

The 'geopark' initiative

The Second UNESCO International Conference on Geoparks, was recently held during 17–21 September 2006, at Belfast, Northern Ireland. It was attended by participants from 40 countries, apart from officials from UNESCO, IUCN, IUGS, and other geoheritage conservation agencies, academicians, researchers, geopark staff and those interested in geoconservation popularization of geosciences and geotourism. The 'geopark' concept is a rapidly growing one, more so because of a growing consciousness among humankind worldwide for protecting nature, especially georesources. This has precipitated into the birth of the 'geoparks' movement in some of the European Union countries in the year 2000, followed closely in China, paving way for creation of the 'European Geoparks Network', 'National Geoparks of China' and 'National Mineparks of China'. In early 2004, during an international meeting held at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, a decision was taken by UNESCO to provide support to certain national geoparks, thereby paving the way for the creation of a new network, named as the 'Global Geoparks Network' (GGN). The aim of the GCN is to promote high quality standards in park services, the sharing of common strategies and best practice geoconservation, geoscience education and geotourism development. The GGN works in close synergy with UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) World Network of Bio-

sphere Reserves, national and international undertakings and NGOs active in geological heritage conservation. As of date, there are 50 approved members affiliated to the GGN, of which 18 belong to China alone.

A 'geopark' is a nationally protected area containing a number of geological heritage sites of particular importance, rarity or aesthetic appeal. A 'geopark' achieves its goal through a three-pronged approach, viz. conservation (a 'geopark' seeks to conserve significant geological features, and explore and demonstrate methods for excellence in conservation), education (a 'geopark' organizes activities and provides logistic support to communicate geoscientific knowledge and environmental concepts to the public, through various modes), and tourism (a 'geopark' stimulates economic activity and sustainable development through geotourism, and encourages the creation of local enterprises and cottage industries involved in geotourism and geoproducts).

In India, the Geological Survey of India (GSI) has already done the groundwork for the setting up of 'geoparks', by identifying 26 geosites. This has been published in a book titled *National Geological Monuments* during GSI's 150-year Anniversary celebration in 2001. In addition, the official website (www.gsi.gov.in/geotour/main.htm) also contains a section on 'geotourism', wherein the above information is displayed. Such geosites are indeed the primary ingredients of any

prospective 'geopark', which can be set up in India, in the future. But going by the 'geopark' criteria, the above list cannot be termed as a comprehensive one, but only an indicative one. Several other geosites can be identified along the length and breadth of the country, including the northeastern region. From the caves of Meghalaya to the snow-capped landscapes of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, from the coal and petroleum horizons of eastern Assam, Majuli group of river islands in Middle Assam to the archaeological remains of Sri Surya Pahar in western Assam, all these sites can form important prospective units of an 'Indian Geopark Network' in the northeastern region of India.

It is high time that different stakeholders like the GSI, ASI, the Union Ministry of Earth Sciences, the Union Ministry of Tourism and Culture, various other geoscience organizations, academicians, professional geologists, NGOs, intelligentsia, as well as all those interested in opening up new frontiers in Indian economy through 'earthly means', coordinate with each other, so that we do not have to wait too long to catch up with a concept which is already six years old.

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