

Geotourism: The Tourism of Geology and Landscape

15

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

15 The Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site: understanding the nature of geotourism

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Introduction: What makes this coast so special?

The Dorset and East Devon Coast World Heritage Site (also known as the ‘Jurassic Coast’), stretches for 155 km across the southern English coastline, encompassing one of the most spectacular geological sequences in the world. The internationally renowned coastal exposures of the Jurassic Coast were awarded World Heritage Site status in 2001 based on a near complete sequence of Mesozoic rocks, which record evidence and development of early reptiles through to the age of the dinosaurs. For a site to obtain World Heritage Site status, it must exhibit cultural or natural features that are of ‘outstanding universal value’ and must be protected for present and future generations of all humanity. Protecting the integrity (or condition) of the site is essential for maintaining the qualities that led to site inscription. Coastal erosion maintains the geological integrity of the Jurassic Coast by exposing fossils that are then washed out onto the beaches. The fossils are an important part of our geological heritage.

The Jurassic Coast is a long narrow linear site (Figure 15.1). The World Heritage Site boundary is designated from the top of the cliffs to the low water mark. For some World Heritage Sites an official ‘buffer zone’ strengthens conservation measures. Since the Jurassic Coast lies within the designated Dorset and East Devon Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as well as 13 Sites of Special Scientific Interest, these additional layers of designation afford statutory protection for the site’s setting. The World Heritage Site Management Plan (Jurassic Coast Team, 2009) guides the work of the Jurassic Coast Steering Group and partners in managing the Site now and into the future. The Steering Group consists of broad stakeholder involvement and is the main body responsible for the delivery of the World Heritage Site Management Plan. The Jurassic Coast team and associated partners deliver the work programme.

Like most beautiful and accessible natural environments, the coastline has also attracted visitors since the earliest days of tourism. Now, as then, many of these visitors are interested in fossils and geology, but the majority come to enjoy the peace, beauty and coastal land and seascapes. With visitors come benefits, but also challenges and pressures which have to be carefully managed.

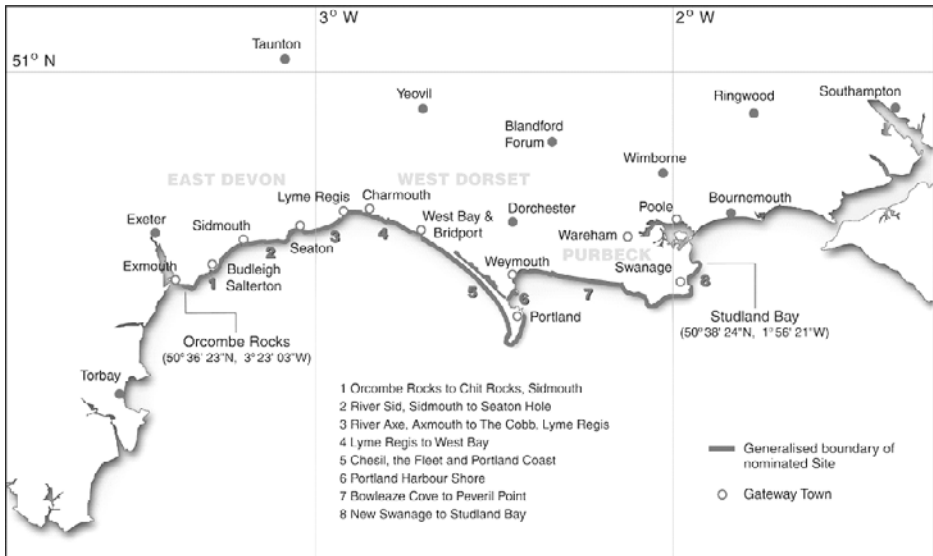


Figure 15.1: Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site

In this chapter, we will explore how the management of the Jurassic Coast has successfully balanced the challenges of encouraging people to enjoy, learn from and appreciate the World Heritage Site, while at the same time, conserving the integrity of one of the world's most important geological sites.

A slice of Mesozoic life – telling the story

The Jurassic Coast encompasses the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods of geological time; 185 million years of the Earth's ancient history – known as the Mesozoic era. The key to understanding this geodiversity is that overall, the rocks dip very gently to the east. As a result, the oldest rocks are found in the west with progressively younger rocks forming the coast to the east. Therefore each section of the coast contains part of a much larger story and the coast as a whole represents a 'walk through time'.

In some areas, the story stands out before your eyes – fossils at Charmouth and the Lulworth Crumple (see Figure 15.2) for example, but in many other areas, it is far more subtle and there is a need for the story to be 'brought to life'.

Along the coast, there are visitor centres, tourist information centres, museums and other outlets which provide information and attempt to help people understand, learn from and enjoy the Jurassic Coast. There are aspirations to develop interpretation centres in areas along the coast where there are gaps in provision, but funding remains an issue. Examples of interpretation centres that do exist are listed below:

- ◆ Beer Quarry Caves – guided tours explaining the story of quarrying for Beer stone – privately owned.
- ◆ Charmouth Heritage Coast Centre – one of the flagship Jurassic Coast centres, providing information and advice on fossil collecting, plus guided walks – operated and owned by an independent trust.
- ◆ Dorset County Museum – although located inland in Dorchester, the museum opened a Jurassic Coast Geology Gallery in 2006 which tells the story of the whole World Heritage Site – operated and owned by a charitable trust.

Chapter extract

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