

Stonehammer UNESCO Global Geopark: geology and geotourism in New Brunswick, Canada

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Establishing North America's first global geopark has been a community effort. Starting as the Stonehammer Project in 2007, developing into Stonehammer Geopark by 2010 and finally evolving to Stonehammer UNESCO Global Geopark in 2015, this geopark was partly about turning a forgotten geological heritage into a geological park. Stonehammer was named for the Steinhammer Club founded in Saint John, New Brunswick in 1857. The club's enthusiasm for the complex geology on their doorstep was built on the work of Abraham Gesner and led to the development of the Natural History Society of New Brunswick, a strong 19th century geoscience presence in the Maritimes.

Geoparks are grassroots projects, built for sustainable economic development based on a region's rich geoscience heritage. Each is part of a global network now numbering 120 geoparks in 33 countries. While the geology must be of significant global value, geoparks must also demonstrate significant community engagement. That participation is partly through geotourism and the economic benefits it brings to communities. Geotourism for Stonehammer follows a focused perspective to provide interpretative facilities and activities to promote the value and social benefit of geologic sites and geoheritage, and encourage conservation for multiple uses.

Stonehammer's geotourism is built upon familiar landscapes and stories, existing sites and infrastructure, recognizing that many of the places of interest to geologists have attracted people for their natural and cultural appeal. Landscapes at the Reversing Falls, Rockwood Park, and Irving Nature Park in Saint John; the Bay of Fundy coast at St. Martins and the Fundy Trail Parkway; and cultural sites at covered bridges and historic Uptown Saint John all have rich geological stories. Stonehammer's strategy was to link existing parks and trails under a common geological theme. About 60 significant geological places, across 2500 km² currently comprise the park. The scenic landscape has resulted in a rich mosaic of parks depending on geology for their beauty, but with little prior interpretation of the rocks. About a dozen of the key geosites are publicly accessible. The use of existing infrastructure was a deliberate attempt to add geological interpretation to places familiar to the community and independently funded. Activities are offered by independent businesses, 'experience providers' who incorporate geological themes into their offerings or develop new products showcasing Stonehammer. The geopark project provided an outlet for the inner geologist inside everyone to explore geosciences and make some sense of the local geological landscape.