

7TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARKS, 2016: “THE ROCK CONNECTS US”



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Hosted by the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark in Torquay, South Devon, the conference was attended by ~700 delegates from 63 countries world-wide and deemed a huge success. This was the first meeting of the UNESCO Global Geoparks following the introduction of the new UNESCO International Geosciences and Geoparks Programme (IGGP).

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INTRODUCTION

November 2015 saw the introduction of a new UNESCO International Geosciences and Geoparks Programme (IGGP) and significant recognition for all of the 130 areas across 33 countries who automatically became UNESCO Global Geoparks as a result. There was, therefore, no surprise that the 7th International Conference on UNESCO Global Geoparks – the first conference to follow this recognition – was the largest in the organisation’s history to date and a fantastic celebration of that achievement.

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HEALTH AND WELLBEING

In line with the conference theme of *Health and Wellbeing through Creative and Active Engagement*, and bringing all of the elements that make UNESCO Global Geoparks so special (e.g., education, science, culture and community), the four day conference began with the première of *Earth Echoes*, a unique piece of theatre specifically created for the opening ceremony, that told the story of our planet, its geology and its people through music, theatre and dance. The piece, co-created and performed by over 100 volunteers, aged eight to eighty, from the local community and schools, with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Plymouth University, Barbican Theatre Plymouth and Doorstep Arts truly brought home a key message that despite deep time and the divisions of our lives today it is the rock that connects us (Figure 1).

Following this performance, which was streamed live over the internet, Nick Powe (Chairman of the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark) and Gordon Oliver (Elected Mayor of Torbay) welcomed delegates to the English Riviera. Prof. Nikolas Zouros, President of the Global Geopark Network Association, welcomed everyone to the conference and the

Chair of the UK National Commission for UNESCO, Dr Beth Taylor, provided a keynote address reporting that:

“UNESCO was established in the wake of World War II, with the mission of promoting peace in the minds of men and women by fostering intercultural dialogue and international co-operation. It seems to me that there has never been a time when these objectives were more relevant than they are today, when global events seem to be dividing rather than uniting communities. And they are objectives which the UNESCO Global Geoparks family has right at its heart, based as it is on collaborative regional and global networks. I could not put this any better than the message that we heard so powerfully in the wonderful performance of “Earth Echoes” that opened the Conference – “The rock connects us”.

The opening ceremony also included a video message from Flavia Schlegel, Assistant Director General for Natural Sciences, UNESCO, and keynotes by Prof. Iain Stewart (English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark Patron and BBC TV Presenter) from Plymouth University and Prof. Patrick McKeever (Secretary of the International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme Chief of Section UNESCO) added their welcomes and explained the role of the geosciences to both health and wellbeing.

THE CONFERENCE

Conference delegates and Geopark representatives participated in a crowded schedule of workshops and field trips that centered around the conference’s main themes, sharing approaches, innovations and best practice from across the global network for participants to take forward in their respective countries.

A particular highlight was the Health and Wellbeing through Creative and Active Engagement keynote given by Mathew White, European Centre for Human Health, titled *The relationship between natural environments and health and*



Figure 1. The community performance, 'Earth Echoes', that opened the conference received a standing ovation from the delegates and distinguished guests.

well-being (and what has been missed) supported by a presentation entitled *Earth Echoes: Resonances between arts, geology and wellbeing in the Conference's Opening Ceremony* by Daisy Sutcliffe. Chaired by Artur Sa (Associate Professor and UNESCO Chair on Geoparks, Sustainable Regional Development and Healthy Lifestyles, University Trás-os-Montes e Alto, Portugal) and including Marko Pogacnik (UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador and Artist for Peace) amongst others on the panel, the discussion emphasized the potential for Global Geoparks to lead the way in local, national and trans-national wellbeing.

An additional 260 presentations were given by delegates in line with the other themes of Aspiring Geoparks, Engaging Communities, Education Interpretation and Communication, Mature Geoparks – Sharing success and challenges, Conservation Science and Research, Geotourism Cultural Tourism Sustainable Development and local products, Regional and International UNESCO Global Geopark Collaborations.

