

## Research Article

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# Space and Time Perception and the Geopark's Communities. From Mythical Geography to Heritage Interpretation

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**Abstract:** A geopark is a complex protected area, combining time scales, nature, culture, man and Earth. Since its creation, Hațeg Geopark uses an innovative approach on community involvement based not only on the tangible culture, but also on the intangible heritage, geographical information, myths and beliefs. The Geopark uses popular geographical knowledge to map the local space perception, to investigate the imaginative geographies and to capture the memory of the communities. This data, combined with scientific facts, forms the Interpretation Strategy of the region. The aim of this study is to show the theoretical framework of working with popular geographical knowledge and its practical uses in heritage interpretation: strategy, infrastructure, identity and perpetuated cultural values.

**Keywords:** popular geographical knowledge, Mythical Geography, geopark, geoconservation, heritage interpretation, Imaginative Geographies

## Introduction

'Geoparks, a UNESCO initiative, are the 21st century's new territories, where conservation and enhancement of geological heritage cohabit with experimentation and sustainable development' (Martini, 2009: 86). A geopark is a complex protected area, where the interpretation of Earth's heritage meets the local communities' space and history. It implies important geological features and it is meant to protect and promote geological heritage, as it was first introduced as a concept in 1991 at the Digne

Convention (Jones, 2008: 273). The geopark philosophy developed in the following years involved more than geology and focused on the local development of special territories through sustainable activities. After becoming a UNESCO Programme, in 2015, comprising 120 territories in 33 states worldwide, a UNESCO Global Geopark is defined as:

*...single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development. A UNESCO Global Geopark uses its geological heritage, in connection with all other aspects of the area's natural and cultural heritage, to enhance awareness and understanding of key issues facing society, [...]. By raising awareness of the importance of the area's geological heritage in history and society today, UNESCO Global Geoparks give local people a sense of pride in their region and strengthen their identification with the area. (UNESCO Global Geoparks, 2016: 2)*

Following these guidelines, between 2000 and 2004, the University of Bucharest created the first geopark in the ex-communist Europe – Hațeg Country Dinosaurs Geopark. It was declared as a national protected area in 2004 and it joined the European Geoparks Network and the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network in 2005. The territory of the Hațeg Geopark covers the Hațeg basin, a depression in the Transylvanian Carpathians, and some of the surrounding mountains, having a total area of around 1000 km<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). Inside this territory there are 11 communities and over 100 villages, with a total of around 35.000 inhabitants. Hațeg Geopark is the only protected area in Romania being administered by a university and one of the few having been established after a bottom-up approach.

The protected areas landscape of Romania as a post socialist state is a very divers and tumultuous one. The state doesn't financially support the protected areas, leaving its administrators and custodians to find their own income sources. As a result, many protected areas are under a lot of pressure from economic stakeholders. On the

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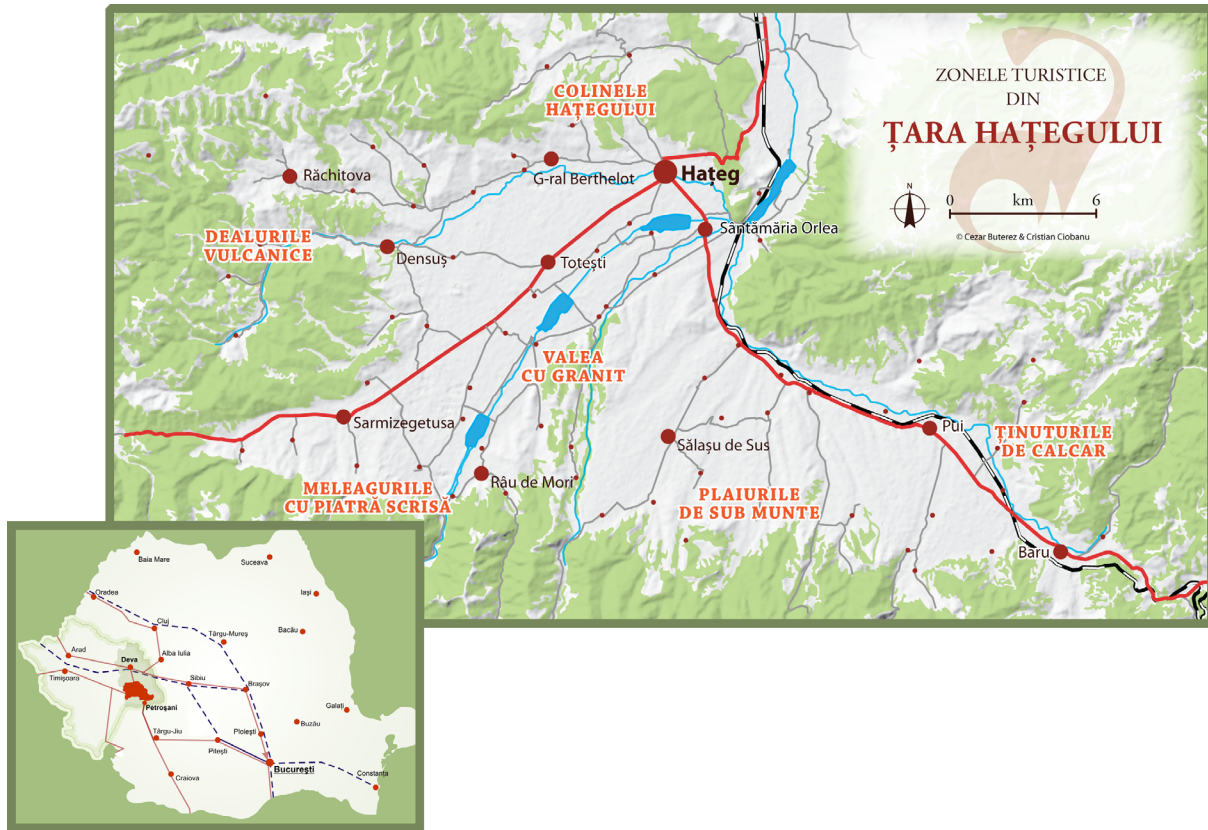


