBParkWarden

You can also find out more about the area on our website: <http://www.breconbeacons.org/environment/waterfall-country>

Sign of the times

In December the final stage of upgrading the signage in the area for walkers was completed. All the new signposts now contain details of destination and average time to get there on foot.



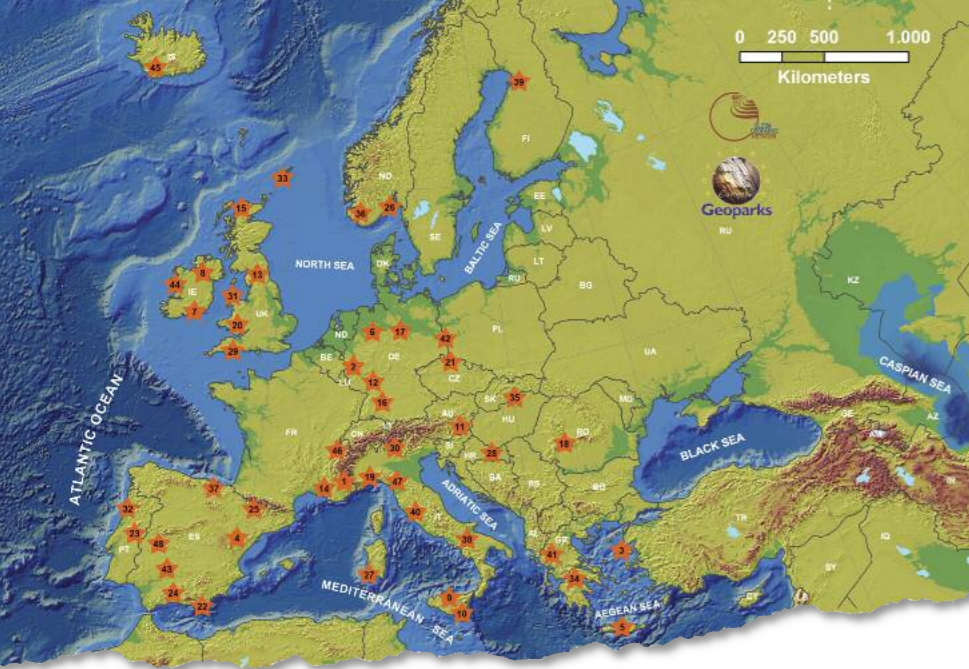
Visitor survey 2011

Volunteers and staff helped carry out the latest two-yearly survey to measure the quality of the visitor experience in the area. It revealed a continuing and significant fall in the number of visitors getting lost since 2007 as a result of the improvements to signage and an increase in number of visitors giving a very high positive experience rating, with many people citing the good waymarking and paths. If you would like a copy of the survey report please e-mail: helen.pye@breconbeacons.org

Waterfall Country Volunteer Warden scheme

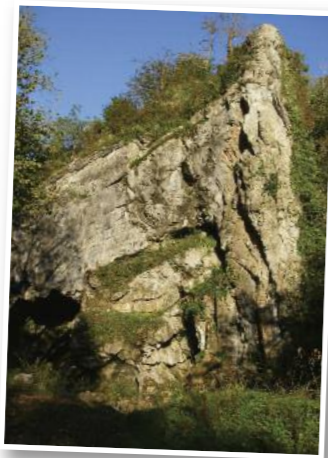
In 2011 we piloted a car park volunteer scheme. This involved having a volunteer based at a Gwaun Hepste on the weekends giving out information and advice to visitors. We hope to expand the scheme this year to increase the number of volunteers we have and to cover more car parks in the area. If you're interested in volunteering on this scheme please contact Helen.pye@breconbeacons.org





Bwa Maen - celebrating our faults!

Thinking of geological faults, one name tends to come up ... San Andreas, California. But did you know that we have our very own faults here in the Geopark, one of which caused one of the most damaging earthquakes to hit Britain in the twentieth century?

