

WESTER ROSS APPLIES TO UNESCO FOR BIOSPHERE STATUS

The communities of Wester Ross, in the northwest Highlands are applying to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for the region to become a Biosphere Reserve. After more than 12 months of community consultations and planning, the nomination will soon be sent to UNESCO in Paris for final consideration.

A Biosphere Reserve is an internationally recognised accolade for promoting biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. In the UK, they are simply referred to as Biospheres. Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve was one of the very first to be recognised by UNESCO in 1976, but the current criteria require a focus on sustainable development for a much larger region.

Assist Social Capital (ASC), a Scottish social enterprise funded by the Scottish Government to support the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere programme nationally and internationally, has been assisting the Wester Ross communities through a participatory and asset-based approach enabling communities to collectively engage, explore and collaborate across sectors at a regional level.

Colin Campbell of ASC said “Wester Ross Biosphere (Biosphere Ros an Iar) will cover 529,000 hectares, making it the largest in the UK. Wester Ross is exceptional in terms of its biodiversity. Approximately 20% of the area is designated under UK legislation as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The internationally recognised UNESCO designation will help to bring a broad range of benefits to the area and encourage opportunities for new jobs to be created, while maintaining the natural environment.”

Patrick Krause of the Scottish Crofting Federation, a member of the Wester Ross Biosphere Strategic Partnership added “UNESCO’s ‘Man and the Biosphere programme’ recognises the importance of sustainable, traditional ways of living on the land. Crofting is an integral part of life in the area and we know that it will play a central role in the future of the Wester Ross Biosphere.”

Professor Martin Price, Chair of the UK National Committee for UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Programme, added, “A strong case has been developed for Wester Ross Biosphere to be the fifth in the UK. This global accolade will recognise the unique ecosystems and landscapes of the region, and their potential for supporting a thriving regional economy.”

It is expected that UNESCO’s decision on the Wester Ross Biosphere application will be announced at the 4th World Congress of Biosphere Reserves in Lima, Peru in March 2016.

For more information, visit www.social-capital.net or www.unesco-mab.org.uk.