

## 9<sup>th</sup> European Geoparks Conference – Lesvos, 1-5 October 2010

Focused on “Learning from the Past – Building a Sustainable Future”, the 9<sup>th</sup> European Geoparks Conference held in Lesvos, at the premises of the University of the Aegean in Mytilene, highlighted topics related to the promotion and protection of natural monuments and the development of quality tourism. The Conference was attended by 350 delegates from 41 countries, among which were representatives of UNESCO, the European and Global Geoparks Networks, the International Union of Geological Sciences, the International Geographical Union and the International Union for Conservation of Nature, academics and members of scientific institutes, as well as representatives of the state and local authorities of Greece and many other countries.



The Conference was the largest in the history of Geoparks, during which 10 keynote talks were given, 138 papers were presented orally and 12 on posters. Attendance exceeded all previous in terms of country representation and of presentation quality. In particular, the speakers came from several European countries, i.e. Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Norway, Poland, Romania, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and United Kingdom, but also from Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iran, Korea, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Uruguay, and Vietnam. The 9th European Geoparks Conference was organized under the auspices of UNESCO, after a decision by the Director-General Irina Bokova. The conference was co-organized by the Lesvos Petrified Forest and the Geography Department of the University of the Aegean, and was supported by the Greek Ministry of Culture

and Tourism and the General Secretariat for the Aegean and Island Policy. In particular, the issues that the 24 Conference sessions dealt with were: the development of Geoparks in Europe and globally, the role of geoparks in the protection of geological heritage, the impact of climate change and the role of geoparks in its understanding, the development of geotourism, the economic benefits and local development, the promotion of geological heritage and communication to the public, presentation and promotion of Geoparks as a quality tourist destination, the future of Geoparks. In the five thematic symposia proposals were sought on the economic dimension of Geoparks, on the management of geological heritage and the services offered to visitors during their visit to a Geopark.

### **First day of the Conference in the Municipal Theatre of Mytilene**

After their registration and the warm welcome by Assoc. Prof. N. Zouros, President of the Conference's Organising Committee and Director of the NHMLPF, and Prof. A. Kelepertzis, President of the Directorial Board of the NHMLPF, on the first day of the Conference, 1<sup>st</sup> October, the participants could follow three sessions with 5 key-note talks by Dr. P. McKeever (UNESCO Geoparks Bureau Member & EGN Vice-Coordinator), Dr. M. Patzak (representative of UNESCO), Prof. D. Mountrakis (Professor of geology in the Geology Dept., Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece), Dr. G. Martini and Dr. M.L. Frey (UNESCO Geoparks Bureau Members) and C. Eckhardt (Bergstrasse-Odenwald Geopark, Germany) and nine 20-minute oral talks, in the Municipal Theatre of Mytilene. The oral presentations in the three opening sessions had themes related with: Geoparks-Global strategy for Geoconservation and Sustainable Development, Geoparks-Aspect Diversity, Principles on Geopark Development and they were given by a very international group of speakers, coming literally from the four corners of the world (China, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Spain, United Kingdom).



### **Opening Ceremony**

The official opening ceremony of the Congress was held in the Municipal Theatre of Mytilene in the evening of the 1<sup>st</sup> October. The ceremony was attended by the Greek Deputy Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Change, N. Sifounakis, the Deputy Mayor of Mytilene Mr. P. Paterellis, the Vice Rector of the University of the Aegean and Professor in the Geography Dept. Dr. N. Soulakellis, the representative of UNESCO's Division of Ecological and Earth Sciences Dr. Margarete Patzak, the Vice President of the International Union of Geological Sciences Prof. Jacques Charvet, the Head of the World Heritage Programme at the International Union for Conservation of Nature Tim Badman.

