

ANNUAL REPORT

2024-25



GALLOWAY AND
SOUTHERN AYRSHIRE
BIOSPHERE



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FOREWORD

I am delighted to share the Galloway & Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership's Annual Report for 2024-25 with partners, funders and supporters.

It has been an exciting year for the Biosphere's officer team as we moved to new offices in Newton Stewart. Having this multi-functional space has catalysed new collaborations and made us more accessible to the individuals and community groups that can benefit from the Biosphere's programme of support.

Also this year we hosted our first Volunteer Programme, through which local people became 'Biosphere Champions', taking a leading role in public engagement to share the incredible value that the UNESCO designation brings economically, culturally, and as an increasingly urgent protection for the landscapes and wildlife of southwest Scotland.

We have been particularly inspired this year by our international partnerships, through which learning exchanges between the Biosphere's primary schools and equivalents in Sweden and Iceland have taken place, with others in progress for 2025/26. The D&G Climate Hub, which is delivered by the GSA Biosphere Partnership with support from Scottish Government, has carried this theme of borderless knowledge-exchange through projects developed with community groups in Kenya and Zimbabwe.

The foundation of our work is always the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In this reporting year we have brought these further to life with the installation of our SDG Trail, covering three local authority areas and spotlighting the people, places and organisations that exemplify 'Think Global, Act Local'. We hope that the trail will be a source of pride to local communities, without whom there would be no UNESCO Biosphere designation and no GSAB Partnership.

As this report is published we expect several pivotal moments are still to come in 2025, announcements and events that will steer the UNESCO Biosphere's course through the next decade and even further. Among these, the Borderlands Natural Capital initiative will launch; the Galloway National Park proposal will be considered; and, we hope, our exciting new venture Merrick Scottish Blackface Sheep Knitwear will go from strength to strength. We look forward to these – as well as all the other 'known unknowns' – with energy, optimism, and clear eyes on the Galloway & Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere's vision: to celebrate our passion for living in a way that benefits people and nature.

Ed Forrest, Director
Galloway & Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere

LOCALLY SPECIAL, NATIONALLY IMPORTANT

THE GALLOWAY NATIONAL PARK PROPOSAL

In February 2024 the GSA Biosphere Partnership submitted a joint proposal for a Galloway National Park (GNP), alongside the GNP Association. The proposal looks towards a future in which southwest Scotland holds the dual status of UNESCO Biosphere and National Park – designations which are recognised nationally and internationally, and which both have the power to generate investment in nature recovery, sustainable development, and Net Zero.

The GSA Biosphere has been a focal point in the critically important public consultation on the GNP proposal; the three options for a National Park boundary all encompass parts of the UNESCO region, including our ecologically precious Core Areas. With our commitment to widening participation, the GSAB Partnership worked hard to promote the 12-week public consultation (which concluded in February 2025), and platformed informational resources on our website and social media.

The Biosphere's Board of Trustees submitted its own response to the consultation and with colleagues and supporters across the southwest we await the outcome of NatureScot's report to Ministers. Our response expressed a desire for dual designation with a fully integrated

"(We are proposing to create a new National Park for Scotland in Galloway. The proposal is community led, has the backing of many local businesses and makes a strong case on the benefits that national park status will bring for people who live in the area, for the local economy and for the environment.

"We received nominations for new National Parks from some really special places – Lochaber, Loch Awe, Scottish Borders and Tay Forest...The competition was extremely tough and the bids have clearly shown the outstanding natural and cultural heritage we have in Scotland, as well as people's ambitions for the rural communities they live in."

Mairi Gougeon MSP,
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform & Islands



approach to governance and staffing that would build on over 12 years of activity that has seen the UNESCO Biosphere acclaimed for the work it has led on community engagement, sustainable business support, and climate resilience. The GSAB Partnership's highly progressive governance model is founded in grassroots engagement that brings strong local representation into public debate and policy decisions. We want to see any future National Park operating in a similar way: representing a diverse cross-section of society and giving young people a voice.

