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LESVOS PETRIFIED FOREST GEOPARK (GREECE): AN ATTEMPT TO EVALUATE 10 YEARS OF ACTIVITIES

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The promotion of local sustainable development is one of the strong arguments frequently used to justify the importance of geoparks, besides their role in geoconservation. The aim of this work was to measure the influence of a geopark in the local community and to evaluate the performance of this geopark in the preservation and promotion of geological heritage, combining the three fundamental keys of a geopark: the geological heritage, the people and the local development. Given its history, activity and importance in the European Geoparks Network, one of the four founders of this network, the Lesvos Petrified Forest Geopark (LPFG), in Greece, was elected as the target of this study that is part of a master thesis of the University of Minho (Portugal).

The following goals were established as an action plan for this work:

- To know the current situation of the geological heritage in the area of the geopark;
- To understand and evaluate the conservation and recovery measures implemented on geosites during the last ten years;
- To assess if ten years after its creation the LPFG meets the principle of integration of the local population in decisions and actions taken by the geopark;
- To understand how this geopark has contributed to the sustainability of local development and how is the social impact in the territory;
- To observe and analyse the attitude and relationship of the population with the territory (natural heritage) and the geopark;
- To know and analyse the educational, geotourism, and cultural activities of the geopark, with special emphasis on those in which communities are involved;
- To evaluate the results of the public participation in activities developed by the geopark and which are the economical, social, cultural, and environmental benefits;
- To understand how the local community “feel” the geopark;
- To collect elements that can help the development of a methodology that allows the evaluation of the geopark’s performance regarding nature conservation and local communities.

Preliminary results based on direct observations, information collected in reports, and questionnaires applied to a sample of the geopark local community – a total of 67 respondents in five villages, including restaurants and hotel managers and general public – show that there is a positive perception of the LPFG role in geoconservation and in communities, namely:

- A favourable assessment of the geoconservation actions, particularly in the geopark's geosites and in the Natural History Museum;
- The success of the educational activities which are recognized by all – students, teachers, and general public – justifying a large number of visitors with a high degree of satisfaction that explain the recurrence of their visits;
- The remarkable success of the museum that is generally recognized by visitors and much cherished by the locals;

- The fact that the geopark has created jobs in the local community;
- The growing sense of identity and pride for their region and its natural heritage felt and expressed by the local population, which is reflected in the increasing sensitivity and awareness for their conservation and promotion.

It is important to keep in mind that, although the collected data does not intend to have a statistical meaning, they are valuable elements that gathered important information and allowed a qualitative assessment of this geopark performance for the last ten years.

Being a new concept promoting local development, it is clear that geoparks are still in an early stage of their evolution which originates many opportunities to improve. Therefore, it is understandable that this work has also identified some weaknesses:

- Some measures of valuation, interpretation and maintenance of the geopark's geosites, especially within the area of the main parks, can be improved;
- Regarding the knowledge and development of their region, a great number of the surveyed people is unaware of the support that the geopark gives to activities, such as: pottery, popular crafts, jewellery production, gastronomy, painting, and also to the promotion of products and other local services;
- Regarding to restaurants and other services related to tourism there are a significant number of respondents that had expected a higher increase in their profit, during the last 10 years, due to the creation of the geopark;
- A major part of respondents is unaware of local companies that develop geotouristic activities;
- In general, the owners and local residents that were interviewed in five villages are satisfied with the development of the region, but there is still a significant part of those who did not felt the real benefits.

It is important to keep in mind that geopark managers cannot be fully responsible for some of these weaknesses. People themselves play an important role in their own success and in this sense they cannot expect that the situation may change without their own cooperation and motivation. This fact stresses once more the need to have local communities really involved in the management of geoparks because they must feel that they are part of the solution and not just beneficiaries of it.

The assessment of the impact of a geopark in nature and local communities is difficult to accomplish. This type of evaluation requires a solid and accessible collection of multidisciplinary data that are usually dispersed and often not cover the whole period of analysis. It is recommended that all geoparks promote the development of common indicators and tools that could be easily used for evaluation purposes and comparison analyses, easily expressed in the native languages and in English.