

# A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF GEOCONSERVATION IN PORTUGAL

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The history of geoconservation in Portugal is not long; since the beginning, as in many other countries, Nature Conservation was dominated by the preservation of biological features. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to mention the work and commitment of some persons and institutions that struggled for the conservation of some of the Portuguese Geological Heritage during the last thirty years.

The most important works regarding Nature Conservation started in Portugal by the middle of the 20th century. The main protagonists of the so-called movement of Nature Protection, namely C.M. Baeta Neves, Francisco Flores, among others, were specialists in forestry management. Despite Portugal's obvious delay in relation to other European countries, they played an important role in raising the politicians and the general public awareness towards Nature Conservation. The League for Nature Protection, created in 1948 and still active today, was the first association related to the movement of Nature Conservation, assembling a small group of specialists with different scientific backgrounds, namely: biology, forestry and agronomical engineering, and geology.

The 1970 celebration of the European Year for Nature Conservation was a major event concerning Portuguese conservation. For the first time, the Portuguese State began to realize the subject's importance. The National Environmental Commission, created in 1971, can be considered the first official institution responsible for the definition of the Portuguese environmental policy. The establishment in 1976 of the National Parks, Reserves and Landscape Heritage Service, was followed in 1983 by the National Parks, Reserves and Nature Conservation Service. The Nature Conservation Institute was created in 1993. Presently, the Nature Conservation Institute is the official institution responsible for the management of protected areas and for the definition of nature conservation strategies. Unfortunately, this Institute shows little interest in geoconservation.

The Mining and Geological Institute (the Portuguese Geological Survey recently integrated in a broader organisation named INETInnovation) is probably the most important institution that has ever tried to develop an inventory and a characterisation of the geological heritage in recent years, especially under the leadership of Prof. Miguel Ramalho.

The National Natural History Museum is another important State institution relating Portuguese geoconservation; during 1996/97, five important outcrops with dinosaur footprints were classified as Natural Monuments due to the strong commitment of its former Director, Prof. Galopim de Carvalho. The Ourém/Torres Novas Natural Monument

is probably the best example of geoconservation in Portugal. The area is protected against intruders and an interpretation centre has been built together with accommodation facilities for youth summer camps. The educational strategy is very well conducted: special activities for students and guided field trips are available, helped by interpretative panels and brochures.

By the end of 2000, the ProGEO Portuguese Group was created. This enlarged group of specialists belonging to several institutions is trying to implement a more systematic approach to Portuguese geoconservation. One of the main activities of the ProGEO-Portugal group was the setup of a form for the inventory and characterisation of Portuguese geosites, expecting the contribution of all national geological institutions. More recently, the group initiated the definition of the Portuguese frameworks with international relevance with the support of many geologists from different Portuguese universities. The resulting work will be published in *Episodes* presenting fourteen frameworks and showing that Portugal, despite its limited geographical area, has a rich geodiversity.

Municipalities are becoming more and more important in what concerns geoconservation. The Valongo City Hall in association with the Geology Department of the Oporto University has developed the Valongo Palaeozoic Park. The area, which has also biological interest, receives hundreds of visitors from schools: it has an interpretation centre and provides educational support for field trips. Using a law published in 2001 for the protection of cultural heritage, some municipalities began to protect relevant geosites. The proposal for the creation of the first Portuguese Geopark made by an association of municipalities (Naturtejo) is ready to be submitted to the European Geoparks Network. A Geoconservation Award was created and is being attributed every year by the ProGEO Portuguese Group to the municipality that best tried to implement a geoconservation project. Idanha-a-Nova and Valongo were the winning municipalities in 2004 and 2005, respectively.

In conclusion, geoconservation in Portugal started with some delay in relation to other European countries. The reason for this is threefold: i) the Nature Conservation legislation has been usually inappropriate for the conservation of the geological heritage; ii) the Nature Conservation Institute generally does not take into account geoheritage as part of natural heritage; and iii) only recently, the Portuguese geological community begun to realize the necessity to get involved in geoconservation. We wish that the development of activities such as this International Symposium will contribute to the implementation of a solid national geoconservation strategy.

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