



UPDATE ON GEOCONSERVATION WORK

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Information note by Neil Ellis

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In March 2008, Joint Committee sought a paper to support discussion, as part of its strategy development, on achieving better integration of geoconservation with other aspects of nature conservation. As it has not yet been possible to progress this work to date, this paper provides Committee with an update on current work in progress. The work required by Committee will be taken forward during the year.

2. Geological Conservation Review (GCR)

- 2.1 The GCR project sets out to identify and describe the best geological and geomorphological sites in Britain, supporting the notification and conservation of geo-SSSIs. Dr Malcolm Vincent previously summarised this area of work: “The GCR remains a fundamental component of geoconservation effort in Great Britain, as does the Earth Science Conservation Review (ESCR) in Northern Ireland. The GCR is more than the publication of the GCR books, but about an active process of updating the site ‘register’ and promoting it through digital sources keeping up with developments of geological science, and providing site-related information for geoconservation purposes. With the constraints on JNCC's budget within the Corporate Plan, JNCC will concentrate on completion of the publication of the GCR volume series and, as far as resources allow, on providing access to site information electronically”.
- 2.2 With over three-quarters of the GCR series of books now published (34 volumes of the planned 45 are on the shelf and the remaining 11 are in advanced stages of preparation), the GCR continues to be definitive in terms of scientific excellence in geoconservation. The country conservation agencies and JNCC rely on this essential reference-source almost daily in support of site protection, monitoring and management. Committee may be interested in the recent ruling on the Easton Bavents GCR site, for example. This ruling concerned a test-case about coastal conservation. [The philosophical issue being: *Can you claim you are conserving something by letting it undergo erosion?*]. Natural England were able to defend the scientific case using GCR data and practical knowledge of coastal processes. The GCR scientific justification was adjudged to be completely sound by Justice Blair.

2.3 In the early part of the new financial year, 20 volumes of the GCR will be available freely on-line at www.thegcr.org.uk. An increase of a further 4 volumes on the 16 that are already published there, and a great boon to those who have sought GCR volumes that are out of print. "Fossil Reptiles" is one of the targeted volumes, a volume which has been out of print for several years.

3. UKGAP

3.1 In 2006/7, work was undertaken collectively by the country agencies, JNCC and other groups interested in geoconservation (such as the British Geological Survey and Regionally Important Geological and Geomorphological Sites (RIGS) groups, towards the development of a UK Geodiversity Action Plan (UK GAP). The UKGAP will provide guidance to local areas (typically at the county level) to promote and safeguard their geodiversity, and will form a framework that embraces geoconservation not only nationally, but also regionally and locally. The UKGAP provides a shared context and direction for geoconservation activity in the future. The UKGAP will facilitate partnership, influence decision- and policy-makers and funding bodies, as well as promote good practice that favours our geodiversity. A prototype website has just been launched and will be developed over time, and managed by JNCC. It will act as a focus for celebrating geodiversity, demonstrating the actions that need to be taken, and describing the developments as they take place. See www.ukgap.org.uk.

4. Geoconservation and the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies

4.1 The Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies include some of the most important and visually impressive geodiversity in the world. JNCC has a contract about to be completed that set out to investigate, summarise and characterise this geodiversity in a desk-based study. A preliminary report about (a) geoconservation value and (b) geoconservation priorities will be published on the JNCC website shortly.

5 Marine geoscience and geoconservation

5.1 As part of the need to assess marine conservation objectives, work has been underway to ensure that marine geodiversity is not ignored. The draft Marine Bill will provide for important geological and geomorphological areas to be protected through the mechanism of Marine Conservation Zones. The Irish Sea Pilot, undertaken during the Review of Marine Nature Conservation, tested out the feasibility of identifying important marine Earth heritage areas (for example, see <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/page-1616>), and concluded (after collating the available information) that they would fall into one or more of the following categories:

- i. marine extensions of existing coastal geological or geomorphological sites;
- ii. nationally important marine geological or geomorphological areas;

- iii. geological or geomorphological systems (e.g. estuarine systems, longshore systems, shelf-slope systems).

52 The Irish Sea Pilot concluded that the most appropriate approach to conserving marine geological features was: firstly to undertake a rapid review of the available literature and databases to identify important features; secondly, to combine geological features and biological communities within marine protected areas holistically in Marine Conservation Zones; and thirdly, to use the marine spatial planning mechanism (and licensing controls) to conserve features outside of protected areas. Work continues in this integration process.

6. Geodiversity and climate change

6.1 The relevance of climate change to geodiversity will be considered in a forthcoming seminar, being organised by several parties, including JNCC. At this stage the thinking is very much exploratory, and the audience will largely consist of specialists in geoconservation and those people with an understanding of the likely development of climate change in the future. We hope that the debate will help inform planning for future conservation. The day-long event will be held at the University of Chester on 4 June 2009 and will examine:

- i. the impacts of climate change on sites that are valued for their geological and geomorphological interests;
- ii. the implications for the future management of sites; and, in particular
- iii. how geomorphological processes in the wider landscape are likely to change .

6.2 A report of the meeting will be made available to Committee, and more widely, via www.geoconservation.com.

7 Earth Heritage magazine

7.1 JNCC provides editorial input, and financial management, but no direct funding, to this magazine (which has a circulation over 5000). The Chief Scientists Group has agreed at its last meeting that the magazine plays an important role in the dissemination of geoconservation work carried out by the agencies and it should continue. CSG has also agreed that the magazine should move more to an electronic format and away from the printed version. It should also seek sponsorship towards the cost of production. In order to advance the move to a digital dissemination method, there should be a question in the next paper edition which asks whether the reader would have a problem if there was a shift to such a format..