



**UK Connect project
Exchange 1 Report
Loch Lomond National Park
and
Solway Coast National Landscape**



**Funded by
UK Government**

Introduction

The UK CONNECT project seeks to deepen and expand East–West collaboration by enabling the Landscapes Youth NI group to engage directly with Youth Ranger and Youth Ambassador programmes across National Parks and National Landscapes in GB. Working in partnership with EUROPARC Atlantic Isles, the project will support learning exchanges, problem-solving, leadership development, and the creation of lasting civic relationships across jurisdictions.

Within the project we have developed 3 learning exchanges as follows:

1. A learning exchange to Loch Lomond National Park and Solway Coast National Landscape for the Landscapes Youth NI Group.
2. A learning exchange to the Causeway Coast and Glens for EUROPARC Atlantic Isles members youth rangers and ambassadors.
3. A learning exchange to Eryri National Park and Shropshire Hills National Landscape for the Landscapes Youth NI Group.

Following on from these exchanges, the joint UK and NI groups will develop and co-create a youth manifesto for Landscapes and share this through webinars and seek to influence policy by presenting to the relevant national environment ministers.

This report, which has been written by the participants of the first exchange, outlines the experiences and knowledge that they gained throughout the 5 day programme.

A huge thanks are due to our hosts in Loch Lomond National Park and Solway Coast National Landscape.

Ali Cush , Nik Turner, Naomi Kay and Laura Singleton – you all went way beyond the call of duty – so thanks a million.

Thanks as well to Deb Brookes from EUROPARC Atlantic Isles and Mary-Jane Alexander from North York Moors National Park for their engagement and involvement.

Mike McClure – Landscapes NI



Day 1 – Friday 21st August

From 21st to 25th August, the Landscape NI Youth group embarked on yet another adventure, aiming to strengthen relationships with partner groups from across the UK. This time, our journey would focus on Loch Lomond and the Solway Coast.

Meeting at Grand Central Station in Belfast, the group gathered with a mixture of excitement and anticipation. We wasted no time loading into our hybrid minibus, which proved to be far more fuel-efficient than travelling by car. The minibus group met up with Carole and Dearbhla in the ferry terminal car park, and the team efficiently reorganised a few passengers between the vehicles in record time. Unfortunately, shortly afterwards we were informed of a 45-minute delay to our sailing across to Cairnryan. However, the group did not let this dampen their spirits. Having learned on previous trips to make the most of any situation, we passed the time playing I Spy With My Little Eye, which later evolved into a creative game of I Hear With My Little Ear.

Once safely aboard the ferry, everyone quickly secured what some might describe as the best seats in the house: the window seats. As we departed the harbour, the group eagerly scanned the water in the hope of spotting dolphins. While waiting for a sighting, we enjoyed our packed lunches and took in the views across the sea.

Upon arriving in Cairnryan Harbour, everyone returned to their designated vehicles and began the three-hour journey to Edenmill Farm, where we would be staying during our time in Scotland. It was not long before Mike's Spotify playlist was completely taken over by the group, resulting in an hour of enthusiastic singing and carpool karaoke. Eventually, the excitement gave way to tiredness and most people drifted off to sleep.

Our next stop was a lovely café in Prestwick, where we refuelled before continuing the journey. After picking up Deb and Jessica, the karaoke resumed for the final stretch of the trip before we finally reached Edenmill Farm.

Ryan Nelson



Day 1 – Friday 21st August (continued)

After a long journey filled with scenic views and carpool karaoke, we arrived at Edenmill Farm. Beautifully situated between Glasgow and Loch Lomond, the farm provided an excellent base from which to explore the surrounding area.

Once we arrived, the staff gave us a warm welcome and showed us to our accommodation. The service was excellent, and the rooms were comfortable, modern and of a surprisingly high standard for a farm stay. The communal lounge area was a fantastic addition, giving us a space to socialise, play games, and enjoy meals together.

Speaking of meals, we had pre-ordered our pizza dinner earlier in the day, and it was delivered directly to the lounge area. The pizzas were yummy, with lots of different choices from vegetarian “Fairy Falls” pizza to a “Haggis” pizza! The delicious skin-on fries also earned special praise.