Trustees believe the combination of two designations provides an opportunity to do something unique that will be positive for the region's communities, businesses and natural environments. We highlighted the need to adopt a 'hilltop to sea' ecosystem services approach that would support nature-friendly farming and sustainable recreation, and address the intense pressure for large scale land use change. If, however, the consultation establishes that a National Park is not the optimum choice for Scotland's southwest, the UNESCO Biosphere will remain, and we will continue our work apace.



SPOTLIGHT:

Through its structure and operations the GSA Biosphere Partnership has always been uniquely and strategically placed to connect people with policymakers. Within the consultation on the proposed National Park for Galloway we have convened local and special interest groups to ensure the maximum possible representation across D&G, South and East Ayrshire. Among these groups were our Biosphere Communities, villages and towns that have collectively joined our Proud Supporter initiative and which have an especially close relationship with the UNESCO Biosphere, drawing on support and resourcing for sustainability, climate and biodiversity initiatives and community-led tourism.

CLIMATE-READY BIOSPHERE

LOCAL ACTION FOR GLOBAL GOALS

Generating resilience among local communities is part of the UNESCO Biosphere remit worldwide as we strive to resolve the global climate crisis. The GSAB Partnership has been both leader and facilitator in local climate action for over twelve years, and demand continues to accelerate.

In 2023 the GSAB Partnership was selected to deliver the Climate Hub for Dumfries & Galloway, part of Scottish Government's Net Zero Nation campaign which is equipping community-led action nationwide. That first year of funding was followed by a second award for 2024-25, representing a total of £340,000 to be channelled into local initiatives that build resilience across one of Scotland's largest local authority areas. Over 70 groups and organisations have drawn on the support of the D&G Climate Hub through planning, learning and networking, and our provision of seed funding for projects that cover everything from establishing community gardens to salvaging marine plastics.

One of our most important events this year was the inaugural Future Energy Conference in Dumfries, which welcomed speakers from across the UK to discuss Net Zero advances in technology, construction and manufacturing. The Hub's activity mirrors the international scope of the UNESCO Biosphere: in 2024-25 our officers have facilitated international knowledge exchange for climate activists through online events which saw southwest Scotland introduced to innovation with recycled plastics in Kenya, and ecosystem threats in Zimbabwe.



Alongside the Climate Hub we have delivered accredited Carbon Literacy training to residents, youth and community groups. To maximise accessibility we created a bespoke course which Biosphere officers deliver locally, supporting everyday sustainable living and boosting employability.

We will continue in earnest to reach climate-readiness in our UNESCO Biosphere. In 2025 we will launch a new Carbon Literacy course designed specifically for businesses, which will be available to micro-enterprise and SMEs. We are also delighted to have won grant funding from Henkel and UNESCO in Germany to develop accessible climate learning resources for young people and adults with additional support needs. Working in partnership with The Usual Place, the University of Glasgow and Crichton Carbon Centre we will be making climate action truly inclusive while creating a template that can be used by colleagues globally.

SPOTLIGHT:

Launched in Scotland's Climate Week, the D&G Hub hosted **Scotland meets Zimbabwe: What is Changing?** This exchange brought together conservation and research groups working in southwest Scotland with an upcoming, dynamic group of academics and activists in southern Africa who are trying to raise climate awareness in their communities. Exploring the ecological impact of climate change on food chains and how disruptions impact people and biodiversity, we were joined by RSPB Scotland and the Solway Firth Partnership, and Young Climate Activism in Zimbabwe, for webinars that attracted attendees from across the Biosphere and beyond.



Carbon Literacy Project



"Adaptation and resilience are key components of Zimbabwe's strategy in the face of climate change. We would share our experiences in building climate-resilient infrastructure, promoting sustainable agriculture, and enhancing disaster preparedness...global cooperation is crucial [and] cooperation on renewable energy development and sustainable practices can help drive a global transformation towards a more resilient and sustainable future. The climate crisis knows no borders, and Zimbabwe's message is that now, more than ever, we must come together. The time for action is now, and it is our shared responsibility to ensure that vulnerable nations are not left behind in this global fight."

