

Community involvement for Geoparks



UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development. A UNESCO Global Geopark uses its geological heritage, in connection with all other aspects of the area's natural and cultural heritage, to enhance awareness and understanding of key issues facing society, such as using our Earth's resources sustainably, mitigating the effects of climate change and reducing the impact of natural disasters.

By raising awareness of the importance of the area's geological heritage in history and society today, UNESCO Global Geoparks give local people a sense of pride in their region and strengthen their identification with the area. The creation of innovative local enterprises, new jobs and high quality training courses is stimulated as new sources of revenue are generated through ecotourism, while the geological resources of the area are protected.

Excerpt from the UNESCO Global Geoparks Handbook

Whether or not your site is a UNESCO Global Geopark the principles espoused in the quote above are sound for any Geopark and in particular anyone aspiring to achieve UNESCO status.

Why community involvement?

Why bother engaging with communities at all if it is going to involve you in a lot of work and hassle? Firstly, the UNESCO Global Geopark Guidelines clearly call for a holistic approach to development and therefore a failure to engage with communities is a failure to meet the conditions required to be a UNESCO Geopark. Secondly, Geoparks do not exist in isolation and without the help of your communities in providing access and support the Geopark may be unable to function at all.

Geoparks can range from small single sites close to major cities to entire, relatively remote, island groups. The degree of community involvement which one location can generate may be totally unachievable at a different location and this document is designed to help Geoparks and prospective Geoparks identify the opportunities available in their particular circumstances.

DRIFTING APART

Because of this the document will not seek to give definitive answers but will encourage asking the right questions. Surprisingly it may be the smaller and more remote sites that are best placed to develop a strong relationship with their local community. This will be in part because the Geopark is “the only game in town” and therefore is regarded as an important part of the local culture but it may also be that small communities have, by necessity, to function as a cohesive unit or they very soon cease to exist on any meaningful level.

In addition to individual sites the Geopark network can also be presented as a potential community asset. The UNESCO Global Geopark network represents 35* countries some containing many more than one Geopark. Within this overarching network there is capacity for building regional relationships such as those proposed by the Drifting Apart project which can build on joint experience and a shared geological inheritance.

**This may be subject to amendment as new Geoparks achieve UNESCO designation.*



Community involvement in Geological Sites

Things you need to know?

To prepare a strategy for promoting the involvement of communities in a geological site several questions need to be addressed. A few of these may be operational in nature and help you plan how to involve community groups in the actual day to day use of sites but more will be concerned with how to integrate the Geopark into the community, so it becomes part of the everyday lives of the residents. Some of these questions may seem very simplistic but it is surprising how often they are not asked, and the result can be frustrating for both the community and the Geopark.

It is strongly recommended that you firstly read the document “Geoparks for communities” that also forms part of this toolkit. This will give you some understanding of what communities may be seeking to gain from any relationship you build with them.

Which community or communities should you be engaging with?

This may seem on the face of it to be an obvious question with an obvious answer, but it will probably not be that simple. In some cases, a Geopark may have a very specific location and already be tied to a particular community but in many cases, it will be spread over a relatively large geographical area and not all communities within that area will have a direct relationship to specific geosites. This section will help you identify which organisations and communities in your Geopark area are most likely to wish to be involved.



What are you offering?

Before you make any approaches to communities you must be clear what it is that you want from any relationship you develop and what you are prepared to offer in return. The worst possible scenario is for you to raise expectations of what the Geopark can do for communities and then fail to deliver.

Do an assessment of what your geopark can do and what might be of interest to your community. Could you for instance offer the following:

- Tours
- Education sessions
- Outreach sessions
- Activities
- Open days
- Joint marketing
- Training
- Expert advisors

These are just a few suggestions. Look at what you already do or plan to do in your Geopark and make sure your plans include provision for working with communities.



What resources are available?

When you decide to approach communities with a view to creating a working partnership you must be mindful of the necessity for all participants to put resources into any joint endeavours agreed upon.

This means that first and foremost you need to define the resources that you are capable of putting into the mix. Secondly you need to make a judgement as to the contribution you believe your potential partners may be able to make.

Internal resources

When deciding on the allocation of internal resources regarding working with communities there are three primary areas for consideration.

1. The resources required to build relationships with the identified groups.
2. The resources required to deliver partnership working.
3. The resources required to engage with the community as a whole.

Relationship building

Building meaningful relationships with community groups is rarely a swift or simple process. It will require a significant investment of staff or volunteer time but this will probably be an investment worth making. By far the most effective way of building such a relationship is through direct involvement by either a staff member or volunteer associated with the Geopark.

Face to face contact is better than phone and phone is better than e-mail. There is no real substitute for spending time talking to people and showing them around the Geopark. It may well be that the community group will be more than familiar with the area already but do not assume that this means they know anything about the geology.



Equally you should bear in mind that you may have much to learn from the community. As has already been stated Geoparks are much more than just geology and community groups often have a vast store of local knowledge which they are keen to share with the wider world. By identifying Geoparks as a vehicle by which they can present this knowledge you can immediately create a mutually beneficial partnership. Never assume that because local knowledge does not match up to current scientific thought that it does not have value. If you wish to encourage non geologists to engage with your sites it is just these local stories and legends which may provide exactly the “hook” you need to bring in a whole new audience.

