

Taking Scotland's Geodiversity Charter forward: Tourism



Scotland has world-class geodiversity that underpins our landscape, biodiversity and culture. There is simply no other country of comparable size in the world with such diversity in rock types, ages and landscapes. Scotland can also rightfully claim to be birthplace of the geological sciences, through the work of James Hutton in the 18th century and many other subsequent advances in our understanding of how the Earth works. Scotland's geoheritage has significant potential to increase visitor numbers and enhance the visitor experience throughout the country, both as an attraction in its own right and through its links to cultural heritage, history, literature, outdoor sports, whisky and golf, for example. The UNESCO-endorsed award of Global Geopark status to Scottish Geoparks highlights this.

Our geodiversity and geoheritage could be more widely valued and appreciated, and to address this the Scottish Geodiversity Forum published Scotland's Geodiversity Charter in June 2012 - see scottishgeodiversityforum.org/charter/.

Geodiversity is the variety of rocks, landforms, sediments and soils, together with the natural processes that form and alter them. It is the link between biodiversity, landscape, people and their culture.

Geoheritage is those elements of our geodiversity that have significant scientific, educational, cultural or aesthetic value.

The Charter sets out why geodiversity is important, and presents a vision where geodiversity is recognised as an integral and vital part of our environment, economy, heritage and future sustainability to be safeguarded for existing and future generations in Scotland. There are suggested actions for different stakeholders and a range of case studies. The Charter has been well received and supported, with more than 50 organisations now signed up and working to support its vision.

This paper outlines how tourism organisations can work with the Forum and other partners to help implement the Charter. It has been prepared by the Charter Working Group, with representatives from the Scottish Government, British Geological Survey, Scottish Natural Heritage and Visit Scotland.

How awareness of our geoheritage can benefit the tourism industry

It is widely recognised that Scotland's scenery is a major draw for visitors, consistently listed as one of the main reasons for a visit. The front page of visitscotland.com puts it explicitly: "Come and discover Scotland, world-famous for its awesome scenery, vibrant culture and spectacular heritage". For many heavily-visited areas such as Glencoe, the Cairngorms, Loch Lomond, Skye and Iona, scenery is clearly one of the main attractions; but this is also undoubtedly true for Edinburgh, Stirling and many other popular destinations where the dramatic settings of the built heritage are intimately linked to geology.

However, we don't spend much time explaining Scotland's scenery. In publications, visitor centres, guided tours and websites, information about the scenery is usually quite superficial, and visitors seem quickly diverted to heritage, culture, food, legends, etc. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many visitors do want to know more, but find it hard to get good interpretation to which they can easily relate. And certainly where landscapes and geoheritage are promoted, such as in Scotland's three Geoparks, it is enjoyed and well-used.

Better understanding and awareness of geoheritage within the industry has great potential to deepen visitors' enjoyment and appreciation of Scotland and add value to their experiences. At the same time, human-interest stories about leading historical figures, such as James Hutton, Hugh Miller, or Ben Peach and John Horne in the Northwest Highlands, can help to enliven visitor engagement.

Geoheritage can therefore encourage people to stay longer in an area, or to go to areas that they might not normally visit. It can bring them back to explore more. Engaging with our geoheritage also leads to a much better appreciation of other heritage aspects, since it underpins biodiversity, land use, settlement, culture and the whole geography of Scotland.

Our soils and water provide the basis of the whisky industry; and our golf industry depends on the presence of largely natural landforms produced by glaciation, sea-level change and wind-blown sands. Geodiversity is particularly relevant to enhancing the visitor experience since it provides the 'stage' for many aspects of our cultural heritage and history. For example, Sir Walter Scott's novels and poetry are set against backgrounds that include the natural features of The Trossachs and the Hebrides; landscape art from John Knox and Horatio

McCulloch to the Colourists and James Morrison is founded on our geodiversity; poets such as Robert Burns, Sorley MacLean, Norman MacCaig and Hugh MacDiarmid drew inspiration from the landscape.

Scotland's rocks and landforms have been used by people through the ages, from brochs and standing stones to the building and roofing of Scotland's modern towns and cities. Use of local building materials contributes strongly to the sense of place across Scotland; as does the industrial heritage left by the extraction of the coal and oil that powered the industrial revolution.

More fundamentally, though, geodiversity has its own grand story to tell of Scotland's great journey across the face of the Earth over billions of years, encountering collisions of continents, volcanic eruptions, tropical seas, blistering deserts and great ice ages. This narrative can fascinate and entertain if landscapes and geological features can be translated by well-designed interpretation and talented, well-informed guides in much the same way as is done routinely for Scotland's biodiversity. Furthermore, if used judiciously in advertising, such stories could stimulate visitors to come to Scotland, or at least strengthen their reasons for wanting to do so.

