

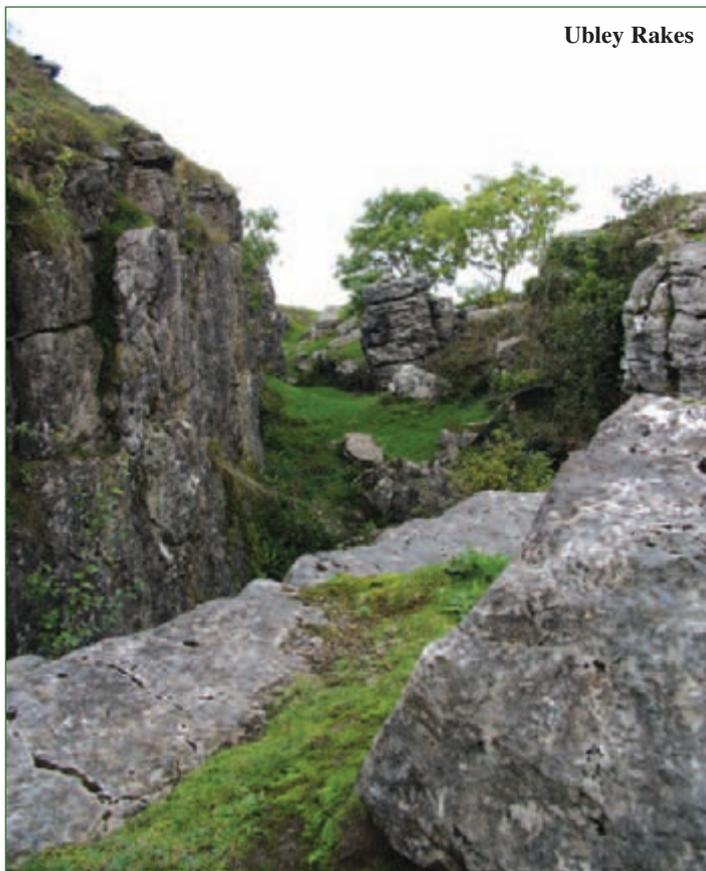
European geopark status for the Mendip Hills?

THE Mendip Hills AONB Partnership Annual Forum in November is to focus on European Geopark designation – what it is and what benefits it might bring to the area. If there is sufficient interest, work to make a case for designation will begin.

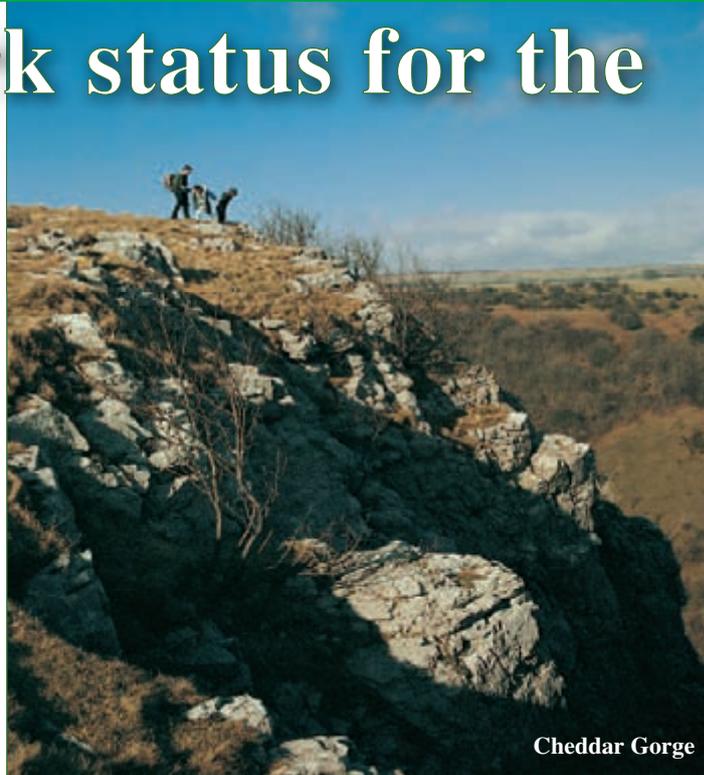
A European Geopark is an area, which has a particular geological heritage, with a sustainable development strategy supported by a program to promote geotourism. It must have clearly defined boundaries and sufficient surface area for true economic development. Geoparks must comprise a certain number of geological sites of particular importance in terms of their scientific quality, rarity, aesthetic appeal or educational value.

The majority of sites present in a European Geopark must be part of the geological heritage, but their interest may also be archaeological, ecological, historical or cultural. The sites are expected to have an active role in the economic development of the area with local geological heritage in mind and also have a direct impact on the area by influencing its residents' living conditions and local environment. The objective is to enable the residents to reprioritise the area's heritage and be involved in its cultural revitalisation as a whole.

Other areas within the UK have already acquired the European Geopark title including: North Pennines AONB,



Ubley Rakes



Cheddar Gorge

North West Highlands, Fforest Fawr, English Riviera, Lochaber, and Shetland.

So what would European Geopark status mean for the Mendip Hills and its residents? Firstly it would give the Mendip Hills European recognition for its geological beauty resulting in more people being aware of it. This would be likely to result in an increase in visitors who are attracted by its geological interest – geotourism – people coming to the region to enjoy the aesthetics or make use of its educational importance or indeed for the activities it offers. The Mendips are already known for some of the best climbing and caving in the country as well as tourist caves.

Geopark status for the Mendip Hills would build on the experience and knowledge of those currently involved in the above. It would be looking to manage the geological element of the Mendip Hills to protect and enhance its numerous caves, outcrops and historical and cultural sites. Features of the Mendip Hills, which make them so distinctive, will be enhanced and promoted for public appreciation and future preservation and the exceptional geological element of the Mendip Hills will be given the exposure and precedence it deserves.

Consideration of this additional designation is timely with the four-year English Heritage research project currently being concluded with a publication due in 2011 and the walkers guides and maps to the geology and landscape of Eastern Mendip and Western Mendip launched in 2008 by the British Geological Survey. There are also collections of finds and a wealth of research gathered over centuries by individuals including H.E Balch (1869- 1958) – pioneer of cave exploration (held at the Wells and Mendip Museum) and groups – including University of Bristol Spelaeological Society and local caving groups.

For further information see www.europeangeoparks.org or contact Mendip Hills AONB below.

The Mendip Hills AONB Unit is the voice of the protected landscape, working with landowners and the local community to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the area. www.mendiphillsaonb.org.uk
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