

JNCC fossil collecting policy statement

Conserving Our Fossil Heritage – a JNCC Policy Statement

- **Responsible fossil collecting**
- **Irresponsible fossil collecting**
- **Code of good practice**
- **Achieving positive management**



Photo: Ulster museum

Fossils are a key part of our natural heritage and form a major scientific, educational and cultural resource. They are fundamental to understanding the evolution of life and the character of ancient environments. Fossils also provide a basis for comparing the ages of rocks the world over.

The discovery, collection and study of the fossilised remains of ancient life can be enjoyable and stimulating activities that give people a fascinating insight into the geological and biological history of the Earth. However, the available fossil resource is finite. It is only through maintaining a prudent approach to the management of important fossil sites that future generations will be able to experience, study and enjoy this resource.

Responsible fossil collecting

In most circumstances, responsible fossil collecting is not harmful to the conservation of fossil sites. It can actually benefit our understanding of geology. This is particularly true where the fossils are relatively common or the sites in which they are found are subject to high levels of natural or artificial degradation, such as coastal cliffs that are being eroded or quarries that are being actively worked. In such situations collecting fossil specimens that might otherwise be destroyed can be beneficial to science, provided that they are properly documented and made available for study. Responsible fossil collecting can therefore be a valuable activity in the sustainable management and safeguard of our fossil heritage.

Irresponsible fossil collecting

Irresponsible collecting provides no scientific or educational gain and is therefore an unacceptable activity resulting in irreparable damage to our fossil heritage. It will pose a clear threat where fossils are rare or the fossil source is limited in extent, for example in a cave or a river channel deposit. Collecting without proper recording and curation, inexpert collecting, over-collecting and inappropriate use of power tools and heavy machinery are likely to reduce or even destroy the scientific value of such sites. Unless the activity is undertaken in an appropriate manner, the statutory nature conservation agencies, the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature, Environment and Heritage Service and Scottish Natural Heritage, will oppose fossil collecting on the small number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest / Areas of Special Scientific Interest where this activity would cause significant damage to the features of special interest.

Code of good practice

Adopting a responsible approach to collecting is essential for conserving our fossil heritage. The basic principles set out below should be followed by all those intending to collect fossils.

Access and ownership – permission to enter private land and collect fossils must always be gained and local bylaws should be obeyed. A clear agreement should be made over the future ownership of any fossils collected.

Collecting – in general, collect only a few representative specimens and obtain these from fallen or loose material. Detailed scientific study will require collection of fossils in situ.

Site management – avoid disturbance to wildlife. Many invertebrates and lower plants live on or under loose rocks that should be replaced in their original positions whenever possible. Do not leave the site in an untidy or dangerous condition for those who follow.

Recording and curation – always record precisely the locality at which fossils are found and, if collected in situ, record relevant details of the position of the rock layer from where the fossil was collected. Ensure that these records can be directly related to the relevant specimens. Where necessary, seek specialist advice on specimen identification and care. Fossils of prime scientific importance should be placed in a suitable repository, normally a museum with adequate curatorial and storage facilities.

Achieving positive management

In order to achieve the successful management of the fossil heritage of the United Kingdom, the statutory nature conservation agencies will:

- Promote the responsible approach outlined in the Code of Good Practice, above.
- Encourage the placement of scientifically important fossils into a suitable repository (such as a museum) in order to ensure their proper curation, long-term security and accessibility.
- Recognise the contribution that responsible fossil collectors can make to geological and palaeontological study.
- Encourage collaboration within the geological community to ensure that maximum educational and scientific gain is made from our fossil resource.
- Support and encourage initiatives that increase awareness and understanding of the value of our fossil resource and the need to conserve it.
- Increase awareness and understanding of the differing management needs of fossil sites. In particular, encourage landowners and occupiers to become advocates for conservation of the fossil resource.
- Review the need for export and import controls on the international trade in fossil specimens.

The JNCC is a committee of the Countryside Council for Wales, English Nature and Scottish Natural Heritage, together with independent members and representatives from the Countryside Commission and the Environment and Heritage Service, Northern Ireland. The Committee is supported by staff from the three British agencies.

Further information on conservation of geological sites can be obtained from Geological Conservation Review Publications Unit, JNCC, Monkstone House, City Road, Peterborough, PE1 1JY. Tel. 01733 62626, Fax: 01733 562626 and within these web pages.

October 1997