

Geotourism: The Tourism of Geology and Landscape

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

17 The UNESCO global network of national geoparks

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Introduction

Today, at the start of the 21st century we can look back over a century that has seen enormous advances in our understanding of how our planet functions. While we might still not be able to predict exactly when an earthquake will happen or exactly when a volcano will erupt, we know why these phenomena occur. We know how and why mountain ranges are formed and we know how the very face of our planet changes over millions of years as the tectonic plates of the Earth's crust continue their relentless move over the surface of the planet. But it wasn't always like this. For centuries, people had no clear understanding of Earth processes. Nevertheless, people were in awe of their landscape and of the planet's natural phenomena and stories, myths and legends arose to help explain them. We, as geoscientists, now have explanations for all these phenomena. However, perhaps we should ask ourselves: How successful are we at sharing this knowledge with those with no formal geological training? Moreover, how good are we at preserving these phenomena and special landscapes for future generations. Many people today still ask the same questions our ancestors of long ago asked. Yet, all across our planet we have places where the amazing story of our planet can be told to the non-specialist without the need for the use of the esoteric language so often employed by geoscientists. Moreover these places should be conserved for the future. But it should not be our aim to conserve them in a sterile way where only the geoscientist can visit, it should be our aim to conserve in a way that the local communities can take ownership of these places and where they can feel that these places contribute positively to their everyday lives.

Local communities across Europe, China and increasingly other parts of the world, are beginning to realise that their geological heritage can provide a source of sustainable economic benefit to their area. Rather than exploit this heritage in the non-renewable fashion of the past, there is an opportunity to manage it in a way that conserves it for the future through the development of geotourism. This form of sustainable economic development has the potential to directly impact on those rural areas that have suffered from economic stagnation or demographic decline. But why should geoscientists be involved in such activities? In simple terms, we have to demonstrate to the wider public the relevance of geological science in the 21st century. We have to re-build the bridge between our knowledge of the Earth, its history and its landscape and the total dependence of modern society upon Earth's natural resources, a link that was known to generations past.

The Global Geoparks Network

In June 2000, representatives of four European territories, which had separately been promoting geological conservation and sustainable development, came together in Greece to discuss their common socio-economic problems (stagnant economic development, high unemployment, rural depopulation and an ageing of the remaining population) and how to address these problems through the protection of geological heritage and the promotion of geological tourism. The result was the signing of a convention declaring the creation of the European Geoparks Network. The purpose of this new designation was to provide a network within which to share information and expertise, and to define common tools in addressing the above objectives (Zouros and Martini, 2003).

In November 2000, the four members of the new network, Réserve Géologique de Haute-Provence (France), Lesvos Petrified Forest (Greece), Maestrazgo Cultural Park (Spain), and Vulkaneifel (Germany) invited interested regions and organizations from across Europe to join them in learning more about geoparks and to apply for membership of the new network. From its formal beginnings in June 2000, the European Geoparks Network grew rapidly and successfully. One of the key early successes for the European Geoparks Network was the signing of an official agreement of collaboration with UNESCO (the then Division of Earth Sciences) in April 2001 which placed the new network under the auspices of UNESCO, thereby confirming its important contributions to conservation and sustainable development issues in Europe. Since then, UNESCO has played an important role in the development of the European Geoparks Network and has used the European model as the one to follow as they rolled out their Global Geoparks Network (Eder, 2004). At a meeting in UNESCO headquarters in Paris in February 2004 representatives from the scientific board of the International Geoscience Programme, the International Geographical Union and the International Union of Geological Sciences along with international experts on geological heritage, conservation and promotion agreed to the establishment of a 'Global Network of National Geoparks (GGN) under the auspices of UNESCO'. This decision was endorsed by the first International Geoparks Conference held in Beijing in June 2004. Three goals were established for the new global network, i.e. conserving a healthy environment, education about earth sciences to the wider public and fostering sustainable local economic development. Currently (May 2009) the GGN comprises 58 members in 18 nations including 34 in Europe, 20 in China and one each in Australia, Brazil, Iran and Malaysia.

But what actually is a 'geopark'? As specified in the operational guidelines, a geopark is not just a collection of geological sites, but is a territory with a particular geological heritage of international significance and with a sustainable territorial development strategy (in Frey *et al.*, 2001). It must have clearly defined boundaries and a sufficient area to allow for true territorial economic development, primarily through tourism. Geological sites must be of international importance in terms of their scientific quality, rarity, aesthetic appeal and educational value. Sites can not only be related to geology but also to archaeology, ecology, history and culture. All these sites in the geopark must be linked in a network and constitute thematic parks with routes, trails and rock sections that can benefit from protection and management measures.

Typical activities in a global geopark include the development of walking and cycling trails, the training of local people to act as guides, education courses, provision of information signage and the development of modern museums and visitor centres (Figure 17.1). The ultimate aim of a global geopark is to bring enhanced employment oppor-

Chapter extract

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