After travelling for most of the day, we were all feeling a little tired, so we decided to take a short evening walk through the woodland surrounding the farm. The weather was mild and calm, allowing us to fully appreciate the sounds of the local wildlife, including the many barn swallows preparing for their migration.

As we wandered along the forest paths, we admired the local flora, shared stories, and learned more about forestry practices and woodland management. A highlight from the walk was stopping at a small pond where we took some photos, but most importantly we stood still and let our senses focus in on the smells, sounds and sights around us. After a long day of travelling, it was a grounding and reflective experience that set us up nicely for our walk back.

Gary Conlon



Day 2 – Saturday 22nd August



When we first arrived at Loch Lomond, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. I had heard many people describe it as beautiful, and they certainly weren't wrong.

The day began with introductions, which were friendly and relaxed. It was fascinating to meet members of Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park (LLNP) and learn more about the important work they do to protect and manage the landscape. Their presentation was both educational and insightful, giving us a deeper understanding of conservation in the area.

As a group, we then walked to the pier to catch a boat to Inchcailloch Island. The walk itself was lovely, with beautiful scenery and well-maintained surroundings. One particular tree along the route was a highlight for Carole, who absolutely loved it!

The boat journey was incredibly peaceful and offered spectacular views of the mountain peaks surrounding the loch. When we arrived on the island, we were welcomed by stunning scenery, fascinating history, and, unfortunately, plenty of ticks! Despite this, I felt incredibly lucky to experience the island with such an amazing group of people.

One of my favourite parts of the day was sitting by the beach and spending time talking with everyone. Whether we were hiking, enjoying the fresh air, or learning about the island's rich history, every moment felt rewarding. It was a truly memorable experience, and I am grateful to have been part of it.

Olivia Bell.



Day 2 – Saturday 22nd August (continued)

Snack times and meal times were always my favourite parts of the trip. Throughout our walk around the island, I couldn't stop thinking about the lemon German biscuit I had stashed in Grace's bag. By the time lunch finally arrived, I was more than relieved.

We had completed the first part of our hike around Loch Lomond and stopped at a small beach that was actually really lovely. The only thing I was cautious about was the sand. By this point, I had already found enough ticks on myself and I certainly didn't want to bring any more unwanted souvenirs back to bed that night! If I had woken up the next morning with half the island in my sheets, I would have been raging.

Grace and I decided to sit on the rocks, slightly away from the rest of the group. We both needed a quiet moment to recharge. Some of our squad sat on benches beneath the trees, while others gathered on the sand. We enjoyed our sandwiches and biscuits, which were exactly what I needed after a busy morning of hiking.



There were also several ducks wandering around the area. They were completely fearless and confidently strolled right up to us, clearly hoping to steal some of our lunch. Unfortunately for them, we had been specifically instructed not to feed them!

We caught the ferry back from the island at around 3.00 pm. With some free time before heading back, a few of us browsed the local shops. I bought a magnet for my fridge, while Grace managed to spend £25 on things she definitely didn't need. We then stopped for ice cream. I didn't have any because I wasn't in the mood, but it looked delicious and everyone else gave it great reviews.

Alana Howland



Day 2 – Saturday 22nd August (continued)

When we returned to Edenmill after a day well spent at Loch Lomond we participated in a few different activities outside.



The first activity, led by Ryan was an interactive soil sampling session. After Ryan's demonstration we got stuck in, gathering the right soil and adding water to our sample. We shaped the sample into a stick shape and kept adding water until it was able to somewhat form a circle with a hole in the middle.

Ryan taught us about the different types of soil, clay, loamy and sandy, and where our sample fitted in as loamy soil. It was able to form the circle somewhat due to it having decent levels of nutrient and water retention. Clay soil would form the most solid circle while sandy soil would most likely crumble.

After hands were washed and midge nests were donned the excitement continued with the "Find the Tree" game, organised by Jessica, Tara, and me. After being split into groups, each member of the group took turns closing their eyes and being led to a random tree. After a few minutes feeling the different features of the tree, they were then led back to the starting position and had to pick their tree from out from the grove. It was a brilliant grounding exercise that encouraged us to engage more deeply with the natural environment and pay attention to details we might otherwise overlook.

