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REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE GEOTOURISM CONCEPT

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The enjoyment by travellers of landscapes dominated by geological features is far to be a recent tendency. Just to give an example, in 1841 Edward Hitchcock published a report about the geology of Massachusetts with one chapter named “Scenographical Geology”. The aim of this chapter was to “call the attention of gentlemen of taste, intelligence, and leisure, to those striking features of our scenery, that are the result chiefly of geological changes, and which produce landscapes abundant in beauty and sublimity.” However, the academic discussion about this type of tourism is much more recent. In 1995, Thomas Hose presented a geotourism definition based on geological tourism and on-site interpretation of geological features. Some years latter, the National Geographic Society from the USA has decided to use the same word but with a broader sense and not specifically focused on geology. Nevertheless, among the geoscientific community, geotourism mean the recreational use of the geodiversity, in association with some sort of informal education addressed to the general public. The interpretation of the main geological character of the territory is always the main aim for this type of geotourism.

In 2011, the Arouca Geopark organized an international congress on geotourism with the perspective of promote the discussion about this concept. During the closing ceremony, the organizers have presented the Arouca Declaration where geotourism is defined as “as tourism which sustains and enhances the identity of a territory, taking into consideration its geology, environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of its residents.” The idea was to use the broader definition of geotourism but clearly showing geology as a fundamental asset. This perspective of geotourism is not against the more restrict one because in the same declaration is clearly affirmed: “geological tourism is one of the multiple components of geotourism”.

What are the advantages of expand the concept of geotourism beyond geological tourism?

Geotourism, like any other type of tourism, is an economic activity. This means that it is expected that this activity generate money in order to provide a solid income to investors and workers. In general, a higher tourism income is directly related with a higher numbers of tourists; this is what all tourism agents aspire. Without losing the sense of environmental and social sustainability, geotourism managers also expect to have success in their businesses. Nevertheless, geoscience is not a popular subject among the general population. For most people, geology is just rocks besides dinosaurs, volcanoes and earthquakes. The number of people really interested in travel and spending money to participate in nothing but a geological tourism activity is unquestionably low. Of course that these activities are very welcome by geoscientists and by those with some geological background, but the number is too low to guarantee the economical sustainability of many geotourism companies. Broadening the concept of geotourism will increase the number of potential tourists, an essential trend to guarantee the success of this economic activity.

Still, some geologists have reacted to a broader tourism approach as threatening to geological conservation and public education. This creates an issue where none exists, for public education is not a zero-sum game. Indeed, tourism that promotes a general ethic of conservation is more likely to foster a protective attitude toward unique geological sites than a strictly geological focus that willfully ignores a destination's related attractions. Such a narrow focus can be counterproductive.

Whatever the name of the featured area, a positive attitude toward geoconservation depends on responsible, educational tourism that generates sufficient economic benefit for the community. In geoparks, residents are then more likely to value the geological features that warranted a geopark designation in the first place. To that end, and in keeping with the Arouca Declaration, the National Geographic Society has already published comment that their definition of the geotourism approach can be expanded explicitly to include "geology" whenever desired and that the broad approach also includes the established narrower "geotourism" meaning focused on the topic of geology. Done well, the broad approach should improve public appreciation for geology.

The low social recognition of geosciences and geoscientists has many reasons. The fact that geoscientists usually work in close circles is one the explanations for this situation. Geologists are accustomed to communicating with a very obscure technical jargon, using millions of years when they speak about time and explaining how the rocks that form the Alps today were once formed on the seabed! It is very difficult for the majority of people to understand geologists and to give them credit. During decades, many geologists have failed to communicate with the general public. They failed to clearly show that it is the geodiversity that controls everything in our planet and that almost all living organisms are dependent on this geological diversity. Or how local rocks are determinant in the use of geological materials since the Stone Age. Or how the vineyards that produce Porto wine are completely dependent on the soil developed on a specific type of rocks. Geologists have often failed to clearly demonstrate that without them it was impossible to have all the technological development based on very rare minerals used to build all the electronic equipment that we are completely dependent today. The broader concept of geotourism is a tool to show these relations and to underline the relevance of geodiversity in the planet and in our lives. These geotourism programmes will allow tourists to know the local geology but also to better understand that this geology is closely related with all the other assets of the territory, such as biodiversity, archaeological and cultural values, gastronomy, etc. Perhaps that some of these geotourists will finally understand that geology is much more than just rocks!

With this broader definition of geotourism, we loose nothing (the geological tourism is still there) but we can gain a lot!