A Disaster Risk Reduction Panel discussion and workshop chaired by UNESCO Representative Irina Pavlova focused on finding ways to strengthen the potential of UNESCO Global Geoparks (UGG's) and geosites in general, to ensure sites' conservation in the face of geological and hydrometeorological hazards (Figure 2). Fruitful discussion took place between key experts, including UNESCO representatives and UGG site managers, as well as disaster risk management, climate change and conservation specialists regarding solutions on how to contribute to Disaster Risk Reduction. The Workshop element enabled UGG's exposed to natural hazards to share good practice, to create opportunity and motivate the cooperation on this topic between UNESCO Global Geoparks. Several speakers, including UGG site managers and scientists involved in UGG activities, delivered talks on educational programs or other activity for disaster mitigation and share the practice and experience between participants. Japanese UGGs experience in this field was highlighted.

No UNESCO Global Geopark conference is complete without fieldtrips and, despite being one of the smaller geoparks, the English Riviera provided a multitude of wonderful sites that showed the internationally significant geology and integrated history, heritage, natural environment and culture at its best (Hart, 2012). Well organised and executed, the tours – many of which were expertly led by academic staff and student volunteers from Plymouth University (Fig. 3) – took in spectacular SSSI sites such as Hope's Nose, Goodrington Sands to Saltern Cove and Berry Head National Nature Reserve (Figures 4–7). Kents Cavern (Figure 8), with its extensive – nationally protected – labyrinth of caverns that have yielded a wealth of fossil remains, fascinated the delegates just as it has many of Britain's pioneering Earth scientists including the Rev'd Buckland, Charles Darwin, Alfred Wallace and William Pengelly (Greeves, 2012; McFarlane and Lundberg, 2005, 2013; Lundberg and McFarlane, 2007; Wootton, 2012). A human jawbone (now housed at Torquay Museum) discovered there is the oldest human fossil ever found in north-western Europe (Higham *et al.*, 2011). Yet Kents Cavern's connection to human kind goes back much further to *neanderthals* and *Homo heidelbergensis* over 500,000 years ago (Stringer *et al.*, 2007; White and Pettitt, 2009, 2011; Stringer, 2010; Jacobi and Higham, 2010a, 2010b; Currant and Jacobi, 2010; Barnett, 2014).

Meanwhile, other tours took in the thirteenth century built heritage in the form of Torre Abbey and St Michael's Chapel, the beautiful grounds and the vibrant centre for locally inspired and traditional arts and crafts at Cockington Court and, of course, the community led initiative, Paignton Geoplay Park which introduces and engages the Geopark's complex geological history in simple terms to children and adults alike. Thankfully, good weather prevailed during the day of field excursions, enabling many to enjoy the stunning features of the marine Devonian limestones and Permian sandstones and breccias and the Pleistocene raised beach of the Geopark by boat (Fig. 9).



Figure 2. Disaster Risk Reduction Panel discussion and workshop chaired by Irina Pavlova.



Figure 3. Academic staff and student volunteers from Plymouth University outside the Conference Centre after a successful day leading some of the more geologically oriented field excursions.



Figure 4. Dr Matthew Watkinson (Plymouth University) explaining the depositional environments represented by the fossiliferous Middle Devonian limestones at the northern end of Hope's Nose.



Figure 5. Delegates at Hope's Nose, looking at the famous fold in the Middle Devonian limestones that contain a number of ash-fall deposits and which are overlain by the famous raised beach (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Dr Kevin Page (centre stage) explains the view from the southern end of Hope's Nose with Thatcher Rock in the background. The group are standing on the fascinating raised beach that is so well exposed on this corner of Hope's Nose (Fig. 5).



Figure 7. Dr Matthew Watkinson in front of the folded Meadfoot Group sediments exposed between Goodrington Sands, Waterside Cove and Saltern Cove.



Figure 8. Kents Cavern, prehistoric caves that have been excavated for scientific research from the early nineteenth century.

Of course delegates were treated to some of the culture of the area in the form of an evening icebreaker reception in the fine setting of the medieval Spanish Barn and foot-stomping entertainment that got many on their feet following an expert caller at a Barn Dance hosted by Torbay Coast and Countryside Trust at Occombe Farm. Delegates also enjoyed an English Riviera Street Party, organised by Torbay Community Development Trust, on Torquay Seafront, complete with the chance to sample traditional British fish and chips, enjoy traditional games, the entertainment of Punch and Judy, Morris Dancing, live music and an opportunity to buy local craft products.



Figure 9. Delegates taking part in one of the boat trips around Tor Bay. Having just studied London Bridge, they are facing the thinly-bedded limestones of the Daddyhole Limestone Member.