The evening culminated in a truly creative manner when Mike tasked us with building a "hay man." This collaborative effort brought out everyone's artistic side, resulting in some truly impressive hay men that will undoubtedly be remembered for years to come. One team used their own items, such as a camera, glasses, hat and chocolate biscuits to truly bring their vision alive.

The other team used leaves along with the hay to create a farmer from hay with a truly impressive amount of hair and bright green eyes. The competition produced plenty of laughter and teamwork, making it a perfect way to end a memorable day.

Nicole Quinn



Day 3 – Sunday 23rd August

After packing our bags and enjoying a delicious breakfast, we set off once again for the visitor centre in Balmaha. Upon arrival, we took part in a short briefing and PowerPoint session before getting to work.

We were provided with equipment for a range of trail maintenance tasks, including litter picking, cutting back brambles, and clearing blocked drainage systems. It was encouraging to see that the paths were already in excellent condition, thanks to the efforts of local volunteers, staff, and visitors who clearly take pride in maintaining the area.

That said, there was still plenty of work for us to do, particularly in the quieter, less frequently visited sections of the trail. As we carried out our tasks, we were rewarded with stunning views across the loch and the surrounding mountains, making the work all the more enjoyable.

Once we had completed our activities, we returned to the visitor centre for a well-earned lunch and some ice cream before climbing back into the bus and continuing our journey to the Solway Coast.

Grace Deane



Day 3 – Sunday 23rd August (continued)

The landscape at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park reminded me of the feeling I get when being at home in the Mourne, looking up to the mountain peaks rising up from the Irish sea below. However the scale here felt even more powerful with Ben More as the park's highest peak being 1,174 metres. Despite feeling like an ant in this impressive landscape, I didn't feel overwhelmed by the mass of it instead, as Ali and I discussed, it was like receiving a comforting hug from the mountains.

Sitting in the front of the van during the three-hour drive south, I was fortunate to have a clear view of the transforming landscape. Gradually, the giant mountains of the Trossachs began to fade as we made our way to the lowlands of the Solway Coast. The peaks flattened into vast areas of agricultural land with rolling hills and dotted with hay bales stretching far and wide for what seemed like forever.

Mike finally announced, "I can see the sea!" Sure enough – there it was, greeting us on the horizon and glistening in the afternoon sun. The clear blue skies throughout the journey made the contrast between the golden fields and the sea even more striking.

A notable thing about the landscape on the drive south was the large-scale plantations. Nothing about the landscape was natural, instead, it was cleared of native trees, like oak and willow, thousands of years ago for farming and trade. Mike and I discussed how different the land is now compared to back then. It is hard to comprehend a natural landscape when our human eyes haven't seen it before. Nonetheless, pockets of wildlife did stand out with clusters of native trees although they were so small compared to the infinite fields.

Overall, being a part of the Strangford Lough youth ranger team, and growing up near Carlingford Lough, made seeing the ocean along the Solway coast an exciting and welcoming experience.

Jessica Murray-Gibbons



Day 4 – Monday 24th August

The day began in Abbeytown, where we learned about the rich history of the Solway Plain. We visited Holme Cultram Abbey, the remains of an early medieval abbey founded by Cistercian monks in 1150. It was fascinating to learn about the abbey's history and how the monks successfully transformed the landscape through their land and water management practices. We were also interested to discover connections to Northern Ireland. Grey Abbey, the Cistercian abbey located in County Down, was established as a daughter house of Holme Cultram Abbey, highlighting historic links between the two regions.



We then made our way to Mawbray Banks Nature Reserve to learn about the management and conservation of its sand dune grassland habitat. One species that thrives in this unique habitat is the Natterjack Toad which is a rare and protected species and found in only a few coastal locations. The population was sadly declining due to a loss of habitat. They breed in shallow pools, which often dry up in the summer. At Mawbray Banks there are 3 specially managed ponds which are refilled and monitored to support a breeding population of these amphibians! At the reserve there is also a small herd of Belted Galloway cows that provide conservation grazing for the area. They are very effective at helping keep unwanted scrub under control. The cows also wear GPS collars which keep them away from the pond areas that are essential for the natterjack toads.

