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In This Issue:

- **Report of First UK RIGS Conference**
- **Notice of AGM**

Geoconservation at Local Level, the 1998 UK RIGS Conference. Conference Report

CONTENTS:

- *Preamble*
- *Geoconservation at local level*
- *Survey of RIGS groups*
- *Heritage of Geology*
- *Land use planning*
- *UK RIGS body*
- *Heritage lottery fund*

- *Practical issues/GIS*
- *Funding*
- *Links with industry and BGS*
- *Data management*
- *Exhibition*
- *Sponsors*
- *Articles / proceedings*

The first UK RIGS conference took place at University College Worcester in September and brought together all those concerned with and interested in Earth heritage conservation. It was an important opportunity to assess the progress that individual groups had made to date. There are 49 RIGS groups in England, 4 in Wales and 2 in Scotland; and most of these were represented at the conference.

The programme of papers began with Dr. Colin Prosser, Head of Earth Heritage Conservation at English Nature, giving the background to the establishment of geoconservation at local level. He pointed out that the Regionally Important Geological/ geomorphological Sites (RIGS) initiative originated in the late 1980s to help address this issue and had two main aims. Firstly, to conserve a series of locally important sites, and secondly to enable more people to become involved in Earth heritage conservation. Locally based Earth heritage conservation was already taking place and some

excellent projects were already underway. It was not, however, widespread. The RIGS initiative set out to build on and promote this existing good practice, to encourage similar activity to occur elsewhere across Great Britain, and to give the activity a national identity.

A lot of experience has been gained by the movement and in order to make an appraisal of how well local geoconservation was working the RIGS Groups for Herefordshire and Worcestershire prepared a questionnaire and presented the results at the conference. Pauline Couper, Data Manager for H&W RIGS Group collated the results and listed some interesting findings:

When asked to list their three primary objectives in order of importance, 80% of the responding groups placed the recording and designation of Regionally Important Sites first. 69% of the groups have a 'RIGS assessors' panel which includes representation from educational establishments, but only 17% include representation from the minerals industry. Groups were asked about the number of sites which had been designated as Regionally Important. Fifteen per cent of the responding groups have designated over 100 RIGS, and 70% have between 1 and 99 RIGS in their county or region.

All of this enthusiasm, most of it from volunteers, has a wonderful pedigree and the delegates were reminded of this when Philip Doughty, chairman of the Geological Society Geoconservation Commission referred to the United Kingdom occupying a unique position in the world heritage of geology. The founding genius of the modern science of geology was the Scot, James Hutton. Although William Smith, the Father of English Geology, was not the first to suggest that fossils could be used to date rocks, he was certainly the first to demonstrate the feasibility of the concept on a wide scale and to formalise it with the cartographic conventions which are the basis of all modern geological maps. The fluent prose of Charles Lyell presented the first widely read account of Hutton's principles and provided the insight that led another British geologist, Charles Darwin, to key elements of his theory of evolution, a towering concept of universal scientific and philosophical importance to the present day. The giants of stratigraphy, Sedgwick, Murchison, Coynbeare, Phillips and Lapworth provided 6 of the 11 period names in the Phanerozoic timescale, almost all firmly based on British sections. None of this would have been possible without the amazing diversity of geology displayed in these small islands. The geological community of this country therefore has the disproportionate responsibility, and privilege, of safeguarding this exceptional geological heritage.

It is clear that geologists and geomorphologists engaged in conservation in the UK have a daunting task but when approached responsibly the prizes are great. They must work closely with planners, mineral operators, landfill companies, educational establishments and government agencies. The point was further emphasised by John Hughes, Countryside Officer for Shropshire, who pointed out that local authorities have both a duty and moral responsibility to protect important geological sites. Many will own geological sites, but as the pressure on public spending tightens the opportunity to acquire new sites dwindles.

Land use planning is a function common to all local authorities which provides valuable opportunities to protect and manage sites. Many people equate 'planning' with development control which is certainly a useful tool in site protection, but planning has many more facets such as structure and local plans, environmental data collection, economic regeneration and advisory services.

The RIGS groups were encouraged to work closely with geological societies and the Geologists' Association in collecting and analysing data and thus producing local site databases. Support for the local groups to help these and other activities is available through the two RIGS Development

Officers. The conference voted in its plenary session to address this proposal by setting up a Steering Group with the following as a major task: To produce a proposal for the setting up and structure of a UK RIGS Body which will serve the RIGS movement.

With the Heritage Lottery Fund being a potential source of financial support the views of Professor Palmer Newbould (HLF Trustee) were significant. What criteria might HLF invoke? Here are some of the points he made:

Heritage Merit. The listing, description and promotion of information about RIGS is important for the regional heritage. If possible this should include site protection which can occur primarily via the planning process (like County Wildlife Sites) and also by raising public awareness of the importance of these Earth heritage sites.