The allocation of time needed for relationship building should reflect the need to both talk and listen. Do not base it on the assumption that you have to deliver a seminar or send out a leaflet. This is a much more interactive process and therefore more time consuming.

Always remember that the group you are talking to may not share your agenda so be sure to listen to what they want to get out of the relationship.



Partnership Working

Once you have established a relationship within the community you will need to put resources in place to sustain and develop that relationship. The amount of time required to do this will vary significantly depending on the nature of the work you are doing with each group.

For instance if you are doing a joint project with a group there may be periods of intense activity whereas if you are only sharing knowledge for interpretation purposes this may be a much more relaxed process that can develop over a period of time. Similarly local schools might wish to make use of the Geopark quite intensively during the delivery of certain elements of the curriculum but not at all at other times. Training in particular can involve significant resources in developing and producing training materials and in the delivery of training itself. This can be an ongoing commitment as new community groups spring up or new members join existing groups.

The key to delivering a satisfactory partnership is anticipation of the needs of your partner and placing the relevant resources at their disposal when they are needed. This will need good planning and clear communication channels. You need to be able to trust your partner to be similarly aware of your needs. There will of course be occasions when you need to react to a particular set of unplanned circumstances but every attempt should be made to keep these to a minimum.

Engaging whole communities

There will be occasions where you need to engage a whole community, for example when you wish them to participate in an event or activity, and in that case your engagement may be much more of a marketing exercise. This is particularly true if the community you are seeking to engage is a large town or city or even the whole population of your geopark. In the case of very small communities you may need to treat them in the same way you would a community group in larger places.

Community Resources

To work effectively with the various community connections you wish to make you will need to assess the capacity of each group or community and adjust your expectations to meet with their capabilities. This assessment can be carried out as part of your relationship building exercise.

Never make assumptions that the capacity of a community or group is dependent upon its size. Small communities are often very self-reliant and will put a huge amount of effort into projects they choose to support. Small groups can be very focused, enthusiastic and highly skilled.

Let groups show you what they believe they are capable of and use your judgement as to whether you believe they can deliver on their promises. If you do not believe this to be the case then suggest an alternative approach that you think might be safer.



Who should you be working with?

Geoparks have defined physical boundaries, generally dictated by the limits of the geology that they represent. The area of influence of a Geopark may however be considerably larger than its physical borders and, even within those borders; specific geosites might not have communities nearby. Consider all the communities that exist on the periphery of your sites including those who will benefit from through traffic heading towards or leaving Geoparks. Look at your Geopark in geological, geographic and cultural contexts and try to identify communities which might be affected by its existence.

Each Geopark will have a very specific list of community groups that it will want to contact. You might wish to consider at least some of the following:

- Heritage groups
- Environmental groups
- Schools and colleges
- Walking groups
- Climbing groups
- Youth organisations
- Youth clubs
- Religious groups

Other possible contacts might depend on the nature of the geosites in your geopark. If you are near water, then perhaps kayak clubs might be appropriate and so on. Try to think of groups that might be specific to the type of terrain in which your Geopark lies.



