



Application of geosites assessment method in geopark context

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The regional natural park of the Monts d'Ardèche (Ardèche and Haute-Loire departments, France) is candidate to the European Geopark Network (EGN) in 2014. The area has a wide geodiversity - with rocks from Cambrian to Pleistocene (basalt flows) - and interesting features like phonolitic protrusions, maars and granite boulders fields. Around 115 sites were selected and documented through a geosites inventory carried out in the territory. This pre-selection was supervised by the Ardèche Geological Society and is therefore expert advice based.

In the context of EGN candidature, these potential geosites were assessed with a simplified method. It follows the spirit of the method from the University of Lausanne (Reynard et al., 2007) and its recent developments: assessment of the scientific (central) value and of a set of additional values (ecological and cultural). As this assessment aimed to offer a management tool to the future geopark's authorities, a special focus was given to management aspects. In particular, the opportunities to use the site for education (from schools to universities) and for tourism as well as the existence of protection and of interpretive facilities were documented and assessed.

Several interesting conclusions may be drawn from this case study:

- (1) expert assessment is effective when it is based on a pre-existing inventory which is well structured and documented;
- (2) even simplified, an assessment method is a very useful framework to expert assessment as it focuses the discussions on most important points and helps to balance the assessment;
- (3) whereas the inventory can be extensively detailed and partly academic, the assessment in the geopark context is objective-driven in order to answer management needs.

The place of the geosites assessment among the three key players of a geopark construction process (i.e. territory's managers, local geoscientists and EGN) is also discussed. This place can be defined as the point of consensus of needs and wishes of all stakeholders. For instance, the local geoscientists are most interested in conservation and scientific interests whereas managers aim to develop and promote the tourist (and economic) dimension. The definition and application of the assessment method is the outcome of constant discussion with both local key players; it therefore reflects and moderates the – sometimes antagonistic – interests. All the discussions around geosites assessment can be considered as the prime mover at local scale of the geopark construction process.

This example shows that geosites assessment can not be considered only as an academic operation, but also as an essential step to initiate a local dynamic and consensus that help to achieve some of the objectives of a geopark defined by EGN like local involvement, sustainable development, or cooperation with local communities.