

A major achievement towards geoconservation

For the first time in its 60-year-long history, the IUCN incorporates the conservation of geological heritage and geodiversity in its agenda.

Despite the fact that geodiversity underpins natural systems and is an essential part of nature, geological heritage has traditionally been forgotten by the conservation movement, both by governments and by other organizations.

The General Assembly of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) took place in Barcelona (Spain) this last October 2008 within the framework of the Fourth World Conservation Congress. This international meeting takes place every four years, and at this opportunity the General Assembly of IUCN adopted a new resolution called “Conservation of geodiversity and geological heritage.” The adoption of this resolution attempts to put an end to the unjustified oblivion which all too often affects geodiversity. It initiates a new period to stop the loss of irreplaceable geological heritage. In other words, it is an attempt to avoid the continued loss of the memory of the Earth.



The General Assembly of IUCN during the World Conservation Congress at Barcelona

What is so special about this new resolution?

During the sixty years of history of the IUCN, the oldest and largest global environmental organization, most of its efforts have been towards the conservation of the biotic aspects of nature: species, habitats, ecosystems, biodiversity. However, the concept of nature conservation needs to be holistic: **natural diversity also includes abiotic aspects such as geodiversity and geological heritage, which also need to be considered when declaring and managing natural protected areas.**

The conservation of natural heritage must always focus on those most valuable, representative and vulnerable aspects, whether biotic or abiotic. However, there is an important difference: biotic elements (habitats, ecosystems and species) display certain resilience and may be able to recover from partial destruction, whereas **geological heritage is non-renewable and, once destroyed, it is absolutely unrecoverable.**

The resolution adopted by the General Assembly does not imply any big changes in strategies or budgets for IUCN, which might have been a drawback towards its adoption. Instead, its short-term objective (4 years) is to include geological heritage and geodiversity in the agenda of IUCN. In other words, it calls to begin talking about these issues, which includes acknowledgement that they exist and need to be dealt with. Specifically, **from now on, IUCN must design, organize and host workshops, seminars and conferences on the conservation and management of**

geodiversity and geological heritage. This would be similar to what has been done during the last decades in relation with the conservation and management of biodiversity, habitats and species. The long-term objective of this resolution is to incorporate the abiotic component of nature into conservation plans and strategies worldwide, so that the conservation of natural diversity and natural heritage is truly holistic and not just restricted to biotic aspects.

Who is behind this initiative?

The Commission on Geological Heritage of the Geological Society of Spain is responsible for the drafting of this motion and its proposal to the General Assembly of IUCN. This scientific society became a full member of IUCN in March 2008. During the months of April and May, the Commission received some input from ProGEO (the European Association for the Conservation of Geological Heritage) and WCPA (IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas) to improve its content. In late May, the motion got the required support from several IUCN members, and in early June it was submitted to IUCN for consideration by the General Assembly meeting at the World Conservation Congress. During the afternoon of Saturday October 11th, the motion was voted and adopted as a new resolution by the General Assembly of IUCN.

Why is geological heritage so important?

All we know about the evolution of life is "written" (recorded) in the rocks. The same is true for past climate changes as well as other phenomena taking place ever since the formation of our planet. If we lose access to the archive recording all the events that have happened in the past, and which is written in the big open book with the memory of the Earth (sediments and rocks), we will never be able to understand current climate processes and changes affecting the Earth.

Should we not worry about the archive containing our birth certificate or our genealogy tree? If this archive is lost or destroyed, future generations will always regret it. Similarly, we should worry about any threat or possibility of destruction of those most significant and representative geological elements of interest which record that information.

The scientific community is becoming more conscious about problems affecting geological heritage and is making efforts to educate society about them. However, management policies need support from nature conservation organizations, both governmental and non-governmental. That is why it is important that organizations with Earth-science background become members of IUCN. With its participation at the latest World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, the Geological Society of Spain has taken the first step in this direction, hopefully to be followed by many others.

The text of the resolution adopted by IUCN explains that geodiversity is the natural diversity of abiotic elements, features and processes, including minerals and rocks, fossils and meteorites, landforms and surface deposits, groundwater and fossil energy resources. Geodiversity is crucial because it underpins biological, cultural and landscape diversity. The methodology to quantify biodiversity was developed a few decades ago, and we now also have methods to quantify geodiversity. The text explains that geological heritage consists of a selection of those elements, features and processes with high interest or value (scientific, aesthetic, cultural, educational, etc.), and which must be preserved for future generations.

What is IUCN and why is this resolution so important?

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is the oldest and largest global environmental organization. It is a worldwide democratic institution with more than 1,000 member organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, and almost 11,000 scientific experts volunteering from more than 160 countries.

IUCN contributes to find pragmatic solutions to the world's environmental and development challenges. Its efforts go to support scientific research, manage projects throughout the world, and coordinate the work of governments, non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies,

businesses and local communities to develop and implement policies, legislation and best practices.

The Geological Society of Spain is now part of IUCN with the objective to contribute towards the conservation of geological heritage and geodiversity. The newly adopted resolution constitutes a major achievement towards geoconservation and is only the first step forward. Much work remains to implement and put in practice the contents of the resolution at all levels. To be able to do it, all professionals and organizations working on natural heritage conservation must also get involved in this effort.



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Internet links:

- Geological Society of Spain: <http://www.sociedadgeologica.es>
- International Union for the Conservation of Nature: <http://www.iucn.org>
- Original text of the motion: http://www.iucn.org/news_events/events/congress/assembly/policy/index.cfm
- First news on the resolution: <http://www.sociedadgeologica.es/documentosPDF/Terraviva01ingles.pdf>
(corrected for some errors)

Commission on Geological Heritage
Geological Society of Spain
December 2008

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