Natsani Dube,
Young Climate Activism, Zimbabwe

LIFE ON LAND

RECOVERY, REGENERATION, AND FARMING FOR NATURE



The GSAB Partnership facilitates discussion on the impacts of land use change in southwest Scotland, helping guide policy on future land use that will provide multiple benefits to all of society. With so many public and private interests at play the UNESCO Biosphere designation centres attention on finding the balance between ‘people, planet and profit’ that is the essence of sustainable development.

During this reporting year we concluded development of an international research project funded by the abrdn Charitable Foundation and hosted by the UNESCO Regional Office of Science & Culture in Europe. Delivered in partnership with SAC Consulting at SRUC, our team developed and trialled a new audit methodology for measuring natural capital on farms, employing a holistic approach that enables baselining, measurement and monitoring, and identifies the best opportunities for adopting regenerative practices while maintaining a financially viable business. Our findings were published and widely shared, and we were proud to present them to international colleagues at UNESCO’s Venice office in September 2024. This blueprint will form the basis of a new pilot project measuring natural capital on farms within the UNESCO Biosphere, which we hope will inspire use of the same techniques nationwide.

“Our second conference was a huge success and it was great to see many new faces in the audience. Our speakers had such a broad range of size, scale, story and business types, there really was something for everyone. I think we all appreciated the acknowledgement that was given to the human aspect of our agricultural businesses and how important knowing yourself and looking after your mental health was. My favourite quote of the day was from our NFUS Ayrshire member Cora Cooper who told us to never underestimate how much change one small step can make. So for me, the take away message is “Start small, but do start.” I’m excited to see where our third conference in 2025 takes us! ”

Mhairi Dawson, D&G Regional Manager, NFUS



Also last autumn it was our great pleasure to host the second annual Farming for the Future Conference, in partnership with Propagate and the NFUS. Once again all tickets were claimed for this full day of discussion, workshops and presentations; our agenda gives local farmers the chance to share experiences, learn from each other, and articulate the support they require in order to make nature-friendly adaptations that are sustainable in the long term.

The GSAB Partnership continues to be an important partner in the development and delivery of collaborative ‘Life on Land’ projects. Among others we have worked closely with colleagues along the Solway Coast in the development of SCAMP, an ambitious 10-year partnership project involving habitat restoration, education, sustainable tourism development, and support for community enterprise. We are also facilitating a six-year PhD study in partnership with the University of Edinburgh and Forest Research, which is investigating trade-offs and decision-making associated with land use in the UNESCO Biosphere.



SPOTLIGHT:

The GSAB Partnership has been a key player in the four-year development phase of the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal’s £5M Natural Capital Programme. On-Farm Plans Integrated with Nature (OPIN) is one of the six pilot projects. Launching in 2025 it will focus on engagement with farmers and land managers in the UNESCO Biosphere, piloting new ways of working to audit, protect and enhance natural capital, and identification of the potential benefits to farmers through new revenue models linked to public and private sector investment. This will deliver direct economic benefit through new jobs as well as safeguarded livelihoods, more sustainable businesses, skills and innovation, and long-term investible projects for the private sector.

LEARNING AND GROWING

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE UNESCO BIOSPHERE



With the expansion of the UNESCO Biosphere's boundary in 2023 to include 12 nautical miles of the marine environment our remit for engagement widened, as did our scope for outdoor learning and fun.

In July 2024 we launched the Blue Biosphere Resource for Marine & Sustainability Education, created with the Solway Firth Partnership. This activity toolkit helps primary-age children connect with coastal environments and the fascinating species that live in our seas, as well as the rich heritage of local marine industries and the communities of the Biosphere's coast. It also supports educators by introducing issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss and plastic pollution in an age-appropriate way. Publication of the Blue Biosphere resource was supported by a series of school workshops taking place through summer and autumn 2024, with over 500 primary pupils taking part in hands-on activities that incorporated species identification, arts and crafts.

