



“UNESCO GEOPARK” A new Programme - A new UNESCO label

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Abstract. UNESCO promotes through the creation of a world network of natural “parks” with significant geological features, labelled “UNESCO GEOPARK”, the twin goals of conserving a healthy environment and enhancing socio-economic development. GEOPARKS are designed to become a tool for a better understanding of the geological heritage and “wise use” of the Earth’s crust, by increasing public awareness for a balanced relationship between humankind and the Earth. They are areas of special geological significance where the geological heritage of the Earth is safeguarded and sustainably managed.

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Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, has a unique mandate endorsed by 186 Member States. Since more than 50 years, UNESCO globally contributes to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science, culture and communication. In accordance with its workplan, adopted at the 29th General Conference, November 1997, UNESCO now extends its activities to the GEOPARK Programme, to establish a global network of sites having special geological features.

The UNESCO GEOPARK Programme acts in the framework of two internationally agreed action plans. The first is the Agenda 21, an Agenda of Science for Environment and Development into the 21st Century, which includes, among others, education, public awareness, training and capacity building as priority areas. The second is the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World cultural and natural heritage, to which the GEOPARK Programme constitutes a new dimension by highlighting also the developmental aspect.

During recent years UNESCO was confronted with numerous requests from its Member States, expressing their interest in improving the international recognition of their national geological heritage. In

response to the perceived need for more initiatives, UNESCO launches the GEOPARK Programme, whereby enhancing the value of sites of key witnesses to the Earth’s history goes hand in hand with the creation of employment and local economic development. A new internationally recognized label ‘UNESCO GEOPARK’, destined to become synonymous with environmental protection and development, will be attributed every year to some twenty territories - twenty guardians of our planet’s memory distributed all over the world.

The GEOPARK Programme closely co-operates with UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre, UNESCO’s MAB World Network of Biosphere Reserves, and is linked with many national and international undertakings and non-governmental organizations for Earth heritage conservation.

Description of the GEOPARK Programme

Definition: A GEOPARK is a territory comprising a number of geological heritage sites of special geological significance, rarity or beauty that are protected. These geological features are representative for a region and its geological history, events and processes. Comparable to a natural park, a GEOPARK falls

under the authority of the government in the country where it is situated. GEOPARKS are of particular value for education, science, culture and socio-economic development. As a witness to the past, they provide information on the history of the Earth and may not solely be of geological importance but also of archaeological, ecological, historical or cultural value.

Three main purposes of a GEOPARK are protection, education and research, and local economic development. Besides the possibilities for broad environmental education and scientific research, a GEOPARK can become an important factor for local economic development. It can generate employment and new economic approaches, which are linked to its specific theme. The development of new touristic and artisan orientations can be favoured ('geotourism', 'geoproducts'), like the manufacturing of new handicrafts which have a geological connotation (fossil casting, souvenirs, etc.).

Criteria for UNESCO GEOPARKS

Protection

A GEOPARK includes a number of sites (on any scale) or a mosaic of geological systems of special geological significance, representative of an area and its geological history, events or processes. It contributes to the protection and conservation of significant geological features ('geodiversity'), by representing examples of significant rocks, mineral resources, minerals, fossils and landforms, and it provides information on various geoscientific disciplines such as geology, geomorphology, soil science, glacial geology, hydrology, engineering geology, mineralogy, petrography, palaeontology, economic geology and mining, sedimentology, stratigraphy, structural geology and volcanology.

The management body of a GEOPARK ensures adequate protection measures to guarantee the proper conservation of a site or area, and provides means for physical maintenance, as appropriate.

Education and research

A UNESCO Geopark serves as a pedagogical tool for environmental education, training and research related to geoscientific disciplines, broader environmental issues and sustainable development. It explores and demonstrates methods of conserving geological heritage (e.g. conservation of representative rocks, mineral resources, minerals, fossils and landforms).

Local economic development

A GEOPARK fosters socio-economic and human development that is culturally and environmentally sustainable, for example, by creating employment and commercial activities linked to the GEOPARK and the region.

The GEOPARK is run by a designated authority which adopts its own territorial policy for sustainable development. This authority shall provide a thorough management plan containing among others:

- a) a global analysis of the GEOPARK
- b) an analysis and diagnosis of the territory
- c) an analysis of the potential for local economic development.

Collaboration

Organizational arrangements shall be provided to involve public authorities, local communities, research and educational bodies and private interests in the design and execution of the functions of the GEOPARK.

Publicity

The designation of an area as a GEOPARK shall be given appropriate publicity and promotion by the authorities concerned, including the issuing of plaques and dissemination of information.

Legal aspect

A UNESCO Geopark remains under the sole jurisdiction of the State in which it is situated. It is the State's responsibility to decide how to protect the particular sites or areas, in conformity with its national legislation or regulations.

Nomination procedure

Proposers submit proposals on a special UNESCO GEOPARK Nomination Form which can be obtained from the UNESCO's Headquarters, Division of Earth Sciences, Paris.

The information asked for in this form includes the following items:

- a) Identification of the territory
- b) Scientific significance
- c) Territorial analysis
- d) Signature on behalf of the competent authorities.

After having consulted appropriate governmental and other national authorities, responsible for the

clearance of the legal status of the proposed area and its sites, the proposal is addressed to the National Commission for UNESCO in the Member State concerned. (It is the governmental and national authority's responsibility to ascertaining that the establishment of the GEOPARK does not conflict with national interests and legislation.) The National Commission forwards the proposal to the GEOPARKS Secretariat at UNESCO's Headquarters, Paris.

Proposals are reviewed and evaluated by an International GEOPARK Advisory Board, who visits the proposed park and takes the decision on the attribution of the seal of excellence '*UNESCO GEOPARK*'. The composition of the Board takes into account an equitable geographical representation of its members who are outstanding specialists, actively engaged in the promotion of geological heritage and chosen for their personal capacity. Additional experts and liaison-members to the Board from international organizations or non-governmental organizations may be nominated.

The seal of excellence '*UNESCO GEOPARK*' is attributed, after a positive evaluation by the International GEOPARK Advisory Board.

The status of each GEOPARK is subject to review by the International GEOPARK Advisory Board normally every ten years, based on a report prepared by the concerned authority or management body and forwarded to the GEOPARK Secretariat through the National Commission for UNESCO in the country concerned.

Exchange of information and co-operation among UNESCO GEOPARKS

The appropriate authorities are encouraged to make available the results of research, associated publications and other data, taking into account intellectual property rights, in order to ensure and facilitate co-operation with other UNESCO GEOPARKS and maximize the benefits from such information exchange promoting environmental education and training, as well as the development of human resources, in co-operation with other UNESCO GEOPARKS. The totality of UNESCO GEOPARKS will form a World Network of GEOPARKS, providing the exchange of information and interaction among the different members of the Network.

Contacts

The Nomination Form and operational guidelines for the GEOPARKS Programme will be available at the GEOPARKS Secretariat, UNESCO, Division of Earth Sciences, 1, rue Miollis, 75732 Paris, France, Tel: + 33 1 45 68 41 15, Fax: + 33 1 45 68 58 22, e-mail: w.eder@unesco.org