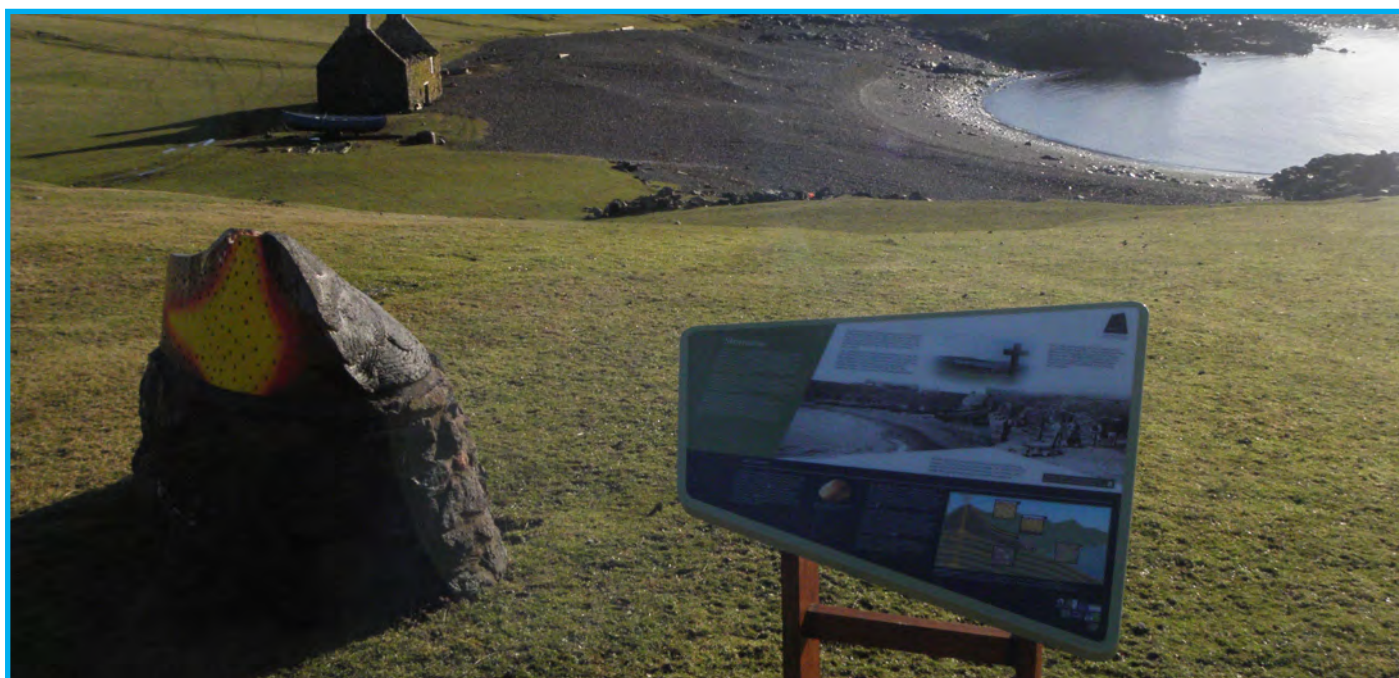
Physical communities

Physical communities are the easiest to identify and possibly easier to make contact with. Their location will be on a map of your area. They may consist of a whole city or a single farm or anything in between. Whatever their size you will need to identify whether your Geopark or individual geosites can have an impact on them and whether that impact is likely to be positive or negative. It is very easy to assume that Geoparks are always going to be a good thing but if a local resident values their privacy then hordes of visitors walking by their door to get to a geosite is not going to endear them to the Geopark. Similarly if a local heritage group finds its visitor centre has no visitors because the Geopark is stealing them all then there are likely to be difficulties.

Relationships with your local communities need to be managed if the experience is to be positive on both sides. On a most basic level you need to speak to neighbours and landowners and gain their trust and co-operation with regard to access and potential environmental impacts. To spark their enthusiasm would be even better and would pay significant dividends both for the community and the Geopark. Active participation is almost always a better alternative to passive acceptance.

Dealing with villages, towns and cities and the groups that inhabit them is more complex as it is likely to involve engagement with a number of different public bodies and community groups as well as capturing the enthusiasm of the population. Each Geopark will need to assess the requirements for community engagement that suit their particular circumstances. It would be useful to make a list of public bodies and community groups in your area and assess whether they are relevant to your Geopark and, if so, how relevant. You will need to establish, before you even approach community contacts, what you are seeking from the relationship and what you are offering in return.

Building and maintaining a relationship with your immediate community requires hard work and a degree of skill. It will not happen overnight and should be approached by developing a structured plan that will allow you to allocate resources proportional to the returns you are likely to make. The dividends can be significant for everybody concerned if you can persuade community activists to buy into your message and work on behalf of both your Geopark and the community.



Virtual communities

Virtual communities or communities of interest may have no specific physical location and yet may contain the most enthusiastic and motivated supporters of your Geopark. Communities of interest consist of groups of people with a passion for a specific subject and, given the avenues for communication available through the internet, can stretch from one side of the globe to the other. They are likely to manifest themselves on websites, blogs, social media pages etc. They are of particular interest because they do not need to be persuaded of the value of your Geopark. They are already converts to your cause and as such can be useful ambassadors on your behalf.

As with any other community there is a need to manage your relationship with your “virtual” enthusiasts. If you wish to engage with them you should do so in the knowledge that you will need to work at maintaining meaningful contact and this may require significant resources. As with any other community you must have a clearly defined perception as to what each party expects of the relationship.



Global Networking

Up until now this toolkit has largely dealt with local conditions but Geoparks are different from most local organisations in that they are part of an established international network with a high level heritage designation. Your involvement in the UNESCO Global Geoparks network and in the Drifting Apart project can be a valuable tool for community development if correctly managed. In particular the UNESCO brand has a strong reputation of being assigned to high quality visitor attractions of international significance.

This designation can of course be used for direct marketing of your Geopark but can also be used in conjunction with community groups to enhance the reputation of their area both as a potential tourist attraction and as a step towards community confidence building.

Joint initiatives with other Geoparks should also be considered as shared costs can often allow potential activities which might be beyond the financial resources of a single Geopark. The geographical distance between Geoparks does however make any kind of multi centre offer difficult to sell to any but the most enthusiastic. Only the most seasoned community campaigners are likely to want to cover the whole North Atlantic but there is certainly enormous scope for joint educational initiatives and cultural exchange.



Conclusions

If you have worked your way through this document you should now have a better idea about how you can interact with your local community and who your best potential partners might be. You also should be aware of what information those partners might ask you for and how you might be able to provide that information.

Over and above this you should also have examined your own community involvement strategy and looked at opportunities where you might feed into joint project or initiatives.

It may be that the principles outlined here are already part of your communities strategy but it is never a bad thing to re-examine such plans from a fresh perspective. Hopefully this document has encouraged you to do so.

