

Activities for raising public awareness of the Idrija Geopark Project (Slovenia)

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ABSTRACT

In Idrija, a decision was taken concerning the presentation of exceptional natural and cultural heritage to a wide spectrum of visitors. In 2007, an initiative group was established by the Municipality in order to start the activities for the establishment of the Geopark Idrija. This idea is older, since the Idrija region is geologically an exceptional area in Slovenia, it has great potential for the development of rural areas by geo-tourism and, after all, there have also been many initiatives from the local residents.

The aspirations for nature conservation in the Municipality extend back to 1986, when many cultural and historical monuments as well as natural sites were proclaimed. Since 1986, the conservation of natural and cultural heritage has been carried out by several decrees. Many efforts have been put into the interpretation and presentation of ore deposit and mercury mine to a wider public. In 1994, the first Slovene tourist mine – Anthony's Main Road – was opened and is still operating today. Around 25,000 visitors come yearly to see the multimedia presentation, showing the mining through centuries and the underground part. Additionally, two geological collections can be found in Idrija. The first one is situated in the Idrija Municipal Museum and the second one is located in the administrative building of the Idrija Mercury Mine and contains more than 800 samples of mercury ore deposit unique worldwide.

In November 2009, a project, co-financed by the LEADER programme was completed. The main purpose of the project was to establish the net of geo-sites and set the basis for establishing the geopark. There were many activities for raising public awareness of the geopark project trying to activate the local residents to see the opportunity and spark their interest in the participation. Educational activities were also organised, such as "Geoday" and cultural day for primary and secondary schools.

Furthermore cooperation with universities has been intensified as we co-supervised seminar papers, BA/BSc theses and hosted students from the University of Ljubljana during their field exercise and students from the University of Zagreb while practising underground mine mapping.

In 2010, the activities have continued at the Municipality level. The Decree for setting the organisational structure is currently in preparation. On this basis, new partners will join the project and take an active part in it. Marketing activities are focused on creating a new general image, starting with a new logo created by designers and selected by tender. We are looking for partners and welcome new initiatives for the cooperation in order to put all the ideas from this project into practice.

Introduction

Slovenia is located in central Europe at the crossing of the Alps, Dinarides and the Pannonian Basin. In the western part of Slovenia the oldest Slovene mining town of Idrija is situated. For centuries, it has developed in conjunction with its underground mine. Today, it

is the administrative, economic and cultural centre of the Municipality of Idrija, with an area of 294 km² and a population of 12,000. The area of the municipality is covered by forests extending over 76 % of the municipality and agricultural areas with close to 20 % of the land. The location at the junction of two gigantic mountain ranges (Dinarides and Alps) has enabled such an exceptional geoheritage – deep gorges where various rocks have been discovered in remarkable stratigraphic cross-sections, tectonic phenomena and mineral and fossil deposits. Water has also shaped the surface and contributed to the variety of the terrain with numerous sources, rivers and Karst features. In a relatively small area, variegated rocks are exposed, from the oldest Carboniferous shales, to the youngest Paleocene-Eocene flysch. The terrain has a typical thrust structure and is very diverse, with deep gorges, high Karst tablelands and mountain-tops, offering beautiful views from the Alps to the Adriatic Sea.

The history and development of Idrija was intrinsically linked to mercury mining activities, starting in 1490, when mercury was first discovered by a tubemaker as he was soaking a wooden barrel in a stream. During centuries there were ups and downs in the production of mercury, reaching the peak of the excavation and extracting of mercury in 1913 with 820 tons of extracted mercury and 60 tons of cinnabar (Mohorič, 1960; Kavčič, 1993). In the second half of the 19th century, the Idrija Mine was one of the best equipped mines in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It constantly improved the processes of extracting the cinnabar ore. However, all these technological achievements did not remain in this area, but spread to other mining towns in Europe and across the Ocean to South America, where mercury was used for the amalgamation process.

With its natural and industrial heritage, the Idrija region represents one of the most valuable and interesting areas in Slovenia and must be preserved for future generations.

Establishing the Geopark Idrija

In the past, separate parts of the heritage were managed separately, thus needing integral coordination and promotion to offer programmes to all kinds of visitors and tourists. This posed problems for tourist managers and at the same time, the local authorities started getting the initiatives from the countryside, expressing the need for integral management and joining tourist offers, education institutions, local people and companies into one organisational form. In the organisational form of Geopark, all the characteristics and needs for integral sustainable management of the area were joined into one organisation. The initiative for establishing the Geopark Idrija began in 2007 by setting up an initiative group which coordinated activities in order to prepare a basis for further work. Also the decision was made about the territory which covered the area of the Idrija Municipality at the time of establishment and setting. The EGN charter (<http://www.europeangeoparks.org/isite/page/8,1,0.asp?mu=4&cmu=26&thID=0>) indicates that the geopark must include a particular geological heritage of paramount importance, furthermore it can also be interesting as far as archaeological, ecological, historical or cultural heritage is concerned. Our goal is to embrace the entire outstanding heritage of Idrija with an integral view and present it to a wide spectrum of visitors, with a special interest in specific tourism places and local products. Furthermore, activities are not meant to develop towards “mass tourism” but rather towards groups of visitors (for example scholar groups, societies, experts, etc.) with environmental and cultural interest and those who would like to experience characteristics of the area authentically among the local people and in the field. This way, the integral organisation would also play an active role in the economic

