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**REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR-GENERAL ON THE FEASIBILITY STUDY ON
DEVELOPING A UNESCO GEOSITES/GEOPARKS PROGRAMME**

SUMMARY

Pursuant to the Programme and Budget (29 C/5) approved by the General Conference at its 29th session, UNESCO took initiatives “to promote a global network of geosites having special geological features” (29 C/5, para. 02036) by launching a scientific and policy debate on the appropriateness of developing a UNESCO Geoparks Programme.

In the present document, the Director-General reports on the main conclusions of the feasibility study requested by the Executive Board in 156 EX/Decision 3.3.4. Based on these conclusions, it is considered that “hosting” geoparks as an activity within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves of the MAB Programme would offer the most appropriate mechanism for strengthening geological heritage conservation in UNESCO’s programmes.

Decision required: paragraph 28.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. By 156 EX/Decision 3.3.4 the Executive Board invites the Director-General “to prepare, in consultation with the Scientific Board of IGCP, a feasibility study on developing a UNESCO geosites/geoparks programme and to submit it to the Executive Board preferably at its 159th session but not later than the 160th session”. The General Conference in 30 C/Resolution 19, paragraph 6 a(i), authorized the Director-General to implement the corresponding plan of action “by preparing a feasibility study on a UNESCO Geoparks Programme to enhance geological heritage”.

2. In the present document the Director-General reports on the main conclusions of the feasibility study prepared by Dr Tony Weighell (Joint Nature Conservation Committee, United Kingdom), in collaboration with the UNESCO Secretariat, with the support of a number of other external specialists, and in consultation with the IGCP Scientific Board at its annual meeting, held in Paris from 31 January to 3 February 2000. The comprehensive final report of the study (60 pages, English) can be obtained from the Division of Earth Sciences.

3. The scope and purpose of the study, as specified in the above-mentioned decisions and resolutions of UNESCO’s governing bodies, included evaluation of the need for a new initiative by UNESCO to promote a global network of geoparks that would effectively safeguard and develop selected areas having significant geological features, as well as examining how such a geoparks initiative might relate to other relevant UNESCO programmes. It was also requested that the study should examine possible objectives, site selection criteria, and functioning and other operational aspects, as well as management and financing of such a new initiative. The feasibility study examined in particular the option of improving international recognition and protection of geological heritage sites under existing UNESCO programmes such as the International Geological Correlation Programme (IGCP), the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme and the World Heritage Convention.

II. GEOLOGICAL HERITAGE PROMOTION

4. The report of the feasibility study highlights the fact that, around the world, there is now broad public awareness of the necessity for the conservation of nature. Reports about air and water pollution, soil degradation, disappearing rain forests and the extinction of species have increased our perception of the urgency of conserving the natural environment. The need to conserve natural resources and biodiversity is now clear. However, it is less obvious to many people that conservation of geological features is of similar importance. The notion that these features are inherently robust, less vulnerable to destruction and therefore not threatened, is not true. The study concludes that a geological feature is an asset that, once lost, cannot be replaced.

5. The study recalls that rocks, minerals, fossils, soils and landforms are the results and the record of the evolution of our planet and, as such, they form an integral part of our natural world. The distribution of habitats, plants and animals depends not only upon climate, but also upon the geology and landforms. As well as being a fundamental part of the natural world, geology and landforms have had a profound influence on society and civilization, and continue to do so. Our use of the land, for agriculture, forestry, mining, quarrying and for building homes and cities is intimately related to the underlying rocks, soils and landforms. Moreover, resources such as coal, oil, gas and metal ores have played, and still play an important role in technological, industrial and economic development. Consequently, the

feasibility study concludes that geological heritage promotion is an important recognized need and should be addressed by UNESCO.

6. Three main objectives are emphasized by the feasibility study as a basis for enhancing the promotion of geological heritage: the use of geological sites in educating the broad public at large and teaching in geological sciences and in environmental matters; their potential as a tool ensure sustainable development; and the conservation of the geological heritage for future generations.

