

“Urban Fossils”: a project enabling reflections concerning human impact on planet Earth.

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Paleontology is taught in schools and is often the subject of documentaries and newspaper articles, mainly dealing with exceptional findings or exotic localities. As such, most students and adults have no opportunity to find real fossils in their daily lives, which is usually spent in urban environments. On the other hand, the projects of active dissemination of paleontology have to take into account the rules governing the collection of fossils and the fact that these are generally rare and not easily accessible. As geologists it is important to involve people in understanding the implications of this subject, by stimulating their involvement in current research. This is an occasion for us to be in touch with society and therefore to reflect on the values upon which we base our research projects.

In this framework, we agree that nowadays a geoethical approach to the geosphere-society relationship is necessary also to improve public awareness of the interactions between human activities and the geosphere.

“Urban Fossils” offers this opportunity: by actively reflecting on the processes enabling fossilization, nowadays and in the geological past, and by experiencing “fossil hunting” as an amusing search in urban environments, the project improves the awareness that mankind is an active “geological” agent impacting on our planet.

The idea of questing and registering traces of “past actions” recorded in asphalt and concrete pavements and roads (bottle caps and bolts, but also traces of humans and other animals, load left by scaffoldings etc.) stimulate the participants to reflect on fossilization processes, on the amount of information that fossils provide us, and on the huge impact of human traces on urban “soils”.

“Urban Fossils” started as a photographic project by Francesca Cirilli, and developed into a photo contest, a travelling exhibition, and a book.

The exhibition is composed of selected pictures and has been organized in collaboration with the project PROGEO-Piemonte and the Regional Museum of Natural History of Torino; starting from autumn 2015, it is hosted by several Italian museums of Natural History.

Since many of the “urban fossils” are ephemeral and doomed to destruction at “catastrophic” events (eg. maintenance of roads and sidewalks), a virtual collection (www.progeopiemonte.it) will preserve in time their photographs, allowing and promoting continue discussion on aspects of paleontology generally neglected outside the academia, such as ichnology and taphonomy, and on the traces that we, humans, will leave on planet Earth and will ultimately be buried in the Anthropocene rocks.

“Urban Fossils” is therefore an ongoing project, with a great interdisciplinary value, that represents an opportunity for both geoscientists and society to become more conscious of their role and responsibility in everyday life activities.