

Proposal to establish the Lake District as a Site of Special Spiritual Significance (SSSS)

Introduction

The Lake District has inspired visitor and locals alike for centuries, its beauty and majestic mountains imparting a widely-felt sense of awe, wonder and spiritual connection. Yet we live in an age of when the disconnect between people and nature has never been more pronounced, and environmental crises have reached the point where they threaten our very existence. Re-connecting with nature is a key way of bringing about the change of hearts and minds, that is needed to address these crises. Establishing the Lake District as a Site of Special Spiritual Significance will help to bring about this sort of re-connection, as it will focus attention on the spiritual dimension of nature and foster spiritual enquiry and discovery. In short, the Lake District will become known as a place to experience nature at the deepest level, as well as a place to explore questions of purpose and meaning through nature.



The Benefits of a SSSS Designation

The promotion of the Lake District as a SSSS will have multiple benefits, chiefly focused on changing mindsets through time spent in nature. A SSSS designation will create an exemplar – a focal point for spiritual connection through nature. This will foster both spiritual engagement *and* connection with nature. It opens a door to a different way of experiencing the spiritual – a journey of discovery for everyone, regardless of faith or lack thereof.

The connection with nature will feed through to care for both the local landscape and the wider environment. Connection at the deepest level inevitably leads to changing the way we think and act. Not only does this include personal lifestyle choices but it changes how we view global environmental and societal issues.

SSSS designation also challenges the idea of the spiritual being confined to man-made religious sites. It says that all of nature is imbued with the spiritual and can be accessed by anyone.

In practical terms, it will draw those wishing to go further on their spiritual journey, since it will become a place synonymous with spiritual connection and reflection. It will exert a centrifugal force, bringing in people and resources to encourage connection and reflection in nature.



The Spiritual Heritage of the Lake District

The spiritual heritage of the Lake District is multi-layered, with Christian religion having been practised since Roman times. Quakerism, with its belief that ‘God can be found in every man’ and its radical social justice agenda, also flourished in Cumbria in the 17th Century. More recently, a Buddhist peace temple can be found in Ulverston. The Romantic poets of the 19th Century, including Wordsworth, Ruskin and Coleridge, were also hugely influenced by the landscape, writing evocatively of the spiritual connection which they felt. Furthermore, non-religious figures have recognised the special qualities of the Lake District that go beyond what can be adequately described in purely rational terms. For instance, Alfred Wainwright’ refers to his relationship with the Lake District as a ‘love affair’. Countless visitors and locals have formed this sort of relationship with the Lake District over the centuries. There is a long history of outdoor discovery in the Lake District, which was one of the birthplaces of modern rock climbing and of fell racing. Whilst those pursuing outdoor adventure may lack religious faith, many will have sensed the spiritual dimension to the Lake District’s natural beauty, as voiced by the Romantic poets, though they might not describe it as such. It is telling that a Remembrance Day service is held each year on the summit of Great Gable, drawing people for whom the mountain has an affinity not felt in church.

The great love for the Lake District has inspired numerous environmental initiatives. The most well-known of these was brought about by Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, a 19th Century vicar of Keswick who jointly founded the National Trust to protect the natural beauty of the Lake District for future generations

What Makes the Lake District a SSSS?

The spiritual significance of the Lake District is not chiefly to be found in traditional places of worship or religious sites, since these are widely found elsewhere. Rather the Lake District is marked out by the beauty, awe and wonder of its hills, lakes and valleys. Whilst these are not unique in having a spiritual dimension, they have a heritage and history of spiritual inspiration that is widely documented. The area has also attracted countless artists, writers, walkers, climbers and other outdoor enthusiasts who have sensed a spirit flowing through the landscape that goes beyond rational thought or physical presence. This has acted as an inspiration for numerous initiatives that celebrate, protect or enhance the natural wonders of the region. Furthermore, the intimacy of this ancient landscape lends it a richness and diversity that enhances the experience and offers multiple ways of encountering the spiritual, whether this be in the soft light of dawn, the towering buttresses of a cathedral-like cliff, or the gentle burbling of a playful beck.

In recent times, the Lake District has also spawned organisations that are engaging people spiritually. In addition to the traditional church, the Kentigern School is devoted to 'fierce contemplation', whilst Mountain Pilgrims seeks to re-imagine the mountain experience to discover the 'thin places'. A pilgrimage route based on the 'mountain cathedrals' of the Lake District has also been established.



In summary, the Lake District meets all of the criteria for a SSSS:

Spiritual connection – strong sense of connection with the natural world experienced through outdoor activities, and the beauty, awe and wonder that is present in the mountains, valleys, lakes and rivers.

Spiritual heritage – long history of religious and non-religious spiritual connection.

Spiritual inspiration – multiple examples of the spiritual qualities of the landscape inspiring social and environmental action.

Spiritual engagement – current initiatives to engage visitors and locals with the spiritual essence of the Lake District.

Founding Partners

The proposal for a SSSS is an initiative of Mountain Pilgrims – www.mountainpilgrims.org.uk – but the intention is to make this a truly broad coalition of partners with different perspectives including religious and non-religious organisations, private companies and individuals. We are also seeking patrons to help with promotion.



Contact:

John Fleetwood

W: <https://beyondtheview.org.uk>

E: info@beyondtheview.org.uk