7. With respect to sustainable development, the feasibility study points out that numerous areas in the world offer immediate potential for substantial economic development because of the presence of a diverse range of geological phenomena including, amongst many, structures, minerals and fossils. Geological heritage sites, properly managed, can generate employment and new economic activities, especially in regions in need of new or additional sources of income. Novel directions in tourism (geotourism) and in trades and crafts can be generated, such as the sustainable manufacturing of innovative handicrafts and souvenirs with a geological connotation, sale of local products, enforcement of the local hotel and restaurant business through visitors, creation of new jobs, etc.

III. EXISTING INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES FOR GEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

8. The feasibility study refers to the International Union of Geological Sciences' (IUGS) Working Group on Global Geosites. This working group is systematically developing national and regional geological site inventories to build up a global database of geological/geomorphological sites. This is a database that will ultimately contain several thousand sites.

9. On the European level, the feasibility study makes reference to a "European Geoparks Concept", defined and created recently as a trademark in the context of the European LEADER IIC programme "Development of Geotourism in Europe" of the European Union. This concept applies to all areas with an "exceptional" geological heritage that implement a sustainable development policy in their territory. More than 40 European zones potentially qualify for "European Geopark" status on the eve of 2001.

10. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the criteria adopted as a basis for inclusion of natural sites in its World Heritage List are also discussed in the feasibility study. The List currently contains 630 sites, 47 (7%) of which have been included also for their geological interest. Some of those with geological features are purely natural sites, while others fall into the mixed natural/cultural heritage category. In order to be included in the World Heritage List, geological sites have to meet the requirement that they are of "**outstanding universal value**", as stipulated in the Convention's Article 2 of natural heritage: "geological and physiographical formations and precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation".

11. Cooperation with IUGS on geological heritage issues was recommended by the World Heritage Committee at its 20th session in December 1996, in Merida, Mexico. The Committee invited IUGS, through the Global Geosite Working Group, to evaluate sites and to compile a global comparative inventory and database. Also, IUCN was invited to cooperate with IUGS and other appropriate NGOs in further evaluation of sites proposed for World Heritage listing.

IV. OPTIONS FOR THE INSTITUTIONAL SET-UP OF THE UNESCO GEOPARKS INITIATIVE

12. Geoparks as a separate programme

As presented in document 156 EX/11 Rev., the geoparks programme was initially envisaged as a separate entity designed to complement the World Heritage Convention and the Man and the Biosphere programme. As stated in the feasibility study, a separate programme would have the benefit, if implemented, of focusing attention directly on geological conservation. It would highlight this area of conservation, as well as the need to conserve global geological heritage in parallel with biodiversity. Although a dedicated programme would have such benefits, an element common to many national geological/geomorphological conservation schemes is the integration of geoconservation with biological conservation. Linking science-based conservation initiatives to economic and cultural activities is also important.

13. The feasibility study concludes that a “holistic” approach (linking geology, biology, culture and economics) is not only consistent with effective conservation, but would also provide a more effective programme. The feasibility study recommends that the geoparks initiative should not be pursued as a separate programme.

14. World Heritage Convention

As stated in the feasibility study, it is expected that the World Heritage Committee will remain extremely selective and will continue to adhere closely to the “**outstanding universal value**” concept. The concerns expressed by the World Heritage Committee as to the representativeness of the World Heritage List, and the need for more natural sites, are unlikely to result in a substantive increase in the proportion of inscribed geological sites. The current reviews of the operations of the World Heritage Convention suggest that the criteria applied to natural site nominations for the World Heritage List will be enforced even more rigorously in the future. The feasibility study concludes that the World Heritage Convention remains the most adequate international instrument for the protection of sites with geological features of **outstanding universal value**. Any new initiative should clearly respect the specific mandate and objectives of the World Heritage Convention and should focus on sites of international value which would not qualify for the World Heritage List.

