



## Local communities and young people – the future of geoconservation

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### ABSTRACT

The UK has weakening development controls, limited earth science teaching and reducing financial resources which directly impact the geological community's ability to sustain the conservation of local geodiversity. Geoconservation is becoming a function of interested local people's desire to do something rather than having a formal mandate and paradoxically it is non-geologists who are often best placed to do the practical conservation. Fewer younger people are getting involved in geoconservation which is particularly worrying for the future. Local geology needs to be meaningful and personal to a much wider range of people if we are to achieve a sustained geoconservation outcome. There is a fantastic array of local geodiversity assets to engage new people but perhaps we need to use them in exciting new ways in order to succeed. This paper focuses on some inspirational projects that have engaged local communities and younger people in the Black Country, England, UK.

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### 1. Black Country geodiversity a 21st century context

The Black Country, defined as the combined boundary surrounding Dudley, Sandwell and Walsall Metropolitan Boroughs and Wolverhampton City (Fig. 1), has a rich and diverse geology (Fig. 2 and Powell et al., 1992) that generates a wide array of related cultural assets. The town of Dudley is particularly rich in economic minerals, exceptional fossil sites and associations with the industrial revolution resulting from the mineral exploitation. Such a natural and cultural legacy offers rich opportunities for novel projects if people are minded to take them. Geodiversity and its future should be easily assured in such a setting, but unfortunately it is not so, even in the Black Country.

Modern lives are not as connected to the surrounding landscape and geology as they once were. The closure of mining and related industries has seen awareness of geodiversity fade dramatically in the Black Country in the last 50 years. In consequence, there is currently a poorer understanding of the immediate value and relevance of the local geodiversity. Communities here now have a very different concept of the landscape which is influenced by large populations and development continuously imposing new shape and meaning to the place they live. Developers and residents are overwhelmingly unaware of any relevant geological connections and the reality is that geodiversity does not currently deliver the

financial incentive and high profile that it once did. There is, therefore, an urgent need to raise awareness of geodiversity and its value to today's communities because until people are aware of and interested in it they certainly would not care about its conservation.

In this paper 'geoconservation' is used to mean 'action taken with the intent of conserving and enhancing geological and geomorphological features, processes sites and specimens' (Burek and Prosser, 2008). To make such actions thrive and be sustained will require significant numbers of new people getting into geoscience and geoconservation. To achieve this there needs to be something in it for them, not just for geoconservation.

Individuals currently involved in geoconservation in the UK often express a sense of feeling under-valued with respect to other disciplines. Closely related disciplines of biodiversity and archaeology enjoy far greater public and political profile and more public resources. Consequently, they have well established and better organised volunteer involvement (Burek, 2008) and greater and more explicit protection in law. They attract a wide spectrum of society and can see a strong future for what they do. The reality is that there is no greater urgency to protect wildlife or buildings than there is for geology and geomorphology, and failure to recognise this suggests that the importance of geology and geomorphology in its self and in underpinning conservation of wildlife and historic buildings is not at all understood.

If the public and political interest in, and engagement with, geodiversity is somehow not as strong, then that is telling us something about the way our discipline is communicated to others. There is certainly a great deal of room for improvement in

