

National Parks are protected areas

Information sheet

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What is a protected area?

Protected areas in the UK are part of a worldwide network of more than 100,000 protected areas. There is one organisation called the International Union for Conservation of Nature, known as the IUCN, that helps to look after protected areas globally.

IUCN definition of a protected area:

"A clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values".

In other words: A protected area is a location which has a clear boundary. It has people and laws that make sure nature and wildlife are protected and that people can continue to benefit from nature without destroying it.

Protected areas in the UK

In the United Kingdom, there are some areas that have international designations, and some areas, including our national parks, that have national designations.

Internationally designated areas:



Ynyslas beach in the Dyfi Biosphere Reserve in Wales
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These are areas which have been designated internationally by organisations such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation).

Here are two examples of internationally designated protected areas in the UK, designated by UNESCO:

1. Biosphere Reserves, currently there are 9 Biosphere Reserves in the UK
Example: Dyfi Biosphere Reserve in Wales
2. World Heritage Sites, currently there are 28 World Heritage Sites in the UK
Example: St Kilda World Heritage Site and National Nature Reserve

Nationally designated areas:

Map of protected areas in the UK showing National Parks in yellow and AONBs in orange

There is a government agency in each country with the power to designate national protected areas. They are:

- [Natural Resources Wales](#)
- [Natural England](#)
- [Scottish Natural Heritage](#)

There are three types of nationally protected areas in the UK;

- National Parks - in England, Scotland and Wales
- Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty - in England, Northern Ireland and Wales
- National Scenic Areas - in Scotland

National Parks

National parks are areas of countryside that include villages and towns. They have an authority to help look after them, including planning controls.

Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

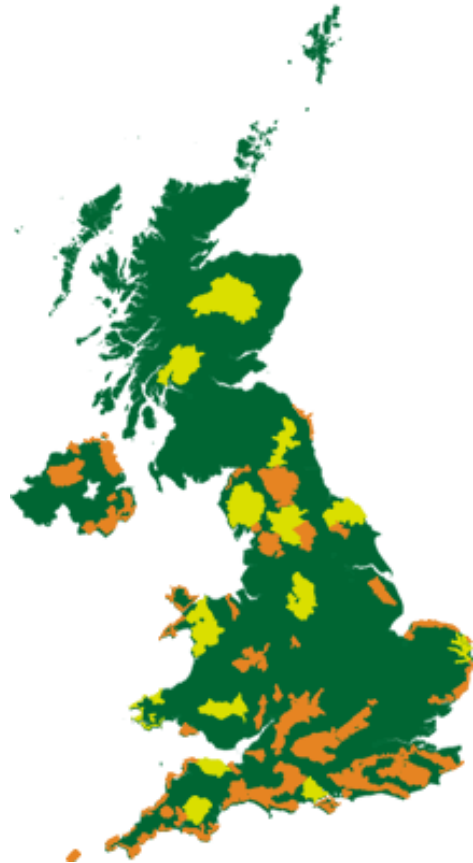
AONBs are areas of countryside that include villages and towns. They have the same legal protection for their landscapes as national parks, but don't have their own authorities for planning control and other services like national parks do. Instead they are looked after by partnerships between local communities and local authorities.

[Find out more about AONBs](#)

National Scenic Areas (NSA)

These are areas of land which are conserved because of their beautiful scenery and a mixture of richly diverse landscapes including prominent landforms, coastline, sea and freshwater lochs, rivers, woodlands and moorlands. Parts of the two Scottish National Parks are also National Scenic Areas.

[Find out more about NSAs](#)



Key facts and figures about the three types of nationally protected areas in the UK:

	Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty	The National Park Family	National Scenic Areas
Where are they?	35 in England 4 in Wales 1 in both England and Wales 9 in Northern Ireland 0 in Scotland	10 in England 3 in Wales 2 in Scotland 0 in Northern Ireland	40 in Scotland 0 in any other country
How many in total?	49	15	40
How much land? (km ²)	19,596 in England 844 in Wales 2861 in Northern Ireland 23,301 in total	12,126 in England 4141 in Wales 5665 in Scotland 21,932 in total	13,783 in total
The First	The Gower Peninsula - 1956	The Peak District - 1951	Loch Rannoch and Glen Lyon - 1981
The Largest (km ²)	The Cotswolds - 2038	The Cairngorms - 3800	Wester Ross - 1452

(Source: "A Clear View" by Europarc Atlantic Isles, 2006)

The Legislation - more than 70 years of protected areas in the UK

2019 was the 70th Anniversary of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, which made the designation of protected areas in the UK possible.

The Act set out how land could be designated as national parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest. It also set out how National Trails could be created, to give people access across land on foot, bicycle or horseback.