

## 7TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARKS, 2016: “THE ROCK CONNECTS US”



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Hosted by the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark in Torquay, South Devon, the conference was attended by ~700 delegates from 63 countries world-wide and deemed a huge success. This was the first meeting of the UNESCO Global Geoparks following the introduction of the new UNESCO International Geosciences and Geoparks Programme (IGGP).

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### INTRODUCTION

November 2015 saw the introduction of a new UNESCO International Geosciences and Geoparks Programme (IGGP) and significant recognition for all of the 130 areas across 33 countries who automatically became UNESCO Global Geoparks as a result. There was, therefore, no surprise that the 7th International Conference on UNESCO Global Geoparks – the first conference to follow this recognition – was the largest in the organisation’s history to date and a fantastic celebration of that achievement.

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### HEALTH AND WELLBEING

In line with the conference theme of *Health and Wellbeing through Creative and Active Engagement*, and bringing all of the elements that make UNESCO Global Geoparks so special (e.g., education, science, culture and community), the four day conference began with the première of *Earth Echoes*, a unique piece of theatre specifically created for the opening ceremony, that told the story of our planet, its geology and its people through music, theatre and dance. The piece, co-created and performed by over 100 volunteers, aged eight to eighty, from the local community and schools, with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Plymouth University, Barbican Theatre Plymouth and Doorstep Arts truly brought home a key message that despite deep time and the divisions of our lives today it is the rock that connects us (Figure 1).

Following this performance, which was streamed live over the internet, Nick Powe (Chairman of the English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark) and Gordon Oliver (Elected Mayor of Torbay) welcomed delegates to the English Riviera. Prof. Nikolas Zouros, President of the Global Geopark Network Association, welcomed everyone to the conference and the

Chair of the UK National Commission for UNESCO, Dr Beth Taylor, provided a keynote address reporting that:

*“UNESCO was established in the wake of World War II, with the mission of promoting peace in the minds of men and women by fostering intercultural dialogue and international co-operation. It seems to me that there has never been a time when these objectives were more relevant than they are today, when global events seem to be dividing rather than uniting communities. And they are objectives which the UNESCO Global Geoparks family has right at its heart, based as it is on collaborative regional and global networks. I could not put this any better than the message that we heard so powerfully in the wonderful performance of “Earth Echoes” that opened the Conference – “The rock connects us”.*

The opening ceremony also included a video message from Flavia Schlegel, Assistant Director General for Natural Sciences, UNESCO, and keynotes by Prof. Iain Stewart (English Riviera UNESCO Global Geopark Patron and BBC TV Presenter) from Plymouth University and Prof. Patrick McKeever (Secretary of the International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme Chief of Section UNESCO) added their welcomes and explained the role of the geosciences to both health and wellbeing.

### THE CONFERENCE

Conference delegates and Geopark representatives participated in a crowded schedule of workshops and field trips that centered around the conference’s main themes, sharing approaches, innovations and best practice from across the global network for participants to take forward in their respective countries.

A particular highlight was the Health and Wellbeing through Creative and Active Engagement keynote given by Mathew White, European Centre for Human Health, titled *The relationship between natural environments and health and*