The Deputy Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Change, N. Sifounakis, opening the conference, referred to the need for enhancement of natural and geological monuments and

the efforts of the Greek state for the promotion of the Lesvos Petrified Forest. He also referred to the contribution of UNESCO's Global Geoparks Network and the European Geoparks Network for the promotion and protection of our natural heritage, since "...geoparks study the past and face the future..." , as he stated. The next speaker, representative of UNESCO, Dr. Margarete Patzak, stressed the importance of Geoparks to the protection of natural heritage and the development of local communities. For UNESCO, the operation of the European Geoparks Network is an example for developing similar networks in other continents. Following, the Vice President of the International Union of Geological Sciences, Prof. Jacques Charvet, stressed that geoparks are an excellent opportunity for cooperation between the scientific community and local communities for the enhancement of natural resources and utilization of the potential of local communities. The last speaker, Dr. Patrick McKeever, Vice Coordinator of the European Geoparks Network, referred to the role of the European Geoparks Network for the promotion of protected natural monuments and its contribution to the development of quality tourism throughout Europe, and stressed that Lesvos is a perfect example of successful development for all Geoparks, both in Europe and worldwide. Wishes for the success of the Congress were sent by the General Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Ms. L. Mendoni, the General Secretary of the North Aegean Region, Ms. S. Theologitou, and the Rector of the University of Aegean, Prof. of Tourism at the Business

Administration Dept., Dr. P. Tsartas.

During the opening ceremony, a special celebratory event was held, as this year marks 10 years since the establishment of the European Geoparks Network, and special certificates were awarded to the 42 members of the Network by the Deputy Minister Mr. N. Sifounakis.

The evening closed with the Conference's official dinner, in a local taverna, where the guests could taste the delicious local delicacies.



### **Two days of presentations, forums and symposia in the University of the Aegean**

The two days that followed, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> October, were very eventful. On the second Conference day, three parallel oral presentation sessions were held, in three different amphitheatres of the Geography Dept. of the University of the Aegean.

In Room 1, two keynote presentations were given, by Dr. Ibrahim Komoo (UNESCO Geoparks Bureau Member and Asia Pacific Geoparks Network Coordinator) and Denise Gorfinkiel (UNESCO Program Officer for Earth Sciences in the Latin American and Caribbean).

Subsequently, 18 interesting talks were given, separated in 3 sessions, all presenting Aspiring Geoparks all around the world (Brazil, Canada, Chile, France, Greece, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Vietnam).

In Room A, a keynote presentation was given by Kristin Rangnes (Gea Norvegica Geopark). Afterwards, 14 20-minute talks were presented, separated into 3 sessions, related with Geoparks and International collaboration, Geoparks-Interpretation and Communication, Geoparks and Climate adaptation. The speakers presented examples of collaboration among geoparks, which are usually based on common features between the two parts and target to a

common goal; also examples of good practise of communicating geoheritage and geodiversity in various geoparks were given. Finally, three interesting talks presented how the “hot” issue of our century, climate change, can be presented to public aiming to raising awareness.

In Room C, a keynote presentation by Assis. Prof. I. Spilanis and L. Vayanni (Dept. of Environmental Studies, University of the Aegean) was followed by 16 20-minute talks on Best practices in geoconservation and sustainable development, Geoparks and nature tourism development, Geoparks, local participation and sustainable development.

In parallel to the Conference’s three different session groups, in the frames of the Conference, an Educational Forum was taking place in the Marine Sciences Amphitheatre of the University of the Aegean. During the whole day, 18 talks were given, separated into three sessions on Environmental education, Educational programs on abiotic nature and Geoparks and environmental education.

In the halls of the Geography Dept., during the whole day, 12 posters were presented, with a variety of themes, all related with Geoparks, local development and tools of earth sciences interpretation.

In the evening of this busy day, after the presentations in the university, the participants were invited to the Medieval Castle of Mytilene, the largest of its kind in the eastern Mediterranean area. There, they were welcomed by Dr. C. Loupou, Chief Archaeologist of the 14<sup>th</sup> Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities, and they were guided through the impressive monument. The surprise of the evening and best way to close a very tiring day was a concert, inside the castle, by the “Santouria of Agiassos”, presenting Greek traditional music from the area of the east Aegean and the coasts of Asia Minor.