This year also saw a wonderful series of international learning exchanges which activated the GSA Biosphere's global Biosphere network. After introductions to schools in Sweden and Iceland, pupils from D&G, South and East Ayrshire made and sent postcards describing their favourite local species and what made these precious to their own UNESCO Biospheres. With so many partners galvanised and

enthused, this project will continue into the 2025/26 reporting period, with exchanges already planned with schools in UNESCO Biospheres in Austria, Luxembourg, South Africa, and the United States.

The GSAB Partnership's schools programme is delivered by our Community & Education officers, who criss-cross the 9,720km² UNESCO region for presentations, workshops and training. Our team takes the Biosphere programme direct to the heart of local communities and ensures the hardest to reach have the best possible opportunities to access educational support that embodies Learning for Sustainability, the Curriculum for Excellence, and the principles of global citizenship.



"We had a lot of fun with the projects. Our pupils did their very best and have been very curious to see what our Scottish friends sent for them."

Sofia Hildingsson,
Primary School Teacher, Ljungsbackenskolan, Götene

"This is so great...full of good knowledge and pedagogical high class material."

Sofia Guldbrand, Project and Process Manager,
Unesco Biosfärområde Vänerskärsgården med Kinnekulle



SPOTLIGHT:

Dolphin House, South Ayrshire Council's outdoor education centre, launched their new outdoor classroom with a day of activities that incorporated Blue Biosphere themes. Tailored for school pupils and adult groups, participants joined Biosphere officers, South Ayrshire Council Rangers, Dolphin House staff and other practitioners for beachcombing, rock pooling, and learning about marine biodiversity through the unique experiencing of a transparent kayak filled with sea water and underwater life. Participants also had the opportunity to go out on the St Ayles Skiff, giving unparalleled views of the Biosphere's coast.

THE BIOSPHERE BY NUMBERS

910 MINUTES OF FOOTAGE SHOT FOR 'HEART OF THE BIOSPHERE' FILM



248 TICKETS BOOKED FOR 'HEART OF THE BIOSPHERE' SCREENINGS



11 COUNTRIES ENGAGED FOR INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES AND LEARNING JOURNEYS



16,800 PEOPLE ATTENDING A BIOSPHERE-ACCREDITED SUSTAINABLE EVENT



LOCAL AUTHORITY/AGENCY	AREA INSIDE GSAB (KM²)	% IN GSAB
DUMFRIES & GALLOWAY	3938.25	59.0%
EAST AYRSHIRE	661.77	52.1%
SOUTH AYRSHIRE	1051.10	85.1%
SOSE	3938.25	34.4%



14 DESIGNATED BIOSPHERE COMMUNITIES



510 CHILDREN TAKING PART IN BLUE BIOSPHERE WORKSHOPS
IN 14 SCHOOLS



70 GROUPS ENGAGED WITH THE D&G CLIMATE HUB

DUMFRIES



60 BIOSPHERE CERTIFICATION MARK BUSINESSES



23,000+ UNIQUE VISITORS TO WWW.GSABIOSPHERE.ORG.UK

0 10 20 30 40 50 km

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Biosphere management zones

Biosphere Communities

MERRICK SCOTTISH BLACKFACE KNITWEAR

FARMING AND FASHION UNITE



This year saw the realisation of our ambition to take Scottish Blackface wool ‘from rural industry to luxury clothing design’, the tagline of our landmark 2023 Crowdfunder campaign. Merrick Scottish Blackface Knitwear launched at the end of 2024, utilising a pioneering social enterprise model which reinvests all profits into local, grassroots projects delivered through the GSAB Partnership.