15. The World Heritage Operational Guidelines state clearly that “it is not intended to provide for the protection of all properties of great interest, importance or value, but only for a select list of the **most outstanding** of these from an international viewpoint”. The feasibility study concludes that, for the above reason, the predicted level of representation of geological sites within the World Heritage List will be too low to ensure recognition of a sufficient number of sites at the global level. While, therefore, many sites of international, and *ipso facto* national, importance may not qualify for inscription on the World Heritage List, the same sites would certainly merit recognition using another mechanism.

16. It is also apparent that the World Heritage Committee and IUCN welcome the establishment of a programme, complementary to the World Heritage Convention, which will be capable of absorbing a significant number of geological/geomorphological sites of national, regional and international importance even though they may not rank as of World Heritage value. The feasibility study concludes that an alternative to the World Heritage List is therefore required for the recognition of geological/geomorphological sites that fall into this category. Such a programme would complement the World Heritage Convention and provide

a natural home for internationally important sites recognized by IUGS and national inventories.

17. Geoparks under the International Geological Correlation Programme (IGCP)

Following the decisions of the Executive Board, which invited the Director-General to prepare the feasibility study in consultation with the Scientific Board of the IGCP, the Geoparks Programme was discussed at the 28th Session of the IGCP Scientific Board (31 January-3 February 2000, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris).

18. The wisdom of finding means to protect, publicize and promote valuable geological phenomena through a geoparks initiative by UNESCO was recognized by the IGCP Board and it was accepted that the Board could assist this initiative by offering the expertise of its members. However, the Board expressed the firm belief that IGCP must clearly be seen to be separate from any envisaged geoparks programme: the business of IGCP is science, and this mandate should not be altered by the introduction of a UNESCO Geoparks Programme into IGCP. Specifically, the Board rejected any suggestion that funds allocated for IGCP project work should be diverted to any activities arising from the establishment of a geoparks programme. The feasibility study endorses the decision taken by the IGCP Scientific Board that a geoparks programme should not be set up under the aegis of IGCP.

19. Geoparks as part of the MAB Biosphere Reserves

As presented in document 156 EX/11 Rev., the geoparks initiative has been modeled on the MAB Programme. This emphasizes a landscape approach to conservation, of which geological heritage would be an integral element. The comparative merits of a separate geoparks programme, and an integrated biological/geological programme under the MAB “umbrella”, as presented by the feasibility study, are tabulated below.

Separate geoparks programme	Integration with MAB
Will need to build support.	Programme already in operation.
Could be seen as diverting resources from other areas.	Strengthening MAB programme, reinforcing effort, bringing together scientific effort.
Will focus attention exclusively on geology/geomorphology but could isolate effort.	Will integrate biology and geology, in line with many national programmes although there remains the danger that geology/geomorphology may be given insufficient emphasis in overall MAB programme.
Will provide clear alternative to implementation of World Heritage Convention for geological sites, but may be regarded as “second class” programme.	Will provide an effective complement to World Heritage Convention through integration of biology and geology.
New Geoparks Evaluation Board to be established.	Evaluation could be based on an Advisory Committee enlarged by specialists for geological conservation.
The initiative will require new funding.	The initiative will utilize existing administrative structures and funding sources.
New management procedures and operational guidelines needed.	Build on established procedures.

20. The feasibility study recommends that “hosting” geoparks within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves of the MAB programme would offer the most appropriate mechanism for strengthening geological heritage conservation in UNESCO’s programmes. This mechanism would avoid the need for instituting an entirely new programme and would be more consistent with national geoconservation strategies that are most effective when they are part of integrated conservation programmes. A UNESCO geoconservation initiative should be capable of setting an example and encouraging such an integrated approach to conservation, as well as animate both environmental protection and sustainable development. This proposal would strengthen both the Earth Sciences and the MAB programme, as well as being in line with the recommendations of the chairpersons of UNESCO’s five environmental scientific programmes to develop collaborative activities. The feasibility study stresses that governance and administrative issues need to be addressed by the UNESCO Secretariat in order to ensure smooth and compatible integration of the geoparks initiative within the existing World Network of Biosphere Reserves.