The following day was equally eventful and busy. In Room 1 of the Geography Dept., a keynote speech was given by Dr. M.L. Frey (Director of the World Heritage Site Messel Pit, Germany) on the role of World Heritage Sites in Geoparks for the sustainable development. Afterwards, 20 talks were given, during which remarkable and unique aspiring geoparks were presented to the participants.

In parallel, in Room A, 15 talks were presented, on Research in Geoparks, proving that a great part of current geological, geographical, geo-conservational knowledge is produced within areas of geoparks, by their scientific staff.

In Room B of the Geography Dept., 11 talks were presented, all of them related with Best practives in management, geotourism and education within Geoparks. Finally, in the Marine sciences Amphitheatre, 12 oral presentations were given, focused on Geoconservation policy and practices and Evaluating Earth heritage.

In the afternoon of the same day, six different Symposia were organised, each one dedicated to one Thematic Network. After small introductions by the organizers of the Thematic Networks, member contributions and discussion followed on: Coastal Geoparks, Geoparks and Fossils, Glacial-Periglacial Geoparks, Mining Geoparks, Tectonic-Alpine Geoparks and Volcanic Geoparks. Very interesting ideas and suggestions were arisen, strengthening the collaboration among the members of the Geoparks Networks.

### **Impressed by the Lesbian natural and cultural heritage**

During their stay, the participants had the opportunity to participate in two field trips around the island, during which they visited protected areas and parks of the Lesvos Petrified Forest, as well as other impressive geotopes of Lesvos (e.g. the volcano of Lepetymnos, the Vatoussa caldera, the volcanic centres of Eressos and Mesotopos, the columnar lavas of Ordymnos, the

volcanic neck of Petra, the Agia Paraskevi fault) and important nature reserves of the island (e.g. the Gulf of Kalloni, important wetland where 68 bird species can be found).

They were also guided to many cultural monuments of the island, such as the archaeological site of Mesa, where they discussed the use of geological research in the identification of monument structural materials, the Museum of Industrial Olive-Oil Production in Agia Paraskevi, the church of the Archangel in Mantamados, the castle of Molivos, the church of Virgin Mary in Petra and Byzantine monasteries of the island.

The delegates were welcomed to the NHMLPF in Sigrí by the President of the Local Sigrí Council and member of the Directory Board of the NHMLPF, Mr. A. Athanasiadis. During their visit to the Museum, the delegates were informed about the Museum's activities regarding fossil research and conservation, environmental education and natural heritage promotion, and they had the chance to experience the results of the Museum's contribution to geotourism development in the area.

The participants, many of whom are specialists in themes regarding conservation and promotion of natural resources, noted the very high level of the existing infrastructure, but also the exemplary promotion tools of the Lesvos Petrified Forest; they acknowledged that great potential for the development of quality tourism in Lesvos is offered through the multi-level action of the NHMLPF. They indicated that the uniqueness of the monument worldwide can offer much more to the development of the island, however for this purpose the promotion within the scientific community is not enough, but the communication and interpretation of the Lesvos Petrified Forest to the wider public is required, since the impressive geo-monument possesses all the potential required for be establishment not only of Lesvos but also of Greece as a major tourist attraction. They further acknowledged the progress made in recent years, with the completion of the permanent exhibitions of the Museum, and highlighted the uniqueness of the Museum among similar museums worldwide. They were impressed by the quality information service available free of charge to all visitors, through the use of the new Museum's eGuide. Finally, they were overwhelmed during their experience on one of the most important educational tools of the Museum, the earthquake simulator designed as a school classroom, which acquaints visitors of the Lesvos Petrified Forest to the seismic risk, which is particularly high in Greece and the wider Mediterranean region.



organization.

At the closure of the conference, participants warmly congratulated for the excellent organization, and also for the infrastructure available in the Museum and the University of the Aegean for the realization of such high-level conferences. The beauty of the lesbian landscape, the quality of local products, the delicious dishes prepared by the women's agrotourist cooperatives of Parakoila, Mesotopos, Skalochori and Petra and the lesbian hospitality have undoubtedly contributed decisively to the success of the