Geodiversity Petition PE1277: Response – January 11th 2010

The letter of 1 December from Stewart Stevenson MSP (and other relevant submissions) was forwarded to all Scottish RIGS Groups, Scottish Geoparks and other interested parties by the petitioner Mike Browne, representing the Scottish arm of GeoConservationUK (formerly UKRIGS, renamed Nov 2009). The following represent the sum of their comments with the unanimous request to keep the petition open until such time as the Scottish Government show how they intend to take on board the ongoing SNH/BGS studies now expected to be completed around April-June 2010.

We think it is fair that your committee know that Mike Browne, as the Petitioner, works for BGS in Edinburgh (until retirement at the end of April 2010) and has had marginal involvement in some of the ongoing SNH/BGS studies partly as advisor and also editor of external contract reports such as that on existing geodiversity policies and guidance in the UK and Scotland (asterisked in next paragraph).

The Government response to the petition
We have read the Government’s response to the Committee’s questions, and are pleased that the Government undertakes, in the new consolidated SPP, to give geodiversity explicit expression in national policy on Local Nature Conservation Sites (LNCS). This would to some extent address the aims of the petition. Within the SPP we would be keen to see Model Policies* on geodiversity (which are being investigated as part of the ongoing studies commissioned by SNH and BGS). The SPP should be fully integrated with the March 2006 SNH Guidance on Establishing and Managing Local Nature Conservation Site Systems (LNCS). In this it was recommended that Regionally Important Geological/geomorphological Sites be renamed as Local Geodiversity Sites (LGS) and be directly comparable with Local Biodiversity Sites (LBS).

However the Scottish members of GeoConservationUK believe the protection and promotion of geodiversity requires more than policy and guidance. This needs to be underpinned by a geodiversity duty in statute, as the Minister suggests. We welcome the ongoing SNH/BGS studies. However, based on our direct experience with local authorities, we are convinced that a formal geodiversity duty is needed. We cannot see how the report’s outcomes could change our view on this matter. SNH’s letter to the Committee sets out in details the aims, implementation and benefits of such a duty.

In our opinion the Minister’s letter does not sufficiently address the petition and the petition should not be closed. It should be kept active until the Government has considered the SNH/BGS study and formulated policy.

Further support for the petition
Some of the Minister’s points actually lend further support to the petition:

- The three areas mentioned with proposed/completed local geodiversity action plans (LGAPs) have their own impetus: the two National Parks have a nature conservation duty. West Lothian is supported by a long-standing voluntary geology group (Lothian and Borders RIGS). The fact that the vast majority of local authorities are not yet even proposing LGAPs or Local Geodiversity Audits highlights the clear need for geodiversity to be promoted in both statute and in planning and development policy but also in emergency situations such as response to landslip and rockfall.

- According to the Minister’s figures, the vast majority (197 out of 257) of un-notified GCR sites have no statutory protection, despite being identified as nationally important. SNH policy is to only notify these as SSSI's if they are immediately threatened. However we now understand that SNH has just contracted (or is about to) a private sector consortium to prepare Earth Science Site Documentation for about 30 of these GCR sites. But it is not clear that these would then be listed as SSSI's in the aftermath of this work.
A geodiversity duty in statute would direct local authorities to give these un-notified GCR sites some protection independent of the proposed UK-wide review of SSSI selection guidelines. Concerns about unprotected GCR sites featured particularly in replies from the geoparks.

Finally we hope that the Government will recognise that the petition represents an urgent opportunity for geodiversity to contribute even more to Scotland’s health, well-being, education and economic development. It is the objective of all our membership such as Strathclyde RIGS Group to continue making their contribution to these in Scotland.

We require support from the Government, through statute, to ensure that Scotland’s world class and irreplaceable rocks, fossils, sediments and landforms are protected, conserved and promoted at national, regional and local levels. This can be better achieved if we have good practice guidance on geodiversity in planning and development (and emergency response which naturally is out with the normal systems of consideration).

We refer the committee to an article which appeared in ‘Earth Heritage’, a magazine produced jointly with SNH. In Issue 30, summer, 2008 there is an article entitled “Climate Change: Why Geodiversity Matters” written by John Gordon, Ness Kirkbride, Alistair Rennie and Patricia Bruneau, all of SNH.

Mike Browne
Chair GeoConservationUK on behalf of Scottish member bodies