

**6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Global Geoparks  
19 to 22 September 2014**

**Saint John, 19 September 2014**

**Address**

**Opening ceremony**

**Honorable Jean-Pierre Blackburn**

**Ambassador and Permanent Delegate  
of Canada to UNESCO**

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to be with you today. It is an honor to welcome the Global Geoparks community here in St. John. This is a tremendous occasion for most of us to become familiar with the first Global Geopark in Canada, Stonehammer, and but also with the larger concept of geoparks. In this sense, I would like to sincerely thank the organizers for bringing us together and for developing a very thoughtful and a most promising programme.

I am not an expert in geology or in the management of geoparks. I am not going to venture to give you advice on what makes a successful geopark. As Canada's ambassador to UNESCO for three years, I feel more comfortable to share with you the main objectives of the Organization and my analysis of the benefits and risks brought by an association with UNESCO.

In fact, the patronage of UNESCO for this conference is most appropriate given that the objectives of the Global Geoparks Network (GGN) are in line with those of UNESCO. UNESCO is a specialized agency of the United Nations with a very ambitious mission. What is this mission? To contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue. By which means? Through education, science, culture, communication and information. The Organization works globally by setting norms and standards, and serving as a laboratory of ideas. It also acts at the national level by providing guidance and advice to its member states for the development and implementation of policies and to develop human and institutional capacities.

To deliver on its mission in favor of promoting sustainable development, UNESCO cannot operate only at the international level. Local communities must also be actively engaged in conceptualizing, planning and leading initiatives at the territorial level aiming at an economic development which respects heritage, nature, and local cultures.

With a regular budget of about \$ 250 million per year, 1,400 employees and 195 Member States, UNESCO obviously does not have enough money to meet all needs in its five areas of competence. UNESCO rather aims to strengthen international and regional cooperation in its fields of competence, and promoting alliances and networking, intellectual cooperation, knowledge sharing and partnerships.

The strength of the Organization is largely due to its vast network of partners worldwide. This is why the new UNESCO medium-term strategy focuses on strengthening partnerships and getting closer to the field.

A network of quality, well established in the field, such as the Global Geoparks Network is a natural partner for UNESCO. With high standards and rigorous periodic monitoring by the geological community, the Global Geoparks Network is built on a solid foundation, with committed members. The network currently enjoys great independence, which allows it to be challenging and rigorous in the establishment and renewal of the

accreditation of its Geoparks. These Geoparks are located in parts of the world enjoying a good socio-economic level as well as solid infrastructure and expertise. And the network can rely on strong institutional and scientific support, including the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Let's ask ourselves the question: Can the success of the European and Asian networks be replicated in other regions of the world? Promoting the expansion of the network in all regions of the world while maintaining the highest quality standards is a major challenge. By partnering with UNESCO, the Global Geoparks Network gains access to all 195 member states of the Organization. This is therefore a wonderful opportunity to promote the concept of Geoparks and its values on all continents. The network, which is still very Eurocentric, can only be enriched by contact with these communities. This is already the case in view of exchanges between the European and the Asian Network Geoparks Networks. This was the experience of Canadian Biosphere Reserves that had the opportunity to share their expertise with African Biosphere Reserves.

To ensure implementation at local levels, UNESCO has largely relied on its designated UNESCO Heritage Sites and Biosphere Reserves, which merit to be better known for their inspiring and innovative work. Interestingly, several of these UNESCO sites were designated partly based on their unique geological features. Closeby, Joggins World Heritage Site is of course a magnificent example of fossil records, and the designation of the first UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Canada, Mont St-Hilaire, was partly justified by its exceptional mineral diversity in a small area.

We must recognize that the "UNESCO" label has become very prestigious, mainly through the World Heritage Convention which radiates around the world with more than 1,000 sites on the List. It is the same with Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB), which includes 631 Biosphere Reserves in 119 countries. Similarly to Geoparks, these two other UNESCO networks of excellence also strive to promote conservation of unique natural features, public education, and sustainable economic development. The potential for synergies among these programmes and the GGN therefore appears obvious.

To successfully integrate the Global Geoparks Network in UNESCO, it is becoming important and appropriate to learn from these two flagship programmes which, it must be said, are victims of their own success. The working group that examined the draft guidelines took up the challenge by reflecting the strengths of the GGN while addressing potential problems identified through the experience of the other two networks. Indeed, the draft guidelines retain the criteria and processes for selecting and renewing designated sites which have made the success of the Global Geoparks Network, but also take into account the political and financial requirements of an intergovernmental organization.

If Member States have understood the value of obtaining "UNESCO" designations, they are not necessarily willing to invest considerable resources in a secretariat based in Paris or to guarantee the long-term quality of the designated sites. Geoparks are

therefore well advised to continue to finance themselves in order not to depend on the funding of UNESCO.

It should be acknowledged that the notoriety brought by the UNESCO label increases the possibility that the number of sites can increase very quickly, and it may be impossible for UNESCO, with its very limited resources, to meet all the expectations of its member states and its partners. For example, the World Heritage Centre, with 24 employees, and the MAB Programme Secretariat with 10 staff are no longer able to meet all requests. And the UNESCO budget is insufficient to strengthen these secretariats that compete with other programmes deemed equal priority by Member States.

Another element should also be considered: UNESCO is primarily an intergovernmental organization. This implies that governments are the key decision makers and thus political considerations sometimes come to influence decision-making. And as demonstrated by the experience of World Heritage sites or that of the MAB program, expert opinion can sometimes be put aside in favor of political considerations. Or states can use an application to support a territorial dispute. This poses a huge risk to the reputation of the entire network.

At UNESCO, it has proven very difficult to remove the designation of a site that no longer meets the criteria. States are reluctant to offend another state. And even when a national committee wishes to withdraw accreditation, sometimes the international committee does not follow this recommendation.

Moreover, as several UNESCO designations exist, it is important for each to maintain its identity to avoid confusion. It is for this reason that Canada has joined other member states at the General Conference to request UNESCO to identify possible ways to protect and enhance brand recognition of Biosphere Reserves, World Heritage properties and Global Geoparks. We also believe that it is in the Global Geoparks Network interest to clearly identify how UNESCO and its multidisciplinary approach can help support the continuous success of Geoparks.

In Canada, the proximity of Fundy Biosphere Reserve, which shares some of its boundaries with Stonehammer Geopark, offers a wonderful opportunity to identify potential synergies between the different UNESCO designations. We must also reflect on what contribution Geoparks can make to the UNESCO's strategic objectives and determine how UNESCO's involvement will contribute to the success of Geoparks. Considering the involvement of a large multitude of groups in the Global Geoparks Network, including you researchers, governmental and private sector representatives, it appears that at this 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Geoparks, we are heading, with UNESCO, in a very promising direction.