

GOALS AND TASKS OF THE BULGARIAN GEOCONSERVATION

The main goal of the Association for Preservation of the Bulgarian Geodiversity, according to its statutes, is *“To uphold and implement the principles of the International Geosciences and Geoparks Program (IPGG) of UNESCO on the territory of the country”*. In accordance with the IPGG recommendation to establish National Geoparks Commissions in the member states (recognized by the respective National Commissions for UNESCO), among the main goals is also to develop a National Strategy for Protection of the Bulgarian Geodiversity including establishment of a National Geoparks Committee, which will coordinate the activities for the development and management of Bulgarian geoparks.

History of Bulgarian geoconservation

The following main stages have been outlined in the development of Bulgarian geoconservation since the nineties:

- 1996-1998: Integration of the Bulgarian geological community in the European efforts to assess the geological heritage, including hosting the ProGEO conference in 1998, at which the UNESCO Geoparks Initiative was officially announced;
- 1999-2003: Development of a Register and Cadastre of the Bulgarian Geological Phenomena on behalf of the Ministry of Environment and Waters;
- 2007-2010: Creation of a website with data on the most famous Bulgarian geosites on a project by the Ministry of Education and Science.
- 2000-present: Popularization of the Bulgarian geological heritage through public campaigns and publications in our country and abroad.
- 2002-present: Development of geoparks in territories with remarkable geological heritage: Iskar Gorge (2002, 2018-present), Belogradchik Rocks (2009-2015), Rila (2014-present), East Balkan (2022-present), Pomorie (2023-present).

The analysis of the period after the announcement of the GEOSITES (Anon., 1995) and GEOPARKS (UNESCO Geoparks Programme, 1999) programs with the inclusion of Bulgarian geoconservation in the ProGEO initiatives, imposes the following main conclusions:

- Geological heritage has enormous potential for stimulating the local economy and ensuring sustainable development of regions through geotourism and other forms of sustainable tourism;
- Mass campaigns such as “The New Seven Natural Wonders of the World”, “The Wonders of Bulgaria”, etc. show that the Bulgarian vote gives clear priority to geological heritage over cultural and spiritual heritage;
- Geological landmarks, as a rule, remain outside the state measures for economic stimulation of tourist destinations, at the expense of cultural and historical heritage sites;
- The rich experience accumulated over the past 25 years can be used for the global promotion of natural landmarks in Bulgaria.

Tasks of Bulgarian geoconservation

In order to use the achievements in inclusion in the global geoconservation values and to make a successful transition to the global legitimization of the Bulgarian geological heritage, the Association sets itself the following tasks:

- To bring out as a national priority the promotion of the Bulgarian geological heritage, which is a national treasure;
- To turn the development of geotourism, which is a successfully oriented business sector providing a high degree of return on investment, into a national priority;
- To attract the attention of responsible institutions for targeted stimulation of local initiatives for geotourism development;
- To do everything possible to establish through the Law on Protected Areas the new categories “geotope” and “geopark”.
- To make efforts to include regions with famous geological landmarks among the priorities of the operational programs for regional development.

Mission and strategy of Bulgarian geoconservation

Mission: Preservation of the Bulgarian geological heritage in accordance with the principles of the International Program for Geosciences and Geoparks (IPGG) and its use for improving the socio-economic condition of the regions through geotourism.

Strategic tasks:

- Implementation of the IPGG policy on the territory of Bulgaria through the two main activities set out in its statute: the International Program for Geosciences and UNESCO Global Geoparks;
- Updating the Register and Cadastre of the Bulgarian Geological Phenomena;
- Expanding the national list of geosites through scientific description and expert assessment of new sites;
- Developing a national network of geoparks and their nomination to UNESCO Geoparks;
- Developing visitor centers in small and medium-sized settlements with museum collections of rocks, minerals and fossils, and illustrative materials on the local geology.

Based on the prospects for the development of the Bulgarian economy, it seems that the future of our geology will be more closely related to tourism than to prospecting and exploration of minerals. An integrated approach to solving the problems of society requires mobilizing the efforts of experts from different fields of knowledge and economics. The development of geotourism in Bulgaria, which is in its initial stage, requires enormous efforts and resources. A prerequisite for the implementation of this economically important step for the country is in the hands of APBG, whose mission is to inform the wide public about the enormous potential of geotourism as a successful and rapidly developing new tourism business sector.

The legalization of the new category of protected area “Geopark” and the development of geoparks throughout the country will provide new jobs and introduce Bulgarian geology into a new role - stimulating the socio-economic development of the regions through geotourism. The orientation of national and natural parks towards the protection of geological phenomena may prove to be a turning point in creating a constant need for qualified experts in the field of

geotourism, educated in management, protection and promotion of geodiversity. The implementation of the strategic tasks of Bulgarian geoconservation will bring the country global promotion of its natural landmarks and will contribute to attracting a year-round tourist flow from all continents of the world.