Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty: HLF routes £1.5m into Mourne Mountains

23/07/2012

They were the inspiration for renowned author C.S Lewis' imaginative creation of the fantasy Kingdom of Narnia; immortalised in song by the numerously covered song 'The Mountains of Mourne' by Percy French; they are one of the most visited tourist attractions in Northern Ireland; the Mourne Mountains have now inspired £1.5million in conservation funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

The scheme is led by the Mourne Heritage Trust (MHT), and the money comes through HLF's Landscape Partnership (LP) programme which helps to protect and manage some of the UK's most outstanding and treasured landscapes. The programme brings together members of the community as well as local, regional, and national organisations, through many interlinked projects to create a shared vision to tackle the natural and built heritage needs of the local landscape.

HLF has also announced its initial support of £1,040,200, including £60,200 development funding, under the same programme, towards conservation, improvement and restoration works for the Ring of Gullion Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The area is regarded as the finest example of a ring dyke in Ireland and Britain and has an exceptionally rich archaeological heritage.

Welcoming the news, Environment Minister Alex Attwood, said: "This is great news for two of our most prized landscapes, Mourne and Ring of Gullion, both of which are designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is clear evidence of the growing recognition that investing in our natural and built heritage can produce very significant community benefits as well as a sound economic return. It is also a strong endorsement of the approach taken by the Mourne Heritage Trust and the staff in Ring of Gullion to work with landowners and local communities to identify practical measures to enhance the landscape and promote its enjoyment by the visiting public."

Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: "We are absolutely delighted the Mourne Landscape Partnership vision has been realised and that we have been able to give our initial support for the Ring of Gullion Landscape Partnership.

"The Mournes are one of the most iconic landscapes of such natural beauty we cherish in Northern Ireland. They are subject to a high number of designations for their heritage value such as Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI) and contain some of Europe's most important tracts of upland heath. This scheme will ensure long-term management, promising long-term benefits for the local communities, visitors to the Mournes and to the heritage of this magnificent landscape."

Martin Carey, CEO of the Mourne Heritage Trust, said: "This funding will celebrate and significantly enhance the conservation of our natural, built and cultural heritage and we look forward to engaging with the communities of Mourne throughout the implementation of the programme."

Darren Rice, Ring of Gullion Officer, Newry and Mourne District Council, said: "We're delighted that the Heritage Lottery Fund has given us this support. This partnership will provide educational and community benefits that are of interest to everybody in the Ring of Gullion. The Council would also like to thank everyone involved in the application; a fantastic

team effort.”

The Mournes are home to many plant and animal species including priority species such as red grouse, the keeled skimmer, sundew, butterwort and Juniper. The landscape has also given rise to a distinctive industrial heritage based around farming, granite quarrying and water supply.

The LP area is centred around the upland core of the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) with the compact range of granite peaks which rise abruptly from the Irish Sea as the focus of the project. The quality and importance of this landscape has been recognised in the Mournes being identified among three landscapes shortlisted as candidates to be among Northern Ireland’s first ever National Parks[3].

Thirty individual projects make up the Landscape Conservation Action Plan (LCAP) which covers an area of 223km^2. Ten project themes cover the practical level of the scheme which include: encouraging healthy heathland; saving Mourne juniper; caring for walls and monuments; making recreation sustainable; developing trails with tales; getting people around the Mournes; creating focal points; participative research and learning; sharing our stories and creative Mournes.

By 2016, the vision is that the Mourne Mountains will exhibit a mosaic of recovering heathland with unique Mourne Juniper thriving once again. Monuments and iconic dry stone walls that criss-cross the area will be restored. A cohesive approach by farmers and large landowners will ensure the use of a range of techniques to clear scrub, keep invasive species at bay, while encouraging and maintaining native plants.

The local communities are also at the heart of many aspects of the Landscape Partnership scheme. Skills training and wide ranging participation from the local communities will allow their knowledge to be shared in a variety of ways. A drive to re-invigorate traditional folklore, handicrafts and skills in communities will ensure the natural, cultural and Industrial heritage of the Mournes is preserved and shared with their visitors.

The majority of landowners in the mountains are smallholders, but substantial areas of land fall under the remit of Northern Ireland Water (NIW), the National Trust (NT) and the Mourne Mountains Trustees. Professional expertise has been sought from Northern Ireland Environmental Agency (NIEA), the National Trust, trail designers, conservation architects, local enthusiasts and other relevant specialists.

Note to editors

• HLF’s Landscape Partnerships are helping bring together members of the community as well as local, regional, and national organisations to deliver schemes which benefit some of the UK’s most outstanding landscapes and rural communities. Grants currently range from £250,000 up to £2m. From 2013 this range changes to £100,000 up to £3m. The next closing date for LP applications is May 2013.

• HLF has awarded Newry and Mourne District Council a first-round pass of £1,040,200, including £60,200 development funding. An LP earmarked first-round pass means that money has been set aside by HLF for the scheme in question. Competition at this stage is tough, and while it does not guarantee funding, it is an indication of positive support. The applicant then progresses to the second round and submits a further, fully-developed application to secure the full award. This early level of strong financial commitment means that LPs can build strong partnerships with the assurance that funding for their scheme is in place provided that their final proposals fully meet the programme's criteria.

• A shortlist of three areas for selection as Northern Ireland's first National Parks was announced in June. The Mournes; the Causeway Coast and Antrim Glens, and the Fermanagh Lakelands have been chosen. It is hoped two of the three will be designated as National Parks. See BBC website for more information.

Further information

• Heritage Lottery Fund - please contact Robert Smith on 020 7591 6245 or email roberts@hlf.org.uk.

• Mourne Heritage Trust – please contact Martin Carey on 028 4372 4059.