

Integrated assessment of geoheritage resources for geoconservation and sustainable geotourism in Malësi e Madhe, Albania

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ABSTRACT: Mountainous rural areas often contain geological and geomorphological features with important scientific, educational, and tourism value, but their use for geotourism requires careful consideration of accessibility, visitor safety, site sensitivity, and conservation needs. This study assesses the geoheritage resources of Malësi e Madhe Municipality, northern Albania, with the aim of examining how selected geosites can support geoconservation, geoeducation, and sustainable geotourism. An initial review of 32 officially recognised natural monuments identified 22 geomonuments, from which 12 representative geosites were selected for detailed assessment. The study combined documentary research, thematic mapping, field observations, photographic documentation, and an exploratory local stakeholder questionnaire. Each geosite was assessed separately for scientific value, educational potential, tourism potential, and degradation risk using a semi-quantitative 0–4 scale. The results indicate that accessible and clearly observable surface geosites generally provide stronger opportunities for educational and tourism use, whereas caves and karst shafts, although scientifically significant, are more constrained by difficult access, visitor-safety concerns, and higher sensitivity to degradation. On this basis, three management profiles are proposed: public educational use, guided or seasonally controlled use, and restricted or specialist use. The study contributes a practical municipality-scale approach that links geoheritage assessment with differentiated site management, interpretation, access planning, and conservation. Its findings also underline the need to avoid treating tourism potential as equivalent to actual tourism demand and to adapt geotourism development to the specific physical and management conditions of each site. The results are limited to the 12 assessed geosites and should be regarded as an initial evidence base for further geological, ecological, safety, visitor-use, and carrying-capacity studies.

KEYWORDS: geoheritage assessment, geoconservation, visitor safety, degradation risk, karst landscapes, management planning, Albanian Alps

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