Our high-end outerwear is unique on the market: no other knitwear brand is using 100% Scottish Blackface wool. Our other USP is provenance: all wool is sourced from farms located in the UNESCO Biosphere, guaranteed by the prestigious Authentic Traceable British Wool tag. Even more than a brand, Merrick is a story: through the new website and online shop we are sharing the history of Scottish farming and cottage industries, and explaining the importance of textiles and fashion as part of our circular economy.



This social enterprise has attracted widespread media interest, with features this year in national press and a showcase segment on BBC's The One Show. Merrick yarn has been part of VisitScotland's latest international marketing campaign, in which 'Coos in Cardis' (Highland cows wearing knitted outfits made from Scottish wool) invite visitors to explore the country in the winter months. We are thrilled to have already expanded from selling only in the UK to establishing new markets in North America.

Merrick Scottish Blackface Knitwear is part of Biosphere Enterprises Ltd, the GSAB Partnership's trading arm. This is an exciting new chapter in our story that draws on public appreciation of the UNESCO Biosphere as a powerful voice for sustainable farming and rural heritage. Through collaboration between Merrick's expert steering group and a range of national partners we continue to shape the brand into a celebration of tradition, innovation and craft.



“Merrick Scottish Blackface Knitwear, which is producing high end garments entirely and exclusively from the very best of locally sourced Blackface wool, offers a fantastic opportunity for eco-conscious and stylish consumers. Scottish Blackface wool is an extremely sustainable, natural and biodegradable product with outstanding environmental credentials, produced in the most natural environment in the world.”

Richard Colley, local farmer and Council Member of the Scottish Blackface Sheep Breeders' Association.

SPOTLIGHT:

Since our earliest days developing ‘the wool project’, Merrick has incorporated community-based peer-learning, bringing together farmers, business—Several of our public events were held in the Biosphere Community of Sanquhar, home to a world-renowned knitting tradition and the historic ‘Sanquhar Pattern’, esteemed worldwide and worn by Hollywood celebrities and the British Royal Family. Skilled local knitters based at A’ the Airts (Sanquhar’s community hub) tested Merrick’s Scottish Blackface yarn in hand-knitting and on domestic machines, producing a range of one-off accessories in the famous black-and-cream design.

BADGED FOR THE BIOSPHERE

AWARDS AND ACCREDITATION SCHEMES



The GSAB Partnership is proud to run a range of accreditation schemes that recognise the individuals and organisations that join our shared journey towards Sustainable Development Goals.

The Proud Supporter scheme now has well over 600 members, ranging from businesses to local schools to community groups. The Biosphere Certification Mark has been awarded to more than fifty local businesses who champion sustainability; among recipients in this reporting year were artists, local shops, social enterprises, and accommodation providers. We have welcomed a new cohort of Sustainable Events, among which are the internationally-renowned Wigtown Book Festival, and Raiders Gravel, which in 2024 incorporated the British Gravel Championship, attracting superstar cyclists from around the world. Also this year a new badge was launched for Biosphere Guides; instantly recognisable in marketing and promotions with the Biosphere's familiar sundew branding, the badge celebrates locally-led sustainable tourism.

"Go Girvan decided to sign up as a Proud Supporter of the Biosphere for a number of reasons...probably the main one is because Go Girvan is a community-led tourism organisation and the recognition of the UNESCO accreditation in our area was really important. It would give us more marketability as a town and our surroundings, and it would be leading the way in trying to get other organisations on board...we learn from the Biosphere."

Cath Maguire, Go Girvan,
Proud Supporter organisation



It is a priority for the GSAB Partnership to continue to add value to these participatory schemes. During 2024 we funded full digitisation of the Biosphere Certification Mark, meaning that applicants and awardees now have individual online accounts for networking, information sharing, and direct access to tailored support from our Business Development team. We have also launched a new assessment process for farms and land-based enterprise, expanding access to Biosphere accreditation and our wider offer of natural capital auditing and practical support for regenerative adaptations.

