

Proposal for a new online geosites register: a collaborative project led by the Geological Society and the UK Minerals Forum.

Background

In the first of what is hoped will be a series of meetings with a range of geoscientific organisations, Nic and Judi met with Brian Marker and Lester Hicks of the UK Minerals Forum (UKMF) on 11 May 2016.

An aim of the Geological Society is to work with others to bring together geoscience information and resources in an accessible format, and also to use the networks of the organisations that we partner with to promote these materials to audiences including students, teachers and the general public.

The Minerals Forum began in 2007, and is funded by the CBI Minerals Group. It includes a wide range of onshore extractive industries (but not oil and gas). Its membership is varied and includes bodies such as Natural England, the National Trust and the CPRE; industry specialists; and individuals (for instance from BGS). Following a UKMF Working Group that reported in 2011, an initiative on minerals education in schools was launched. The UKMF is keen to counter negative public perception that has arisen around the subject of minerals extraction and would like to support delivery of Earth science topics within the National Curriculum. Their focus is the early stages of secondary education (KS3).

Outline proposal

We discussed the idea that we might join with the UKMF, and potentially with bodies in other Earth science sectors (e.g. oil and gas, engineering geology, hydrogeology, environmental geoscience) to produce an online directory of field sites suitable for school groups to visit. This would link to resources (teaching and learning materials, information about access and required equipment, etc), local geological experts, organisations and community groups. The Geological Society is currently developing a schools visits scheme, to match geoscientists willing to visit schools to talk about our science with schools looking for such speakers, and to provide resources to support such visits. We expect the proposed field sites project to complement this initiative, and in due course to be integrated with it, providing schools with access to speakers, field sites and supporting resources across the geosciences.

There are several existing sources of information about sites which may be suitable for school visits. These include designated RIGS and SSSI sites; the Geological Society's 100 Great Geosites (including the longlist of nominated sites); information held by UKMF on UK quarries and mines (some disused and some unknown outside the sector); the BGS database on mines and quarries; information held by the Geologists' Association; information gathered on Geoparks; and the plentiful material available through various organisations on well-known areas such as the Antrim and Jurassic coasts.

This could become an important way of identifying and advertising accessible field sites to schools, particularly in urban areas or parts of the country that currently might be labelled geological 'deserts'. In terms of the work of the Education Department, such a resource would be the next major Geological Society online project.

Suggested schedule

1. Data gathering/auditing phase

Look at the existing registers and information sources to assess the depth and coverage over the UK that we have with respect to geological sites. The list of potential collaborators should include: RIGS groups and SSSI site managers, BGS, UGUK, Geoconservation Committee, ESTA, GA, Jurassic and Antrim coast teams, the Field Studies Council, and the Geoparks. The Geological Society will also start conversations with other sector-specific organisations (e.g. PESGB, Ground Forum, Groundwater Forum).

This stage will involve talking to representatives of all the above organisations and forming a Working Group. Some time (3/4 months?) should be allowed to collect and collate the findings.

2. Joining up the data - 'mapping' connections

The data gathering phase will show which areas within the UK are rich in sites and resources, and will also highlight the areas with less geology on offer, the geological 'deserts', where extra effort will be needed to identify sites. Both the geologically 'busy' areas and the deserts will need appropriate handling. The busy spots and the associated resources need presenting simply and clearly to avoid information overload by visitors; the deserts can be enhanced through the addition of urban or graveyard geology, or perhaps hitherto poorly documented old quarries or industrial sites. We could adopt the aim that 'no secondary school is further than 10 miles from a fieldtrip,' for instance.

3. Select a region to be the 'test area'.

The area selected should be one of those that lacks well-known geological sites and resources at the moment. We may decide to look at a location with mines or quarries that have not been advertised as available for visits; as well as identified but undeveloped SSSI or RIGS sites. The purpose of this small scale exercise would be to:

- Establish what is achievable given staff/funding constraints
- See what the output might look like
- Ensure that health and safety matters and liability have been carefully considered
- Determine the cost of rolling this out as a full UK version

Judi will look at the North Yorkshire Potash Project as a useful starting point.

Funding

This project could be started almost immediately at minimal expense - promoting the concept and speaking to stakeholder organisations will simply involve staff time. However further development, even at the pilot project stage, will start to incur costs. Website development work is expensive, and any new signage at field sites will require funding as well.

It is therefore suggested that sponsorship from a variety of sources, linked to the geographic area or type of sites revealed by the mapping exercise (stage 2) are sought. Smaller amounts from local businesses, that can then be used to directly benefit that community, might be the best way to approach fundraising.

Judi Lakin

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