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Nine sites join UN-backed list of globally recognized geological sites

Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark, Ireland

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Nine geological sites of exceptional scientific and educational importance, rarity or beauty have been added to the Global Network of National Geoparks, a United Nations-backed list launched to promote greater cooperation in the management of the world's geological heritage.

The new members – approved at a meeting that concluded yesterday in Norway – come from seven countries, with Spain and China having two entries, and France, Iceland, Ireland, Italy and Japan each having one.

The network, launched with the backing of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), now has 87 sites from 27 countries.

To qualify, sites must not only be of scientific importance, but should also possess an effective management structure which allows for sustainable development, with a particular emphasis on sustainable tourism.

The chosen sites this year include the Muroto Geopark in Japan, which was once submerged by the sea but has been uplifted by the region's earthquakes over thousands of years, making it an area of scientific study for the prediction of large quakes and tsunamis.

The Katla Geopark in Iceland, home to the now famous Eyjafjallajökull volcano, whose eruption temporarily paralysed European air travel in April 2010, also made the list. The region is characterized by its glacier-filled landscape and volcanic activity. This last one affects the population strongly, giving geotourism an important role to drive sustainable development.

The Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark situated on Ireland's west coast not only features impressive 200-metre high cliffs along its coastline, but is also home to more than 70 per cent of Ireland's native plants, and has a legacy of human settlement spanning more than 6,000 years.

Another new site is the Bauges Regional Park in France, a preserved natural island in the north-western French Alps. The park includes the renowned "Savoyarde" cliff, a folded limestone deposit at the area's southern tip, which resembles the folk headdress traditionally worn by women in the region.

The Apuan Alps region in Italy, known for its beautiful marbles, deep canyons and large karst caves, is also home to many endemic species as well as fossils and tectonic structures. The rare morphology of the Apuan Alps has attracted travellers since the 16th century, and today the park offers visitors recreational activities such as mountain climbing and hiking.

Spain's two sites are: Sierra Norte di Sevilla, one of the largest natural parks in Andalucía, and containing rocks that date back to the earliest stages of Earth's history; and Villuercas Ibores Jara Geopark with its famous peak La Villuerca and a landscape complimented by vestiges of a mining culture and decorated menhir stones, or monoliths, dating to the Bronze and Iron ages.

China's two new sites are: Tianzhushan Geopark in Anhui, rich in geo-heritage such as mammalian fossils and an ultra-high pressure metamorphic belt of eclogite, an unusually dense rock important for driving convection within the solid Earth; and the Hong Kong Geopark, whose coastal processes have resulted in diverse erosional and depositional landforms.

The nine sites were selected out of 16 applicants, which were examined by the Bureau of the Global Geopark Network at the three-day 10th European Geoparks Conference.

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