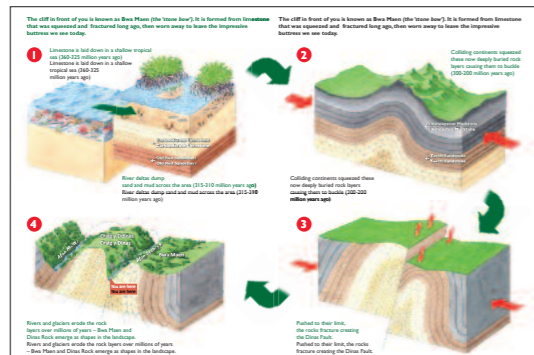


Known as the Neath Disturbance, it's a line of faults, fractures, veins and folds stretching from Swansea Bay to Hereford.

The disturbance gives rise to many significant landscape features along its length, including the Vale of Neath and Moel Penderyn and was responsible for the Swansea earthquake of 1906. But the best rock exposure along the Neath Disturbance is at the foot of Sychryd Cascades, the towering face of folded and fractured rock, known as Bwa Maen.

Following de-vegetation of Bwa Maen by the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW) last year we have been leading a project with our partners, Forestry Commission Wales, CCW, and South Wales Outdoor Activity Providers Group (SWOAPG) to create illustrations and text to feature on a new interpretation panel. The panel explains the formation of Bwa Maen, the relevance of the Neath Disturbance and highlights how we are managing the area for visitors. We have been liaising with SWOAPG and it is hoped that the new panel will aid activity leaders and satisfy their groups' curiosity of the features they encounter whilst gorge walking.

For any further information on the project please contact Alan Bowring, Geopark officer or Suzanna Jones, Interpretation officer on 01874 624437



Our Geopark Network partners

As many readers will know, Fforest Fawr Geopark is one of a family of Geoparks across Europe. At the start of 2012 there were 48 special areas in this continent-wide group from Iceland to Crete. Take a look at www.europeangeoparks.org for more information on each of them.

Those marked * are trans-national ie they extend across more than one country. Numbers refer to the starred locations on the map of Europe.

- Austria** Styrian Eisenwurzen (11)
- Croatia** Papuk (28)
- Czech Republic** Bohemian Paradise (21)
- Finland** Rokua (39)
- France** Bauges (46), Reserve Naturelle Geologique de Haute Provence (1), Parc Naturel Regional de Luberon (14)
- Germany** Geo-Naturpark Bergstrasse - Odenwald (12), Harz - Braunschweiger Land - Ostfalen (17), Muskau Arch (42)*, Schwabian Albs (16), Terra.Vita (6), Vulkaneifel (2)
- Greece**, Chelmos-Vouraikos (34), Petrified Forest of Lesvos (3), Psiloritis (5), Vikos-Aoos (41)
- Hungary** Novohrad - Nograd* (35)
- Iceland** Katla (45)
- Italy** Adamello-Brenta (30), Apuan Alps (47), Beigua (19), Parco Nazionale del Cilento e Vallo di Diano (38), Geological Mining Park of Sardinia (27), Madonie (9), Rocca di Cerere (10), Tuscan Mining Park (40)
- Norway** Gea Norvegica (26), Magma (36)
- Poland** Muskau Arch* (42)
- Portugal** Arouca (32), Naturtejo (23)
- Republic of Ireland** Burren and Cliffs of Moher (44), Copper Coast Geopark (7), Marble Arch Caves (8)*
- Romania** Hateg Country Dinosaurs (18)
- Slovakia** Novohrad - Nograd* (35)
- Spain** Basque Coast (37), Cabo de Gata-Nijjar (22), Parque Cultural del Maestrazgo (4), Sierra Norte de Sevilla Natural Park (43), Sierras Subbeticas (24), Sobrarbe (25), Villuercaas-lbores-Jara (48)
- UK** English Riviera (29), Fforest Fawr (20), GeoMon (Isle of Anglesey) (31), Marble Arch Caves (8)*, North Pennines AONB (13), North West Highlands (15), Shetland (33)



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