

PRESS RELEASE (For release 5th May 2016, 11am GMT)

First International Dark Sky Park In Ireland Receives Accreditation

The International Dark-Sky Association has granted Gold-Tier International Dark Sky Park status to Ballycroy National Park & Wild Nephin Wilderness – to be jointly recognised as Mayo International Dark Sky Park.

County Mayo, situated in western Ireland, is widely celebrated for its rugged and unspoiled landscape on the edge of Europe's wild Atlantic coastline. A Gold tier classification is an honour reserved for the most exceptional of dark skies and stunning nightscapes. This recognition completes the "360 degree experience" that this stunning region has to offer.

The award is the first International Dark Sky Park in Ireland and is a wonderful recognition for the region's pristine skies, enhancing its existing protected landscapes and wilderness regions. This is the second IDA designation in Ireland. The first is Kerry International Dark Sky Reserve in County Kerry.

"Today's announcement is a wonderful outcome for both dark skies and economic development in rural Ireland," IDA Executive Director J. Scott Feierabend said. "County Mayo joins Kerry as a haven of natural darkness for both wildlife and human visitors alike."

Ballycroy National Park and the adjoining Wild Nephin Wilderness expand over 110 square kilometers of mountainous Atlantic blanket bog and forest. Viewing sites for visiting astronomers have been designated and graded by ease of access and facilities available. Signature viewing sites include the Claggan Mountain Boardwalk, Letterkeen Bothy and Ballycroy National Park Visitor Centre, which have excellent interpretive and parking facilities.

"Ballycroy National Park and Wild Nephin are honored to have received Gold-tier International Dark Sky Park Status" National Parks and Wildlife Service Regional Manager, William Cormacan said. "We are fully committed to preserving our pristine dark skies and are excited by the many opportunities that this accreditation will present for local tourism, businesses and the park."

The Mayo Dark-Sky designation follows a lengthy period of night sky surveying and quality monitoring by students of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. Assisted by Professor Brian Espey of Trinity College Dublin's Astrophysics Department, the research resulted in collaboration among communities in Newport, Ballycroy & Mulranny together with Ballycroy National Park, Coillte Forestry, Mayo County Council, Mayo South West Development and Galway Astronomy Club. The group formed the "Friends of Mayo Dark-Skies" steering committee and submitted the application for dark sky status earlier this year.

"We are thrilled with the award. The project has been embraced by so many parties and is the first collaboration of its kind between a National Park, Coillte and surrounding communities," Project Manager Georgia MacMillan explained. "Our nightscapes are inspirational and worth protecting for future generations. It's hoped that achieving this award will not only showcase the area for the growing market of astro-tourism, but also raise awareness of the impact of light pollution on our environment and biodiversity."

Mayo County Council has committed to dark sky friendly lighting in the area and is working with the Friends of Mayo Dark-Skies group to further reduce light pollution where possible.

The Mayo International Dark Sky Park already has some exciting events planned for the coming months, including The Mayo Dark-Sky Festival to be held 28-30 October. A formal launch event will be announced shortly and a full schedule of dark sky events and educational programmes will be available from Ballycroy National Park.

About the IDA Dark Sky Places Program

IDA established the International Dark Sky Places conservation program in 2001 to recognize excellent stewardship of the night sky. Designations are based on stringent outdoor lighting standards and innovative community outreach. Since the program began, 14 Communities, 33 Parks, 10 Reserves, two Sanctuaries and three Dark Sky Friendly Developments of Distinction have received International Dark Sky designations. For more information about the International Dark Sky Places Program, visit <http://darksky.org/idsp>.

About IDA

The International Dark Sky Association, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Tucson, Arizona, U.S., advocates for the protection of the nighttime environment and dark night skies by educating policymakers and the public about night sky conservation and promoting environmentally responsible outdoor lighting. More information about IDA and its mission may be found at <http://www.darksky.org>.

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