There is also significant potential to cater for the specialist visitor, to put Scotland on the map as the must-see place for the global Earth science audience. This fits with the recent diversification of tourism in Scotland and the development of nature tourism and adventurous activities. Provision for specialist geotourism is currently limited, but independent travellers and groups are already coming to Scotland for example to visit famous sites associated with James Hutton, and explore the development of ideas on mountain-building in the Northwest Highlands Geopark, volcanism and glaciation in Lochaber Geopark and ancient oceanic crust in Geopark Shetland. Developments such as the International Appalachian Trail in Scotland will also encourage visitors to experience the many walking opportunities offered by our geodiversity. Walkers and cyclists on the new coast-to-coast John Muir Trail could better appreciate the landscape of central Scotland with some modest investment in interpretation.

With promotion and support, and building on existing Geopark accolades, Scotland could become the world's number one destination for geotourists: increasing total visitor numbers and encouraging visits to less frequented areas such as the Scottish Borders and Northwest Highlands. Geotourism is growing internationally with the development and promotion of the UNESCO-assisted Global Geoparks Network (www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/earth-sciences/global-geoparks) and the constituent European Geoparks Network (www.europeangeoparks.org). Opportunities for co-operation and collaboration between network members should help to stimulate additional visitor interest.

What needs to be done

Accommodation providers, local visitor centres

1. Become a champion of your local geoh heritage, learn about it and share this knowledge.
2. Provide information to visitors about local geoh heritage attractions and walks, and the links between the underlying bedrock, geological processes, landscape and culture (see www.scottishgeology.com/where-to-go/)

Tour operators, Blue Badge Tour guides

1. Become familiar with sources of further information, including apps, websites and local publications so that you can signpost these to visitors who want to find out more.
2. Include geoh heritage in training and CPD, particularly highlighting the wider contributions that geodiversity makes to many aspects of Scotland's scenery, culture, sense of place and biodiversity.
3. Look for opportunities to expand geotourism and offer tours that focus on Scotland's geoh heritage.

Vision: (a) Everyone working face-to-face with visitors is knowledgeable about Scotland's geodiversity and its fundamental role, and promotes this where appropriate. They know where to send people for further information. (b) Mainstream tour operators offer geodiversity-themed tours.

Existing visitor attractions and facilities

1. Add value to your visitors' experience by developing innovative and imaginative interpretation (not simply presentation of geological information) that offers new and memorable experiences for the visitor through links with the wider landscape and geoh heritage features, and how these have contributed to the attraction.
2. Include information about local building and monument stone and the historical stone industry.

3. Consult geoheritage specialists for help (e.g. Local Geoconservation Group, Scottish Natural Heritage - see www.scottishgeodiversityforum.org/whocanhelpt)

Landowners, land managers, mineral operators

1. Work with members of the geodiversity community to help promote appreciation and enjoyment of your landscapes and other geoheritage assets.
2. Where practical, provide safe public viewing points for working quarries.
3. Promote sympathetic restoration of landscape altered by extraction of minerals or other land uses.

Vision: Interpretation of attractions and sites includes as a matter of course accessible, imaginative and accurate interpretation of the associated geoheritage.

National organisations: Scottish Government, the Scottish Geodiversity Forum, Charter signatories, Visit Scotland, Geoparks

1. Promote Scotland's geodiversity, as an attraction in its own right and for its role in creating and supporting Scotland's distinctive character, scenery, biodiversity and culture. Promote the importance of local building materials in contributing to our built heritage and sense of place.
2. Develop a national portal where geoheritage information and interpretation is available in one place: including introductory material, local resources and links to relevant visitor attractions, museums, visitor centres, etc. Use the existing professional knowledge base (e.g. in governmental organisations, universities, Local Geoconservation Groups) to help translate difficult concepts into stimulating interpretation that visitors can appreciate and make sure that the information content is accurate and up-to-date.
3. Support training and promotion of best practice interpretation of geoheritage across the sector - for example through conferences, providing information for website and publications and contributing to tourism training.
4. Work with the media / documentary makers etc to encourage appreciation of Scotland's unique geoheritage as the foundation of our landscapes and a powerful influence on our cultural heritage.
5. Develop provision for geotourism and promote Scotland as a geotourism destination.
6. Develop and support an annual, national geoheritage festival.

Academic sector

1. Undertake research needed to establish the economic contribution and other benefits of geotourism, exploring existing provision and potential for expansion.
2. Get involved in implementing Scotland's Geodiversity Charter and supporting tourism organisations in their efforts to promote Scotland's geoheritage.

Vision: (a) The importance of Scotland's geoheritage is more widely appreciated, and relevant, up-to-date information is widely available. (b) Geotourism is an established strand of Scotland's tourism portfolio, with appropriate infrastructure in place to meet demand.

The Scottish Geodiversity Forum aims to promote Scotland's geodiversity, and seeks to widen the profile of geodiversity and influence national and local policies. It is the Scottish national forum for geoconservation groups, geoparks and other related organisations, and interested individuals. The Forum promotes the role and value of geodiversity in education, community involvement and health, the development of tourism and the wider economy.

The Forum is open to all organisations and individuals who are interested in promoting Scotland's geodiversity and the sharing of experience and good practice. Our website is www.scottishgeodiversityforum.org.

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