The backing of core funding partners, charitable donations and legacies allows the GSAB Partnership to offer all the above free to residents, businesses, organisations, and land managers. Our accreditation schemes are purposefully reciprocal: participants and awardees play an important role in communicating the UNESCO Biosphere ethos through continuing connectivity and sharing their 'green stories'. Raiders Gravel, as an example, which platformed the Biosphere through blogs, reels, and on-the-ground promotions, has a social media reach of over 50,000 individual accounts.

SPOTLIGHT:

During the last 12 months the GSAB Partnership has hosted networking events to foster new business connections and help insulate against the isolation that often impacts rural enterprise. Among these was a workshop for Biosphere Certification Mark holders, held in the Biosphere Community of Gatehouse of Fleet. Attendees were invited to give short presentations on their work towards Sustainable Development Goals; among others the network heard from Dumfries & Galloway College, Little Peru glamping and alpaca farm, and the award-winning gourmet grower Deer Manor Mushrooms. The event concluded with an outdoor session at The Ship Inn led by the Biosphere's Nature Recovery Officer, demonstrating practical measures that businesses can take to support the UNESCO Biosphere's wildlife and habitats.



TREES FOR ALL

THE AYRSHIRE SMALL SCALE TREE PLANTING PROGRAMME

Following a successful pilot season last year, 2024-25 brought a significant expansion in the Ayrshire Small Scale Tree Planting Programme. This scheme invites individuals, business-owners, organisations and community groups to apply for up to £1,000 in grant funding for planting native trees on areas of land measuring less than 0.25ha. To be eligible the area to be planted must be publicly accessible, fulfilling our vision for Ayrshire's woodlands to support outdoor leisure, nature connections and green health. This is a project with generational goals: aiming to increase broadleaf coverage over a land area currently dominated by coniferous plantations, it will support biodiversity and wellbeing for decades – potentially centuries – to come.

This year we are delighted to be delivering the grant programme in both South and East Ayrshire, and to have the backing of South Ayrshire Council, the Woodland Trust, Scottish Forestry and Land Energy. With this enhanced funding support the GSAB Partnership has been able to supply young trees and materials, and to cover labour costs for non-profit organisations, as well as providing expert advice on planning, planting, and care from within our own officer team. We have promoted volunteer opportunities as part of the scheme, enabling local people to get directly involved in nature restoration. The scheme has brought new wooded areas to farm boundaries, smallholdings, and community spaces, and engaged a diverse demographic with key issues in modern forestry.



Our tree-planting programme is just one of a host of partnership initiatives that will regenerate depleted landscapes and contribute to south Scotland's new era as a Natural Capital Innovation Zone. It will continue through 2025-26 when we will also be delivering pollinator projects, community-based biodiversity workshops; marine education and coastal cultural heritage work through SCAMP; and a catchment-based recovery programme along the course of the River Nith.



"This is a fantastic programme that embodies the array of opportunities for improving our green space and developing long term collaborations between landowners, public bodies, and Ayrshire's dynamic third sector. It's also a great example of the value of our UNESCO Biosphere designation for generating local action on global issues, giving everyone a chance to play a part in resolving the climate and nature crises."

Cllr Alec Clark,
South Ayrshire Council

SPOTLIGHT:

The planting project at Upper Barr along the River Stinchar, funded by the Ayrshire Small Scale Tree Planting grant, was born from the landowners' wish to restore the riverbank. It had been grazed all the way to the waterline, leading to erosion and a lack of young trees. A mix of over 150 alder, rowan and willow saplings were planted on a strip of land approximately 8 metres wide on the south bank of the Stinchar. As they mature these trees will not only provide food and shelter for wildlife, but will also help shade the river from the sun and regulate water temperature, which is essential for fish such as trout and salmon.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

A FORCE FOR GOOD



Since the UNESCO Biosphere designation was awarded in 2012 the GSAB Partnership has been driving nature-friendly tourism that contributes to sustainable economic development in Scotland's rural southwest. In 2024 we were the first Scottish location to appear on Tourism Cares' Meaningful Travel Map, a global showcase of destinations striving to ensure travel and tourism accord with Sustainable Development Goals.