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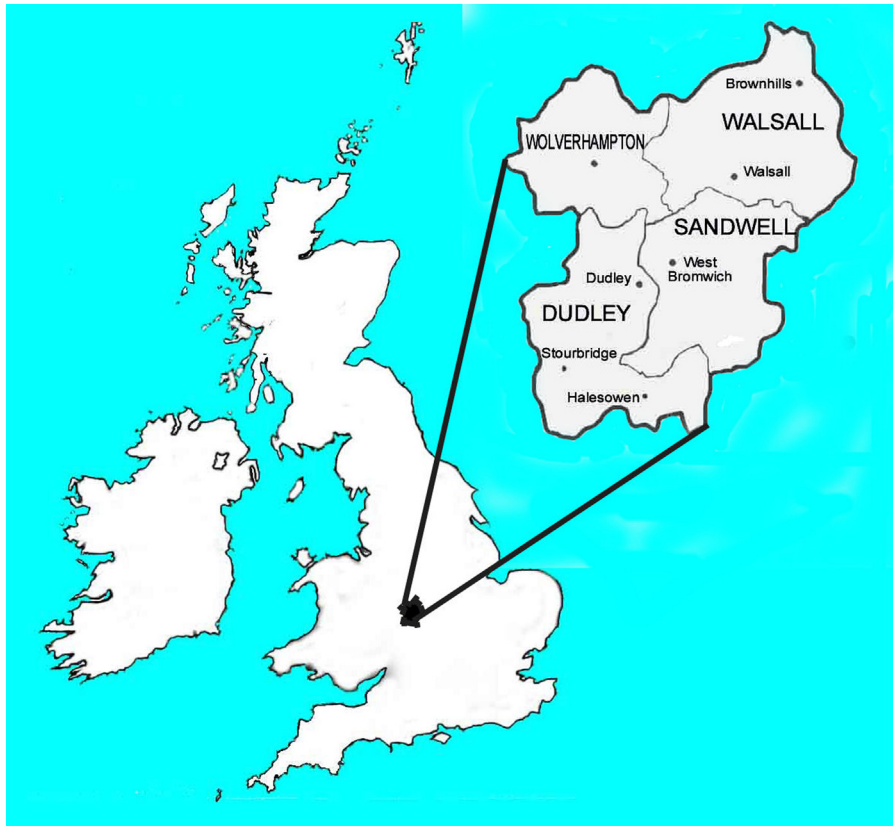


Fig. 1. The British Isles showing the location of the Black Country.

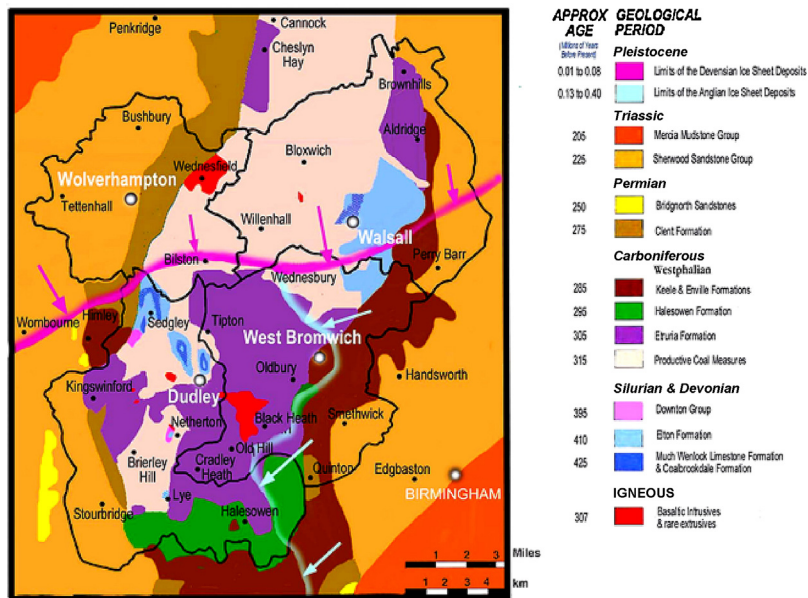


Fig. 2. A simplified geology of the Black Country and its surroundings. Reproduced by permission of the 'British Geological Survey @ NERC. All rights reserved. IPR/148-21CY.

how we promote geoscience to the masses (Stewart and Nield, 2013). There clearly is a need to change our approach before we undergo an 'extinction event' of those that understand and value geodiversity! So what can we offer to new audiences?

## 2. Joining people to local geodiversity

In this information rich age, engaging new people needs to generate shared 'real' experience rather than specialist imparted knowledge. Today and certainly in any foreseeable future, a

multiplicity of levels of information can be accessed through electronic media on demand. This is particularly familiar to the younger generation, so our role as 'experts', knowing 'facts', is in less demand. However, by providing rich personal geological experiences we can impart a deeper meaning to information and facts. If we can do this then we will encourage personal ownership and loyalty which are the vital elements in sustaining our geodiversity activity between the generations.

People need a reason to begin a lifelong relationship with geology. Usually this will be for recreational purposes or tourism

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