THE DECLARATION

The conference concluded with the introduction of the English Riviera Declaration which outlines the next steps and priorities for the Global Geoparks as they embark on their new phase of growth as a formal member of the UNESCO family. After deliberation, the delegates affirmed the following:

1. We welcome the formation of the first new UNESCO site designation of its kind in over 40 years- the UNESCO Global Geoparks- and formally recognise that this was the result of a global collaborative effort over many years between the Global Geopark family, National Commission's and Permanent Delegations of UNESCO and the UNESCO Secretariat.
2. Recalling that UNESCO was established 70 years ago in the wake of World War Two with the aim of promoting peace in the minds of men and woman through international cooperation and collaboration-values which are at the heart of the Global Geopark Network-we believe that the UNESCO Global Geoparks have found their natural home.
3. Recalling that the Global Geopark Network was founded in 2004 as the international network of collaboration among

territories sharing values linked with the celebration of geological heritage and promotion of sustainable local development. We encourage strengthening of networking and activities aiming to support the UNESCO Global Geoparks.

4. Considering the complex challenges that Humankind is facing, we recognise the unique contribution that the work of UNESCO Global Geoparks make in tackling these challenges through the holistic approach of integrated education, outreach, research, culture, sustainable development, community engagement and capacity building.

5. We note the contribution that UNESCO Global Geoparks can make toward promoting the Health and Wellbeing Agenda through providing opportunities to access the natural environment, engage in physical activity and gain an understanding of the planet we share.

6. We encourage the Global Geoparks Network and other stakeholders to continue to work together to promote increased understanding, disseminate evidence and outcomes from pilot projects and adopt and share best practice in this field.

7. Recognising that natural disasters represent major risk to Health and Wellbeing worldwide, we believe that UNESCO Global Geoparks have significant potential to contribute to disaster risk reduction and enhance disaster preparedness within the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. We encourage UNESCO Global Geoparks to perform and promote education awareness activities and to reinforce cooperation in the field of disaster risk reduction between sites for the sharing of good practices and the establishment of thematic projects.

8. We welcome the increased interest in UNESCO Global Geoparks from across the world and encourage greater partnership working between aspirant, new and established UNESCO Global Geoparks in order to promote best practice and increase the impact of the work of UNESCO Global Geoparks around the world.

9. At a time when conflict threatens to divide and displace many communities around the globe we would like to celebrate the ability of the UNESCO Global Geoparks to bring people together from all continents and backgrounds. "The rock connects us."

SUMMING UP

In his closing speech, Torbay's elected Mayor, Gordon Oliver, recognised and thanked the local Geopark staff and partners including Torbay Council and the Torbay Development Agency along with all the sponsors but it was most certainly the incredible band of Geopark Ambassador Volunteers who took to centre stage for a standing ovation from all. This was fitting recognition for the warm welcome they provided, their never ending smiles and endless support, all of which helped the delegates relax and made the conference atmosphere so special.

Nikolas Zouros, President of the Global Geopark Network Association, expressed his "warmest thanks and congratulations" for the "efficient organisation and success" of the four day event hosted by the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark.

He wrote: "We are all impressed by the excellent organisation of the Conference, the outstanding opening event, the high quality events of the Gala dinner and, opening and closing ceremonies, the Geopark fair, the infrastructure and activities of the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark."

"I personally enjoyed very much the enthusiasm and dedicated work of your Geopark team and volunteers, the involvement of local people in your activities, your friendship and warm hospitality!"

"We share with you and we feel very proud for the success of

the 7th International Conference on UNESCO Global Geoparks that proved the growing international interest on UNESCO Global Geoparks. All colleagues agreed that both the Conference and the associated meetings have very positive contribution to the cohesion and further development of GGN. Thus, the 7th International Conference on UNESCO Global Geoparks is already recognized as the most successful ever.”

THE FUTURE

The International Global Geoparks conference takes place every two years and has previously been staged in China (2004), Northern Ireland (2006), Germany (2008), Malaysia (2010), Japan (2012) and Canada (2014.) The host of the 8th International Conference on UNESCO Global Geoparks in 2018 was announced as Adamello Brenta UNESCO Global Geopark in Italy.

The welcome address by Flavia Schlegel, keynote presentations and a photographic record of the conference can be found in the GGN2016 archive at www.englishrivierageopark.org.uk

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