To maximise the benefits of this increased visibility, and of our ongoing collaborations with VisitScotland and the South of Scotland Destination Alliance, we created bookable experiences for small tour groups. Bringing together Biosphere Guides and Biosphere Certification Mark awardees, these themed activities celebrate the essence of landscape and heritage, immersing visitors in the UNESCO Biosphere's singular sense of place.

"We care about this region, its culture, people and landscapes. It is beautiful and it is special. We like to share it, and we want local communities to feel happy to share it with us. Collaboration is key to how we operate. Educating our guests through our tours and making connections is fun. Finding ways to minimise our impact on the environment is paramount in what we believe. All are elements of the UNESCO ethos, and the Galloway & Southern Ayrshire UNESCO Biosphere gives us a tool, a platform and a 'badge' to show our values to the world and potential customers."

Warren Sanders,
Co-owner, Galloway Cycling Holidays



With these Biosphere Experiences selling nationally, the GSAB Partnership sent representatives to VisitScotland Connect in Aberdeen, the flagship annual travel trade conference attended by tourism organisations and tour providers from around the world. Our focus on high value, bespoke experiences with low environmental impacts attracted widespread interest, not least because of our position on Scotland's UNESCO Trail, a multi award-winning collaboration between all the nation's UNESCO sites and the first of its kind in the world.

Finally, this year we were thrilled to launch Low Carbon Days Out, a series of leisure itineraries exploring history, nature and culture across the UNESCO Biosphere. The outline concept won funding from the 2050 Climate Group and development was led by one of the Biosphere's Project Support Officers, who were with the team on 12-month paid internships. Supporting local people and visitors to reduce their carbon footprints by using bus and train services and going by bike instead of by car, Low Carbon Days Out are available in digital format and hardcopy, and are now being hosted by visitor attractions and tourist information points across the Biosphere. With the success of this project, two new itineraries are scheduled for launch in 2025.

SPOTLIGHT:

Our mission in tourism sector is embodied in the GSA Biosphere's Visitor Charter, which encourages a 'love local' sensibility and invites people to go slow, find stories, and experience all the colours of nature. It highlights the Galloway Forest Dark Sky Park, the first Gold-Tier International Dark Sky Park to be designated in Europe (2009), local produce such as oysters, wool craft, potatoes and gin, and the tranquility in which visitors can enjoy the rare experience of completely natural soundscapes. Our Visitor Charter is available free to any community or any business or tourism provider to use in their marketing or on their premises, engendering responsible tourism through a cohesive and committed partnership approach.

THE HEART OF THE BIOSPHERE

FOUR SEASONS ON FILM



An idea years in the planning finally came to fruition in 2024 with the production of the GSAB Partnership's first documentary short film, *Heart of the Biosphere: A Year in the Life of Merrick-Kells and Silver Flowe*. Produced over twelve months in our remote Core Areas, the film created a brilliantly dynamic interaction between local partners, each one bringing expertise and logistical support to this milestone project. The resulting film takes viewers on a journey through four seasons in some of Scotland's last remaining wilderness to experience the flora, fauna, and sense of place which were recognised by the award of UNESCO Biosphere status in 2012.

Heart of the Biosphere premiered at the community-run cinema in Newton Stewart – the closest town to Merrick-Kells and Silver Flowe – in October 2024. This first screening in Dumfries & Galloway, followed by the Ayrshire premiere in January 2025, attracted over 300 attendees. Subsequently the GSAB Partnership was invited to show the film at the Wild Goose Festival and the Newton Stewart Walking Festival, and to be part of Ayr Film Society's Earth Hour screenings in March. As the 2025 awards season approaches, *Heart of the Biosphere* will be entered into festivals nationwide that celebrate the very best of environmental filmmaking.