Tara Hollywood





Day 4 – Monday 24th August (continued)

For lunch, we headed to Blue Dial Farm, a family run business that has been involved in farm diversification since the 1960s, when they introduced a caravan park onto the site. Along with the caravan park, they now have an on-site milkshake vending machine called 'Moody Cow' and a small shop.

During lunch, we had the opportunity to sample a selection of its milk flavours, including banana, salted caramel, chocolate, strawberries and cream, raspberry, and traditional milk. The strawberries and cream flavour was a clear favourite among the group.

After lunch, we heard from the Solway Coast National Landscape manager, the Farming in Protected Landscape (FIPL) co-ordinator and the farm owner. They provided us with insights into both farm diversification and the FIPL scheme.



The Farming in Protected Landscapes (FIPL) scheme is a grant programme available to farmers and landowners in England. It provides funding for projects that benefit nature recovery, climate resilience, cultural heritage, and public access. Applications are reviewed by a local committee representing a range of local interests, and projects may receive partial or full funding.

One successful FIPL-funded project at Blue Dial Farm was the construction of a large community-use building, complete with standard and accessible toilet facilities. The project received full funding on the condition that the facility would be made available to the local community free of charge. Since its completion, it has hosted a variety of events, including cheerleading practice sessions, farmers' meetings, and children's parties.

With further help from the Solway Coast team, Blue Dial are working to increase the biodiversity on their farm through the development of 'scrapes' in an already wet field. Scrapes are shallow ponds roughly 1m deep that retain rain or flood water seasonally but stay damp throughout the year. This provides habitat for aquatic life including wetland plants and insects e.g. water beetle, dragonflies and hoverflies. They can also be a valuable habitat for birds, amphibians and small mammals.



Day 4 – Monday 24th August (continued)

Following our visit to the farm, we returned to Maryport to meet Amber from the Cumbria Wildlife Trust for a shoreline search.

During our visit to Maryport Beach, we encountered many species familiar to us from the coastlines of Northern Ireland, including the Green Shore Crab (*Carcinus maenas*) and Gutweed (*Ulva intestinalis*).



We began by exploring the rock pools while Amber highlighted various species and explained their ecological importance. One particularly interesting feature was the abundance of Honeycomb Worm (*Sabellaria alveolata*) tubes covering many of the rocks throughout the beach.

Throughout the session, Amber shared many fascinating facts and one that stood out was that all seaweed species found around England's coastline are edible. Among the species we discovered was Laver (*Porphyra umbilicalis*), a tough seaweed traditionally used in the production of Welsh laverbread.

Our discussions also uncovered an unexpected connection to Belfast. Thomas Henry Ismay, one of the founders of the White Star Line, famous for operating the RMS Titanic, was born in Maryport.

As the weather was warm and sunny, some of us decided to take off our shoes and explore the rock pools more closely. While wading through the pools, we observed Common Prawns (*Palaemon serratus*) darting between the rocks, while small Gobies (*Pomatoschistus* species) nibbled curiously at our feet.

Without a doubt, the highlight of the shoreline search was spotting a small Common Cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*). We were lucky enough to watch it swimming through the water before it cleverly buried itself beneath the sand, demonstrating one of its remarkable survival techniques.

It was a fantastic way to end a day filled with history, conservation, farming, and wildlife discoveries.

Dearbhla McSherry





Day 5 – Tuesday 25th August

On our final morning at the Solway Coast National Landscape, we had just enough time to visit Campfield Marsh RSPB reserve. We were treated to a guided tour of the reserve, stopping at several viewing points while learning about the important conservation work taking place there.

The reserve contains a diverse range of habitats, including saltmarsh, peat bog, farmland and wet grassland, making it an ideal home for a wide variety of wildlife. While the site is best known for its birdlife, it also supports impressive dragonfly populations.