Public Benefit. This can take the form of increased public awareness and education, improved and informed access to a proportion of sites and easy access to the RIGS database, preferably via a comprehensive County or Regional Record Centre. Protocols may need to be established to ensure data quality and thus credibility.

The creation and strengthening of partnership between RIGS groups and statutory agencies, local authorities, professional associations, mining companies and landfill operators.

The Conference was treated to some interesting practical accounts and guidelines relating to such issues as health and safety, archaeological investigations, thematic trails, RIGS designation criteria, sites for education use and links with biological reserves. The Ordnance Survey presented their latest Geographical Information Systems products and promoted considerable debate about the efficiency gains to be had from bringing GIS into geoconservation and site recording. Specific regions sharing their RIGS experiences were Cornwall, Cumbria, Dorset, Lothian and Borders, the Black Country and N.E. Wales.

The issue of practical assistance to the local groups was further addressed by the RIGS Development Officers when two workshops looked at the compilation and production of a handbook. Some of the topics discussed were:

- Site ownership and access
- The planning system
- Funding
- RIGS criteria and assessment
- Getting support / volunteer participation
- Health and safety and insurance

Funding for the geoconservation movement is always an important issue and the presence of Judith Jackson of ENTRUST was very useful. The Regulations allow for landfill operators to offset up to 20% of their tax obligations as a credit which can be applied to Environmental Bodies and projects defined within the Landfill Tax Regulations.

Many RIGS groups have already built up good working relationships with landfill companies and hopefully will benefit from the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme in the future. If a similar Aggregates Tax Credit Scheme comes into force the RIGS groups will have even more reason to build on the close links with the quarrying industry. The latter has provided much information to the British Geological Survey at Keyworth and a lot of this information is publicly available. It was of paramount importance that Rod Bowie (BGS Records Officer) addressed the conference and gave

his ideas of how geological data could be made available to RIGS groups. The British Geological Survey runs the National Geological Records Centre (NGRC). The NGRC is a recognised place of deposit for public records relating to geology and is also the NERC Designated Data Centre for Earth Sciences. The Geological Survey has collected vast amounts of geological data as part of its activities and has recently made great efforts to make this data more readily available to all researchers. Large data sets are now indexed digitally and can be accessed via a GIS system and borehole records can be selected and supplied electronically over the Internet. Information such as the Lexicon of Named Rock Units and the Igneous Rock Classification are now freely available via the Internet. As the BGS survey and archive data is more readily available it will be of greater value to local RIGS groups. Conversely as BGS is now starting to undertake continuous revision of its maps then information gathered by RIGS groups could be very important. The BGS is interested in being involved in the future development of RIGS nationally and the possibility of a concordat over the exchange of data. The standardisation and possible extension of recording activity and ability to easily transfer data electronically will be of prime importance.

This fitted in well with the comments of Charles Copp of Environmental Information Management who said that although geological site recording and conservation are well established in the UK, the collection of information remains poorly co-ordinated, and data standards ill-defined. Data exchange between local and national levels is almost non-existent. The GD2 database which was written to manage data from the National Scheme for Geological Site Documentation, is long overdue for redevelopment but this has been held up through lack of resources. Recent advances in both software and communications via the Internet can provide the means to manage and disseminate geological and geomorphological information more effectively. It is suggested that future developments be linked to the National Biodiversity Network which offers both an organisational structure and a range of standards which the geological conservation community can key into.

A major exhibition at the Conference featured 50 displays including those by the British Geological Survey, Buckingham Chilterns University College, the Russell Society, the Earth Science Teachers Association, Wrens Nest National Nature Reserve and the Welsh Borders Early Vertebrate Research Group, as well as a number of RIGS groups.

The conference was sponsored by English Nature, the Geologists' Association, the Environment Agency, the Wildlife Trusts, Scottish Natural Heritage, Herefordshire Council and University College Worcester. Other organisations also present were the Ordnance Survey, the Geological Society, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Geological Survey of Ireland, the Joint Nature Conservation Committee and the RIGS groups.

Articles relating to the conference will be in the December issue of Minerals Planning and the January issue of Earth Heritage.

The proceedings of the conference are now available. To order a copy please contact the Geological Records Centre or use the order form on this site.

Notice of AGM

The AGM of the Group will be held at 11am on Tuesday 2nd February 1999 at University College Worcester. On arrival call at Reception for room details.

Nominations for the positions on the Executive Committee should reach the Geological Records Centre at least 14 days before the AGM. All members of the current Committee have indicated their willingness to serve a further year.

The Executive Committee urges as many people as possible to join H&W RIGS Group and attend the AGM. A membership fee of £1 is payable on the day. Anyone unable to attend on 2nd February may join or renew membership by sending £1 and a covering note to the GRC.

The fee for organisations wishing to join as corporate members is £5.