We are proud to offer *Heart of the Biosphere* as an interactive learning event and it has been incorporated into our programme of lifelong education, which is delivered free at schools and community hubs across the UNESCO Biosphere. With each screening accompanied by discussion, Q&A sessions, learning workshops, and/or outdoor experiences, the film is already proving a versatile tool for engaging local people with conservation issues, and for informing our own approach to helping our audiences access and understand specific environments. *Heart of the Biosphere* is a true legacy asset for the GSAB Partnership.



"The landscapes within the UNESCO Biosphere are incredible, which is also the perfect word to describe their importance in supporting communities and people's way of life as we follow the rivers that flow out of the Galloway Hills. We are thrilled that Heart of the Biosphere is bringing these wild uplands alive and sharing the area's very special sense of place with a hugely diverse audience here in Scotland and around the world, helping connect people with the location and with ideas for positive action that secures its future."

Anthony Howell,
Director, Lilac Howell Films

SPOTLIGHT:

Producing *Heart of the Biosphere* created a new and agile collaboration between the GSAB Partnership and RSPB Scotland, Forestry and Land Scotland, South West Scotland Environmental Information Centre, and NatureScot. These partners worked together on research, storyboarding, script and logistics to support a small filmmaking crew accompanied by the Biosphere's Land Use & Biodiversity team. The year of filming was as low impact as possible, taking account that Merrick-Kells and Silver Flowe are home to rare and threatened birds, invertebrates and plants as well as some of Scotland's iconic species such as red deer, wild goats, and Golden eagles.

AFTERWORD

I am very proud to close the Galloway & Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership's Annual Report 2024-25 on behalf of our Board of Trustees, which this year welcomed nine new members. Coming from backgrounds in business, social enterprise, conservation, local government, higher education, creative arts and legal practice, they bring diverse expertise and a bright new energy to our operations.

This year all colleagues at the GSAB Partnership have been working closely with key partners on some of the most critical issues affecting southwest Scotland. We are at a pivotal moment in our region's history as we continue to grapple with local impacts of the climate and nature crises. The South of Scotland has recently been recognised as a Natural Capital Innovation Zone and has Scotland's first Regional Land Use Framework. The Agriculture and Rural Communities Bill is on its way, and the Natural Environment Bill is due to follow. There is going to be a significant focus on exploring the role the Biosphere can play in delivering against these regional and national initiatives ensuring that the balance between social, environmental and economic priorities that is at the heart of the UNESCO designation wins through.

Within this context Scottish Government will receive NatureScot's report on the proposed Galloway National Park, to be considered by Ministers with an outcome expected before the end of this year. As Chair of the UNESCO Biosphere it has been my privilege to speak in support of the vision for a dual designation that embodies sustainable development and builds on twelve years of engagement and activity led by our Director and officer team. There is no better example of what the Biosphere can achieve than the projects and partnerships captured here in these pages.

Our thanks to the GSAB Partnership's core funding partners: South of Scotland Enterprise, Dumfries & Galloway Council, East Ayrshire Council, and South Ayrshire Council. As a charitable organisation our work relies on the continuing support of public sector agencies, and in economically challenging times we particularly appreciate that this investment represents an enduring trust in our ability to deliver for local communities. The additionality to their financial backing is that all four funders are vocal in support of the UNESCO Biosphere, its capacity, vitality, and potential. We are grateful to be thus equipped and empowered.

With great anticipation, my colleagues and I look forward to the next twelve months of collaboration with partners across the UNESCO Biosphere and further afield, as together we build a better future for people and nature.

John Thomson, Chair
Galloway & Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Partnership



OUR FUNDING PARTNERS:



Additional photographs courtesy of Malcolm Haddow, Michael Rea, Patrick McCulloch, Andrew Bielinski and Galloway Cycling Holidays.



The D&G Climate Hub is supported by Scottish Government as part of the Net Zero Scotland campaign.



GALLOWAY AND
SOUTHERN AYRSHIRE
BIOSPHERE



unesco
Galloway & Southern Ayrshire
Biosphere Reserve
since 2012
Man and the Biosphere
Programme

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR TO CONTACT OUR TEAM, EMAIL

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