

The International Commission on Geoheritage (ICG) and the Heritage Sites and Collections Subcommittee (HSCS): A new global framework for advancing the science and practice of geodiversity conservation

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The ICG is a new Scientific Commission within IUGS, established at the 35th IGC, Cape Town, South Africa, in August 2016. The ICG incorporates two pre-existing Task Groups, on Geoheritage (TGG) and the Heritage Stones (HSTG), now transformed into, respectively, the Heritage Sites and Collections Subcommittee (HSCS) (<http://geoheritage-iugs.mnhn.fr>) and the Heritage Stones Subcommittee (HSS) (<http://globalheritagestone.com/>). Although the latter focuses on culturally significant geological heritage resources, its recognition and selection of Global Heritage Stone Resources (GHSR) demonstrates the close symbiosis that exists between the two Subcommittees.

The HSTG, however, will focus on those aspects of Geodiversity and Geoheritage associated with natural geological materials and processes, both in-situ (e.g. within 'geosites') and ex-situ in institutional collections - and hence, primarily facets of a natural rather than a cultural heritage. Although the foundations of an appreciation of this aspect of natural heritage conservation go back to at least the late 19th century, it was not until the 1980s that international collaborations began to develop, for instance in Europe, leading to the formation of ProGEO in Europe in 1993, with other groups, often focussed on specific tasks, developing in Africa, Australasia and within IUGS, UNESCO and IUCN. Nevertheless, until the GTG was formed in 2008, there had been no explicitly global focus for all aspects of geological heritage and its sustainable management.

The GTG began the process of building a global resource for Geoheritage sites and collections through the establishment of a comprehensive website, including a review of national conservation legislation, links to national geosite inventories (with interactive maps) and the beginnings of an inventory of 'Global Geosites' (a process first begun, abortively, in the 1990s in IUGS). The work of the GTG has confirmed within IUGS the significance of Geoheritage as a fundamental facet of Earth Sciences, crucially linking society to the science, and hence justifying the establishment of a full scientific commission. In parallel, the significance of geological heritage to society has been confirmed by UNESCO's establishment of its Global Geoparks Programme in 2015 and, in the context of the conservation of the natural environment, through IUCN's adoption of a Motion on the Conservation of Geodiversity and Geological Heritage in 2008 and a Recommendation on the Conservation of Moveable Geological Heritage in 2016.

The establishment of the ICG and the HSCS is, therefore, timely, as the new structure can provide an umbrella under which diverse national and international organisations and programmes can now meet and build partnerships in areas of common interest – at a global level. Areas of common interest include the development of national and global geosite inventories, the conservation of 'moveable' geological heritage and the conservation of landscapes, geological process and their memory, as 'geomorphosites'. Within these themes, the HSCS aims to promote collaborative activities, working together towards shared goals. The challenge is to ensure that we really can begin to influence policy and practice at a global scale through our new discipline of geoheritage, one which provides the strongest of connections between society and the geosciences.