development of its territory with the development of geotourism and enhancement of a general image linked to the geoheritage (<http://www.europeangeoparks.org/isite/page/8,1,0.asp?mu=4&cmu=26&thID=0>), which has already been set with a chosen logo by tender. In order to formalise the organisational structure, the Municipality of Idrija is undergoing a procedure of establishing the Idrija Heritage Centre, which will also be responsible for the Geopark Idrija project, with the final goal of establishing the Geopark Idrija and finally applying for the inscription in the EGN. It needs to be stressed that many activities have already been carried out especially educational activities where some programmes have been on trial in cooperation with local schools, universities and societies. A considerable emphasis has also been put on the protection and conservation of heritage, starting in 1986 with a decree proclaiming many cultural and historical monuments as well as natural sites. Since 1986, the conservation of natural and cultural heritage has been carried out by several decrees:

- Decree on the Proclamation of Cultural and Historical Monuments and Natural Sites in the Area of the Municipality of Idrija (Official Gazette of the RS, Nos 16/86,17/88, 56/93, 45/97, 131/03, 45/07, 115/07),
- Decree on the protection of a part of the Govškarca River basin (Official Gazette of the RS, No 25/89)
- Decree on the announcement of Zgornja Idrijca Landscape Park (Official Gazette of the RS, Nos 11/93, 37/95).

The aim of establishing the Geopark Idrija is to manage the activities in the area considering the existing acts and regulations without legislating new ones.

Although we know that this is a beginning of a long way towards a solid structure of the Geopark Idrija, all aspirations for integrated activities, coordinated by one organisation have been accepted positively.

Activities for raising public awareness of Idrija Geopark Project

For decades, we have been trying to preserve the natural heritage of Idrija and present it to visitors. We also wish to preserve the authenticity and uniqueness of our rural natural monuments. In this respect, a lot has already been achieved. However, our aspirations were revived by the recent initiative to establish the Geopark Idrija. In the past three years, a significant step was made towards achieving an innovative interpretation, inclusion in educational programmes as well as the participation of local inhabitants in the activities of the aspiring geopark. This chapter focuses on some of the activities completed and certain goals achieved in the past year as well as on some planned activities for the future.

In the end of 2009, the project *“Involving geological heritage in rural tourism for the area of the Idrijca River basin (the region of Idrija and Tolmin)”*, co-financed by the Leader programme was finished. The main purpose of the project was to establish a network of geo-sites in the Municipality of Idrija and set down the expert basis for establishing the geopark. With the project activities we wanted to enhance the recognition of the aspiring geopark amongst local people and to carry out educational programmes for students as well as a popular programme for adults. The leading partner of the project was the Idrija Mercury Mine Ltd., which is currently reorganising its activities. Other involved partners were Municipality of Idrija, the Municipality of Tolmin and the Nature Centre in Tolmin. The project focused on making an inventory of the geological heritage in accordance with complementary criteria which comply with those used for the assessment of natural values in other European geoparks and also for the determination of safety regimes for individual sites. Altogether 130 geo-sites were reviewed, described and photographed and a database was set up. Additionally, 27 new geo-sites were included which, in our opinion, were important from the

educational and aesthetic point of view. Within the project, many activities were carried out to raise public awareness of the creation of the geopark and also to spread knowledge of natural sciences. Our plans to create a geopark in Idrija and the European and Global Geopark Network were presented to the residents of the Municipality of Idrija. By publishing articles in local newspapers, we are constantly trying to raise the awareness of local residents to recognise this opportunity and increase their interest in participation. In general, local people are now well acquainted with the project and are prepared to get involved in the activities of the aspiring geopark. Having said this, some do express doubts, which is completely understandable at this early stage.

We presented the Mine's collection of cinnabar minerals and stoneware to the 9th-grade pupils from Idrija Primary School. This collection contains more than 800 samples and is doubtless the most extensive collection of Idrija's ore deposit. During the visit, it was explained to the pupils how the ore deposit was created and at the end we discussed the local ecology and distributed a brochure related to ecology and the mitigation of Hg and effects of Hg-pollution.

With the 7th graders from the Idrija Primary School, we followed the Mercury Route into the town of Idrija and saw the site where mercury was first discovered. In 2009, the programme was very well accepted by pupils and teachers and for this reason we repeated it this year with another 7th-grade generation (Figure 1).



Figure 1: With 7th graders from Idrija Primary School the cultural day was repeated in 2010.

For the Museum Society, the popular educational programme “Rock Lessons” was carried out, in which participants later had the chance to test their knowledge in the field.

