

THE 9TH EUROPEAN GEOPARKS CONFERENCE 2010

– Lisa King

INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF GEOPARK NETWORKS



The Global Geopark Network is a program under the auspices of UNESCO which focuses on the conservation of geological resources, sustainable development and geological education.

Being interested in UNESCO protected areas; I decided it would be educational for me to attend the 9th European Geoparks Conference to be held 1-5 October on Lesbos Island in Greece. The fact that the conference was going to be on a lovely Greek island in the northeastern Aegean Sea had absolutely nothing to do with my decision to present a paper, honest (cough).



Associate Professor Zouros (left) and Dr. Patrick Mc Keever of the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland, both key figures in the GGN.

According to the charter of the European Geopark Network (EGN), a geopark is a territory with a particular geological heritage of international significance and with a sustainable territorial development strategy. It must have clearly defined boundaries and a sufficient area to allow for true territorial economic development, primarily through tourism. Geological sites must be of international importance in terms of their scientific quality, rarity, aesthetic appeal and education value. Sites must be related to geology but may also have interests in archeology, ecology, history or culture. Specific sites within a geopark must be linked together in a network and constitute thematic parks, routes or trails that can benefit from protection and management measures.

The European Geopark Network (EGN) is actually a fast growing and dynamic network. The EGN began in 2000 with four founding geopark members and today, eleven years later, consists of 42 geoparks in sixteen European countries. Members to the EGN include the entire Shetland Islands known as Geopark Shetlands, Luberon Geopark in France, Eisenwurzen Geopark in Austria, Papuk Geopark in Croatia and Magma Geopark in Norway. The EGN is part of the larger

Global Geoparks Network which coordinates the different geopark networks around the world. Representatives from aspiring geoparks usually attend these meetings to increase support for their application to join the network.

Quite a few locations around the world with some great geology are working towards becoming geoparks such as Stonehammer in New Brunswick, Canada and sites in Romania, Brazil, France, South Korea, Poland, India, Russia and Turkey. Rio Tinto is even working with a community in Andaluca, southern Spain, to become a geopark.



New friends from Magma Geopark in Norway proudly displaying T-shirts touting their brand

THE EGN CONFERENCE – GOOD PEOPLE AND A GOOD TIME

The first day of the conference was held at the Municipal Theatre of Mytilene, right on the waterfront. The morning consisted of a welcoming address by Associate Professor Nickolas Zouros, one of the founders of the GGN network. The first keynote was given by Dr. Patrick Mc Keever of the Geological Survey of Ireland who gave a general overview of the European and Global Geoparks Networks.

Other keynotes included talks on UNESCO's involvement with geoparks and the potential for geotourism development in the Aegean archipelago. It was a good start to the day. Breaks were full with meeting new people and catching up with friends I had made while attending the GGN Conference in Langkawi, Malaysia.



Great sunset views of part of Mytilene from the town's Medieval Castle.

Lisa King (far right) beside one of the huge petrified logs scattered across the landscape



The afternoon consisted of single session talks revolving around the broader aspects of geopark development principles and geoconservation.

Saturday and Sunday were packed with two full days of presentations. Each day had four rooms of talks from which to choose. Several talks really stood out in my mind. Tamas Koruhely of Novohrad-Nograd Geopark gave an outstanding talk discussing how their group developed the brand identity for their transboundary geopark that lies both in Hungary and Slovakia. Marie-Louis Frey of Weltebre Grube Messel, Germany, gave a memorable presentation on World Heritage Sites in Geoparks.

One of my favourites was Murray Gray's talk on a classification of geoconservation methods. During his talk, he listed a variety of ways managers and others protect sites from using secrecy to signage, permits, supervision, benevolent land ownership and education. I found it thought provoking as I have increasingly become aware of some of the ways protected area managers publically 'fib' to protect particular sites.



A group of EGN delegates posing in front of the tallest standing tree trunk in Europe (Lisa in the second row towards the middle) with a circumference of 13.7m and a diameter of 3.7m

One of the conference's cultural events was an evening concert of Turkish folk music on the grounds of the Medieval Castle of Mytilene, and another was the field trip day to the Petrified Forest Park and the Natural History Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest

Now, honestly I wasn't expecting to be impressed by this petrified forest. I have visited the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona numerous times which contains one of the world's largest and most colourful concentrations of petrified wood. I just was not expecting this site to be as good, but

I was wrong. The Park contains a large number of standing petrified tree trunks with their root systems intact. Many are large sequoia trees, some with huge girths. The trail through the park was well marked and not overly signed. Our guides were well trained and quite informed. It was a really good experience.

About 20 million years ago, flows of pyroclastic material and ash covered the dense forests of Lesvos. Over time, much of the organic material became petrified. Perfectly preserved leaves, stems, roots and standing tree trunks are now protected inside the Park. Locals are even returning large pieces of petrified wood which were removed from the site before it was protected.

The next stop was the Natural History Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest. Now I don't know what I was expecting exactly, but it certainly was not a state-of-the-art multi-media museum in a very rural setting. This place had just about every amenity you could want. A view of the ocean, great small conference spaces, an outdoor amphitheatre (a new one, not one of those old ones that are scattered around Greece...) and thoughtfully designed interpretive displays and exhibits, videos and other materials to transmit themes across to international and local visitors.

The museum, as mandated by the philosophy behind geoparks, sold a wide variety of locally produced goods to visitors. Olive oils, honey, sponges, pastas, pottery, spirits and more was available in the Museum gift shop.

The last day of the conference consisted either of the final day of the 4th International Intensive Course for Evaluating Earth Heritage Management (for those that signed up) or another day of excursions. I had signed up for the course. While the EGN conference was really good, the intensive course unfortunately did not live up to the expectations of the majority of participants. However, a highlight of the course was a presentation by Ilias Valiakos who went over in detail the Global Geoparks nomination and review form and another presentation by Marie-Luise Frey on the business aspects of geoparks.

The next EGN conference will be held on 16-20 September 2011 at Gea Norvegica European Geopark in Langesund, Norway. The next Global Geoparks Conference will be held in Unzen Volcanic Geopark, Japan, in 2012.



EGN delegate watching a video presentation in one of the impressive museum galleries.