

Hundred and sixty-first Session

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**RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE MAB INTERNATIONAL COORDINATING
COUNCIL ON THE FEASIBILITY STUDY ON DEVELOPING
A UNESCO GEOSITES/GEOPARKS PROGRAMME**

SUMMARY

Following the decision taken by the Executive Board at its 160th session (160 EX/Decision 3.3.1) on the Report by the Director-General concerning the feasibility study on developing a UNESCO geosites/geoparks programme, the Director-General presented its results at the sixteenth session of the MAB International Coordinating Council, from 6 to 10 November 2000.

The MAB International Coordinating Council examined the recommendations of the feasibility study, on the appropriateness of integrating the geoparks initiative within the World Network of Biosphere Reserves.

In the present document, the Director-General reports on the conclusions of the MAB International Coordinating Council and its Bureau, at its meeting from 21 to 23 March 2001, on this issue.

Decision required: paragraph 13.

INTRODUCTION

1. The proposal to develop a UNESCO geoparks programme to promote the international recognition of significant examples of the earth's geological heritage, popularize knowledge on the earth's history and trigger at the same time local sustainable development was first presented at the 156th session of the Executive Board in April 1999 (156 EX/11 Rev.). There, it was proposed that a geoparks programme be promoted within the Organization, building on existing undertakings and relevant committees within the Organization. The objective of promoting such a programme was based on the specific interest expressed during the past years by geological institutions and geoscientists in numerous Member States, and by non-governmental organizations.

2. Consequent to the decision taken at this session of the Executive Board (156 EX/Decision 3.3.4), the Director-General was "invited to prepare, in consultation with the Scientific Board of IGCP (International Geological Correlation Programme), 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". In 30 C/Resolution 19, paragraph 6(a)(i), the General Conference 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".

II. FEASIBILITY STUDY

3. The feasibility study was 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. It comprised an evaluation of the need for a new initiative by UNESCO to promote a global network of geoparks, as well as examine how such a geoparks initiative might relate to other relevant UNESCO programmes. The study examined possible objectives, site selection criteria, and functioning and other operational aspects, as well as management and financing of such a new initiative, 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.

4. The feasibility study recommended that the geoparks activity:

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

5. The main conclusions of the feasibility study were reported by the Director-General to the Executive Board at its 160th session in October 2000 (160 EX/10). In its decision on the matter, the Executive Board invited "the Director-General to ensure that the MAB International Coordinating Council, at its sixteenth session in November 2000, examine the

recommendations of the feasibility study and their financial implications as part of its agenda and presents its recommendations to the Board at its 161st session” (160 EX/Decision 3.3.1).

III. MAB INTERNATIONAL COORDINATING COUNCIL

6. Following the decision of the Executive Board at its 160th session (160 EX/Decision 3.3.1), the MAB International Coordinating Council examined the recommendations of the feasibility study and their financial implications at its sixteenth session. These recommendations are recorded in the report of the session in document SC-00/CONF.208/13.

7. During the debate, some delegations agreed on the importance of safeguarding geological sites, but doubts were raised about the advisability of making such activity an integral part of the function of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves. In this respect, a number of different concerns were expressed: some Council members feared that this additional administrative and financial task imposed on the Secretariat would burden the management of MAB; in individual countries the programmes come under different administrations and MAB National Committees often lack expertise in geology.

8. The question of possible confusion as a result of the overlapping of labels and the inherent difficulties of explaining the matter was also raised, as was the need to avoid downgrading the biosphere reserve label, which had gained wide recognition. Some delegations, however, took the view that it would be most timely to include geosites (or geological sites of special interest) in existing or future biosphere reserves, and that they might even increase the value of such reserves; but the same did not go for geoparks. The discussions noted the essential difference between geosites (small sites of geological, scientific importance) and geoparks (larger areas, considered as expressing a relationship between people and geology, and serving as a focus for economic development). The delegates therefore expressed the wish that the idea be studied in greater depth, especially the question of how their integration into biosphere reserves could be envisaged. One observer noted that the proposal to integrate the geosites/geoparks initiative into the World Network of Biosphere Reserves matched the General Conference’s call for closer cooperation between the scientific programmes and a regrouping of their activities, a trend already reflected in the common declaration of the chairpersons of those programmes.

9. In conclusion, the Council acknowledged the geosites/geoparks issue as being a complex matter that requires more thorough examination of all the points raised during the debate and invited the Secretariat to prepare such a review, in consultation with the members of the Council, and to submit it to the Bureau of the MAB International Coordinating Council, before the next session of the Executive Board, so that a final recommendation might be made at that session.

IV. MAB BUREAU

10. The MAB Bureau examined the issue at its meeting from 21 to 23 March 2001. After having considered the opinions expressed during the MAB International Coordinating Council, mentioned in section III above, and after consultation with all the Council members of the MAB programme, the Bureau concluded that it would not be advisable that a geosites/geoparks programme be managed as part of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves.

V. CONCLUSION

11. Taking into account the discussions on this issue held at the sessions referred to of the MAB International Coordinating Council and the MAB Bureau, involving both the Divisions of Earth Sciences and Ecological Sciences, it is concluded that a geosites/geoparks programme should not be managed as part of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves.

12. UNESCO's role is considered as crucial in raising public awareness of geological heritage issues, achieving their fullest international recognition, and securing their most effective political impact. Therefore, the Division of Earth Sciences might be invited to pursue the general objective "Education in earth sciences", through the promotion of geosite/geopark activities as an inter- and multidisciplinary activity, providing UNESCO's support to and cooperation with national initiatives on an ad hoc basis when requested by Member States.

13. In the light of the above, the Executive Board may wish to consider the following decision:

The Executive Board,

1. Having examined document 161 EX/9,
2. Noting the recommendation of the MAB International Coordinating Council and its Bureau against inclusion of a geoparks programme as part of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves,
3. Invites the Director-General not to pursue the development of a UNESCO geosites/geoparks programme, but instead to support ad hoc efforts with individual Member States as appropriate.