V. CONCLUSIONS OF THE FEASIBILITY STUDY

21. After considering the various aspects of, and approaches to, geological heritage conservation in a national and international context and referring also to the support expressed by governmental and scientific agencies in many countries across all continents, the feasibility study concludes that the time has come to fill a gap in current UNESCO programmes by establishing a UNESCO Geoparks Programme to accommodate geological heritage.

22. The study recommends that the geoparks activity:

- (i) should not be launched as a separate programme;
- (ii) should not be launched under the International Geological Correlation Programme (IGCP);
- (iii) should not be included under the World Heritage Convention which covers geological sites only if they are of outstanding universal value;
- (iv) should be integrated into the World Network of Biosphere Reserves within the MAB programme, through developing a “Geoparks seal of excellence”.

23. Draft guidelines on the objectives, selection criteria, functioning and other operational aspects of geoparks have been described in detail in the feasibility study and should serve as a basis for future discussions in the re-design of the administrative procedures for the World Network of Biosphere Reserves to accommodate the geoparks initiative.

24. The feasibility study strongly advises all actors, specifically the members of the Secretariat involved in the planning for a joint programme, to guarantee high visibility of all geoparks activities among UNESCO’s programmes for the worldwide geoscientific community. If this is not achieved, the whole initiative is unlikely to gain any political impact or international recognition, and so would probably fail in its aim to heighten awareness of geological heritage issues in general, and geological education and development in particular.

VI. FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS ENVISAGED

25. Based on the recommendation of the feasibility study to “host” geoparks as an activity within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves of the MAB Programme, it is envisaged to seize the opportunity to have this matter discussed as part of the agenda of the International Co-ordination Council of the MAB Programme during its forthcoming session in November 2000.

26. As part of the follow-up actions envisaged operational aspects, as well as management and financing of geoparks activities, will be discussed between the different actors of the programmes involved and the Secretariat, it being understood that geoparks activities would be mainly financed by extrabudgetary funds. Mutual agreement should be reached between the two Divisions concerned in the Natural Sciences Sector on additional issues concerning allocation of staff resources needed, governance and administration.

27. Further follow-up actions concerning the decisions in which way to proceed with “geological heritage promotion” for the next Medium-Term Strategy and Programme and Budget for 2002-2003, depend on two major additional elements of information: (i) the results of the additional consultations outlined above on the implications of the recommendations made by the feasibility study on existing programmes in the Natural Sciences Sector, and (ii) the views expressed by the International Co-ordinating Council of the MAB Programme at its forthcoming session in November 2000.

VII. DECISION

28. In view of the foregoing, the Executive Board may wish to adopt the following decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Considering that the General Conference at its 29th session authorized the Director-General to take initiatives to “promote a global network of geosites having special geological features” (29 C/5, para. 02036), and at its 30th session invited the Director-General to implement the corresponding plan of action “by preparing a feasibility study on a UNESCO Geoparks Programme to enhance geological heritage”(30 C/Resolution 19, para. 6 a(i) and 30 C/5 para. 02211),
2. Having examined document 160 EX/10,
3. Welcomes the recommendations of the feasibility study to develop a geoparks activity by creating a “Geoparks seal of excellence” within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves of the MAB Programme, the related activities being implemented mainly through extrabudgetary funds; and
4. Invites the Director-General to:
 - (i) ensure that the MAB International Co-ordination Council, at its 16th session in November 2000, examines the recommendations of the feasibility study as part of its agenda;
 - (ii) alert the various partners involved and donors to the merits of collaborating in the implementation of the activity through extrabudgetary sources.