
Geotourism in Saint John, New Brunswick

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Geotourism definitions range from the global view of “Tourism that sustains or enhances the geographical character of a place—its environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and the well-being of its residents” to a more focused perspective where “Geotourism is tourism surrounding geological attractions and destinations”. Geotourism, based on the observation and understanding of geology, is a growing part of the tourism market. While geotourism is not new, the development of the European Geoparks Network and the UNESCO Geopark program are providing models for engaging the public in the appreciation of geology that link sustainable economic development with the preservation and interpretation of geology. We think of geotourism destinations as sites with dramatic landscapes and obvious interpretive and geological impact, but there are other opportunities to incorporate less obvious geological stories into the tourism and public realm. With support from the Community–University Research Alliances (CURA-SSHRC) we have been exploring geotourism opportunities in the Saint John region. Interest has come in part from the tourism industry, seeking to enhance a product that includes exploitation of cultural and natural attractions in a market that strives to provide unique experiences for visitors. In Saint John, boat tours of the Reversing Falls have added the geological story of the gorge to their traditional interpretation of the tides. Kayak tour guides are seeking information about geology to enhance their stories of the natural and cultural landscape. Trail designers are looking for information to develop interpretive signs along walkways. Tour operators working the cruise ship market have considered tours of geological sites for ship passengers. Our strategy for enhancing geotourism includes research and development of human interest stories. Viewing the ‘study of geology’ as important as the science reminds us that geoscience is part of society. This region has promoted its shipbuilding heritage and stories of owners, builders and sailors. The same cannot be said of its geoscience heritage and the people who explored and interpreted the rocks. Nevertheless geoheritage stories captivate the public. The Pennsylvanian geology of west Saint John has puzzled geologists for 150 years. Synthesizing the science into a 30-minute tour can be difficult. But who is not intrigued by the visit of a colourful character like Marie Stopes (both a paleobotanist and a pioneer in the sexual revolution) to Saint John in 1911, and her efforts to reconcile a bitter debate about the age of the rocks at “Fern Ledges”?