It was amazing to see so many birds around enjoying the carefully created habitats. At our first stop, I spotted 5 herons take flight together and it was amazing to see so many at once. Further into the reserve, we spotted two ospreys across a large field. One was perched on a fence post and the other on a dead tree. They were hard to see at first as they were well camouflaged in the trees, but with the help of some binoculars, we got a much better view.

While admiring the ospreys, we also witnessed a Marsh Harrier in flight quite close to where we were standing. It was a brief but very exciting encounter. We were very lucky to see so many interesting birds all within a short space of time – we must have brought some luck with us!

On the way back to the bus to head to the ferry, we heard an interesting call coming from the reeds and bushes. We were informed that it was most likely a Water Rail. Unfortunately, we didn't get to catch sight of it as it was hidden in the bushes, which is not surprising as they tend to be very secretive birds.

With that, our final morning had come to an end and we extended our many thanks to Naomi and Laura, who were with us throughout our time at Solway Coast and waved our goodbyes and headed for the ferry home.

Róisín Gray



Day 5 – Tuesday 25th August (continued)

Reluctantly leaving the RSPB reserve, goodbyes were exchanged between Debs and the bus crew. The car crew set off on a mission to get Debs to Carlisle train station before heading north to meet up with the rest of the group for lunch enroute to the ferry at Cairnryan.

As we travelled along quiet roads and a cycle route, we reflected on everything we had learned during the trip. Having gained a greater understanding of the grazing systems used along the coast and noticing how the local architecture gradually shifted from traditional stone buildings to brick-built villages, conversations naturally turned to the merits of slow tourism. Alongside this, our ongoing cultural exchange continued through music, language, and shared experiences.

Before long, we found ourselves in Carlisle, wondering why none of us had realised sooner just how beautiful the city is. Its welcoming atmosphere and strong sustainable transport connections left a positive impression on the group. After a 'see you soon' farewell at the train station, it was time to reset the map and concentrate on the road ahead. We passed the inner firth wetlands, re-entered Scotland, wistful that there wasn't time to explore the Scottish side of the Solway Firth

Time was tight and even lunch seemed unlikely. After discussing our options and checking in with the bus crew, we made a quick stop at a petrol station in Newton Stewart. In a record time four minute turn around, sandwiches were purchased, bladders relieved and the journey resumed. With three determined women, a deadline to meet and excellent teamwork, we arrived in Cairnryan only a short time after the bus.

With all safely back on board deck seven of the ferry, the final group gathering was a buzz of enthusiasm which resulted in the creation of a Landscapes Youth NI Instagram account.

Looking back, five days somehow felt much longer, but in the best possible sense. Bringing together a diverse group of people who shared a passion for landscapes, conservation, and community created countless opportunities for learning and connection. While knowledge can certainly be shared online, there is a depth of understanding that can only come from experiencing places firsthand, sharing stories, and spending time together in the landscapes that inspire us.

For the ten young people from Northern Ireland, this trip provided an opportunity to build meaningful connections with young people, communities, and landscapes in both Scotland and England. For those of us who are perhaps not quite so young, seeing those connections form offered genuine optimism for the future stewardship of these special places and the communities that depend on them.

Carole Reid



Conclusions

My overall thoughts, summed up in just a few words, would be fun, dedication, inclusion and knowledge.

I learnt a lot, about Northern Ireland, about nature, and about what nature means to young people. I was able to see Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park and the Solway Coast National Landscape through the eyes of young leaders. I tried new activities and games, discovered the beauty in the detail of flora and fauna and honed many new photography skills. We discussed commonalities in our shared history and culture, while also recognising our differences, including where species don't exist in Northern Ireland and exploring why that might be.

It was great fun to try new things, from blindfolded tree identification to soil-type analysis under Ryan's leadership. Taking the time to step outside my comfort zone and experience the spirit of community in a different way was incredibly rewarding.

You could not wish to meet a better group of young people. They share a passion for nature and a real commitment to making positive change, coming together, making a stand for their designated landscapes, and bringing others along with them.

There was a real sense of seeing the beauty in everything around us, while recognising the importance of making a difference by elevating others and ensuring everyone has a voice.

The future of landscapes in Northern Ireland is bright.

Deb Brookes EUROPARC Atlantic isles





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