

## **Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site**

Date of Inscription: 1986

Criteria: vii, viii

Date of draft: August 2010

### **Brief Synthesis**

The Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast World Heritage Site is a spectacular area of global earth science interest straddling the north coast of Northern Ireland. It includes sea cliffs, shoreline features and undersea boulder fields. Celebrated in the arts and in science, it has been a visitor attraction for at least 300 years and has come to be regarded as a symbol for Northern Ireland.

The site's accessible array of curious geological exposures and polygonal columnar formations formed over 60 million years ago, make it a 'classic locality' for the study of Palaeogene (formerly referred to as Tertiary) basalts. The Giant's Causeway site, and in particular the strata exposed in the cliff faces, have been key to shaping the understanding of the sequences of activity in the Earth's geological history.

### **Criteria for Inscription**

**Criterion viii (formerly 1986 natural criterion i):** *be outstanding examples representing the major stages of the earth's evolutionary history;*

The geological activity of the Tertiary era is clearly illustrated by the succession of the lava flows and interbasaltic beds which are in evidence on the Causeway Coast. Interpretation of the succession has allowed a detailed analysis of Tertiary events in the North Atlantic. The extremely regular columnar joining of the Tholeiitic basalts is a spectacular feature which is displayed in exemplary fashion at the Giant's Causeway. The Causeway itself is a unique formation and a superlative horizontal section through columnar basalt lavas

**Criterion vii (formerly 1986 natural criterion iii):** *contain superlative natural phenomena, formations or features, for instance, outstanding examples of the most important ecosystems, areas of exceptional natural beauty or exceptional combinations of natural and cultural elements;*

The cliff exposures of columnar and massive basalt at the edge of the Antrim Plateau present a spectacle of exceptional natural beauty. The extent of visible rock sections and the quality of the exposed columns in the cliff and on the Causeway combine to present an array of features of considerable significance.

### **Integrity**

In 1986, IUCN identified the key attributes of the site which conveyed the Outstanding Universal Value, assessed the integrity of these attributes and confirmed that the property met the criteria for inscription. It also evaluated the site in comparison with other sites in different parts of the world offering similar natural formations.

The Site's integrity has not been compromised since inscription. The cliff exposures and causeway stones, which are held to be the key attributes, are protected by ownership in

perpetuity by The National Trust. The removal of 'souvenir' stones from the Causeway, which occurred before the Site was protected, has long since ceased.

### **Protection and Management Requirements**

The UK Government protects World Heritage Sites and their settings under the spatial planning system through a hierarchy of regional and local policies and plans. Strategic plans 'protect the World Heritage Site of the Giant's Causeway...respecting and protecting its setting, conserving its physical features, managing change, and controlling access and tourism impacts in a sensitive way'. The surrounding Causeway Coast Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) provides the Site with additional incidental policy protection. Planning Policy Statement 6 Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage provides recognition of WHSs and their settings in Area Development plans.

There is a presumption in favour of the preservation of WHS. Within the Site and in the surrounding 'setting' (as defined through the planning system) restrictive policies on development apply, with 'development which would adversely affect such sites or the integrity of their settings ...not permitted unless there are exceptional circumstances.'

Besides the WHS inscription, the Site benefits from several other designations for its outstanding conservation interest. Virtually all of the terrestrial area of the WHS falls within the North Antrim Coast Special Area of Conservation (SAC) designated under the Habitats Directive (Natura 2000): for this designation, the key feature is the vegetated sea cliffs. Other nature conservation designations contributing to the protection of the area include the Giant's Causeway National Nature Reserve (NNR), and the Giant's Causeway and Dunseverick Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI).

The National Trust holds most of the land in inalienable ownership, with approximately 5% of the Site remaining in private ownership. The Crown Estate is considered the legal owner of all lands between high and low water mark and it has rights over the sea bed within territorial waters. In 2012, the National Trust will open a new world-class visitor centre at the Site, at the same time improving both the visitor experience and the integration of visitor facilities into the landscape.

An update of the World Heritage Site Management Plan (2005-11) is currently being prepared. The drafting of the management plan, and its subsequent implementation, is overseen by a World Heritage Management Group comprising relevant stakeholders. This management framework marries the integrity management requirements for the property arising from all the various designations with the delivery of a world-class visitor experience.

The WHS management plan acknowledges that the continuing effects of natural erosion will gradually alter the cliff exposures, and that path routes (and perhaps even site boundaries) may need to be changed to accommodate the effects of this process. Changes in sea level or an increased frequency of storm events may also, in the future, affect the degree to which the causeway is accessible or visible. The current management plan includes monitoring of climate change and erosion.

In summary, the main risks to the Outstanding Universal Value of this WHS are:

- attrition of natural features through natural processes such as cliff erosion or sea level change. Monitoring of erosion events is ongoing.
- damage to natural features through human impact is mitigated by legal control and management by the National Trust.

- damage to the setting through human impact through inappropriate development or land use. Mitigated through legal and spatial planning control measures.

Mitigation measures are considered adequate to the levels of risk posed.