The results of the project have provided a basis for further work in the areas of conservation, education and geo-tourism after the creation of the geopark.

Within the framework of another project within the LEADER programme in cooperation with the Idrija Mercury Mine, the Municipality of Idrija, Idrija Municipal Museum and the Tourist Information Centre Idrija the trail “Along the rake - Following the Trail of Idrija's Natural Scientists” was created with 11 natural sites and a brochure was published. The trail is now open to general public and as the sites were marked by “scouts”, it is also possible to take a walk on one's own. We can also arrange a guided walk by prior arrangement.

The cooperation with the universities was intensified in the past year, with BA/BSc theses, seminar papers and many study visits in the Mercury Mine collection and in the mine. The BA thesis of a geography student at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts (Department of Geography), concentrated on the development potential of the aspiring geopark as a basis for the environmentally friendly development of the region. The student of the University of Nova Gorica, School of Environmental Sciences, prepared a seminar paper in which she dealt with the question of whether the unique geological conditions of the Idrija region, as the main reason behind the local development over the last five centuries, could ensure the development and progress in the form of the proposed park.

As part of 10-day field exercises, the students of the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering, Department of Geology, carried out geological mapping. They were also introduced the plans about Geopark Idrija project (Figure 2). From the same Faculty students come to Idrija to practice underground mapping (Figure 3.) Traditionally, we hosted a group of students from the University of Zagreb, who come to Idrija every year to practise underground mapping. Within a 2-day programme the geological structure of the area, mineralisation with mercury and history of the Mine are explained. The impacts of mining and geological structure can be seen in the field (Figure 4) and after that also underground in Antony's Main Road. The second day is planned for underground mapping.



Figure 2: The students of the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering, Department of Geology were introduced the plans about Geopark Idrija project and EGN



Figure 3: Student from University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering, Department of Geology, practicing underground mapping in the Idrija Mercury Mine.



Figure 4: The students from the University of Zagreb during the field trip where the impacts of mining and geological structure can be seen on the surface

Last year, we also started to create a general image of the Geopark Idrija project, an activity led by the Municipality of Idrija. Terms of cooperation were not so strict, but the contents were clear – the Geopark Idrija project logo must represent mercury which is the main “culprit” for what we can see in Idrija and its surroundings and makes us something special in the world. The first step to the general image was to choose the first design of the logo. Seventeen offers came to the Municipality, out of which two were awarded a prize. Only the best one will undergo some minor changes and later on, the general image will be designed with the chosen logo.

In August 2010, another project was carried out – a study exchange between Magma Geopark and Geopark Idrija project, funded by the Norwegian grants and organised by the Idrija Mercury Mine Ltd. and the Municipality of Idrija. The whole project is composed of two study visits – in Norway and in Slovenia. The goals are cooperation between geoparks, exchange of knowledge and practice with establishing and organising activities in the Geopark, interpretation of nature, educational programmes and, last but not least, motivation of local people to take part in the process of establishing the Geopark Idrija. From this aspect, a presentation of Magma Geopark with a discussion was organised in Idrija for general public (Figure 5). The event also received considerable attention from the media – radio, national TV and local and national newspapers. Later on Norwegian representatives experienced the Trail along Rake and visited Upper Idrijca Landscape park. The Slovene group that visited Norway also included two representatives from the local communities, which especially are interested to see the organisation of geoparks abroad.



Figure 5: Presentation of Magma Geopark for general public in Idrija

The Geopark Idrija Project was also presented at the conference Geotrends in Novi Sad in cooperation with the University of Novi Sad. Apart from that, we are also preparing an article for the Geoheritage magazine.

For next year more partnerships are planned. We are planning to cooperate with the Idrija Lace school within the elective subjects to design lace in the shape of natural values. The Geopark Idrija project will prepare a short presentation of natural values in the Municipality. After that, it will be up to the students to design lace in the shape of natural values and go through the whole procedure of making lace. The resulting lace will be presented at the exhibition on the occasion of the Idrija Lace Festival in June 2011.

Another important cooperation is planned with the Idrija Municipal Museum in the field of cultural heritage in the countryside. Within their programme they are interested in researching old traditions and culture in the countryside, formalising priceless homestead collections and conserving and interpreting cultural heritage in the Municipality.

There are many other projects planned, among others also the arrangement of concrete sites in the field in the next two years with the interpretation panels, brochures, etc. It is too soon to write about some of them. We do hope that all the activities will be carried on into the positive direction and that soon there will be visible results in the field.

Conclusion

Nature and technological development have always been connected in the Idrija region, which is a special region in Europe today. For many centuries, the residents of Idrija have been aware of the value of this heritage. This is also the reason why many activities have been carried out in order to conserve natural and cultural heritage. The establishment of the Geopark offers an opportunity to embrace the whole heritage, the opportunity for integral management and general image, which would represent the Idrija region in the world. And after all, it offers many opportunities for promotion, the recognition among experts from different fields and thus many opportunities for international cooperation.

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