Figure 1: Position and relief of the Hațeg Basin (Ciobanu and Buterez, 2013)

other hand most of the protected areas are declared by the state without the participation of the local communities. This situation, combined with the constant preoccupation of the environmental NGOs to develop projects in these areas, has often left the local inhabitants with only a decorative role. As Andrașanu (2015) states, the concern about the local communities in protected areas is in many cases only declarative, in reality the communication and promotion materials, deriving from projects implemented in protected areas, show only tourists coming to see and learn, regardless of what the locals think or do. The only situation in which the locals appear in these materials is associated with ancient crafts or traditional costumes, as if they are condemned to freeze in time and not to develop any further. This is a dangerous tendency reminding of the appearance of imaginative geographies as a critical reaction to orientalism (Gregory et al. 2009: 370).

In its administrative role, the University of Bucharest gives the proper importance to the local community of Hațeg especially regarding the geotourism infrastructure and the education and interpretation strategies. This paper shows the theoretical framework and the results of the Geopark's Administration in using the local popular geographical knowledge to shape the heritage interpretation strategy.

## Theoretical framework and methodology

Popular geographical knowledge is a collection of space related information developed by a community. It ranges from practical knowledge about space to imagined places based on myths and beliefs. It can refer to a group's space perception of a region for example the mental maps in Figures 2 and 3, but it covers also the Mythical Geography of real or imagined places like the deep meanings of a crossroad or the geography of Heaven and Hell.

This particular type of geographical information forms a community's view of the world and its attempt to make sense of things, to explain Nature and to explore Space. It is an alternative space, dominated by *practical* and *experience*, combined with *faith* and *imagination*.

All this knowledge can easily be dismissed by the academics as being trivial, primitive, wrong or not interesting, but for a territory that wants to enhance identity, this is a goldmine. Consequently the Geopark's Interpretation Strategy integrates popular geographical knowledge with scientific information, it focuses on both the story of science and the story of the people.

The alternative space described by popular geographical knowledge is in the same time a perceived space which forms a local mental map, an imagined space with mythical features and a space of memory, a repository of past images. Thus, it is a subject at the border of several fields of study. The most important are geography, philosophy and sociology, which have a long preoccupation in analysing alternative spaces.

In 1947, J. K. Wright showed the importance of imagination, subjectivity and aesthetics in geography. Wright also defines geosophy as '*the study of geographical knowledge from any or all points of view*'. These ideas are the starting point of several geographical approaches, having perception as their central notion (Nicolae, 2011: 198).

The importance of perception was developed by Behaviourism (Gold, 1980) and then transformed by the Imaginative approach (Said, 1985; Light, 2008).

The most important works in this field belong to Tuan (1974, 1977, 2003, 2009). He defines Mythical Space (1977: 85) as the space outside our experience and also as the spatial component of our world view. Close to this notion is also Cocean's '*mental space*' (2004) defined as a territory which a community integrates into its existential values.

Mythical Geography comprises some of the popular geographical knowledge. It is the case for real, concrete places which have other meanings rooted in local myths and beliefs, or imagined places on Earth or elsewhere. Mythical Geography, used in this study, is defined as an informal set of knowledge which assures the purpose of geography in general: '*to give Man an orderly description of his World*' (Taaffe, 1970: 5). It explains natural phenomena and it can be used for mapping the known world; it describes all that is related to space, from the creation of the World to where it would be a good place to build a house (Ciobanu, 2013: 28).

In the absence of writing, this set of spatial information was kept in a system of customs and beliefs and transmitted through generations as a Good Practice Guide on space related problems. Some of it is still in use and one of the objectives of this study is to find out what part of it and why.

Mythical Geography is defined by Donescu (2008: 22) as an *informal, naive geography, at the border with psychology and ethnology, which explains the world through a system of experienced facts, beliefs, customs and imagination*. The term has other significances outside geography or close related to it (Devereux, 2010: 6), it generally means places of a sacred significance. Other notions with comparable meaning are sacred geography and geomancy (Pogacnik, 2007: 2).

Identity is an important characteristic of the Mythical Geography of a group of people inhabiting a place, because it gives an idea about who those people are. As Tuan (2003: 878-879) put it, '*...people need to have a strong sense of who they are, which they can have only when they are rooted in customs and habits of a particular place.*' and '*place matters [...] because is a repository of the past*'.

Even in present days, space is mythicized by the modern people, as Eliade (1956: 24) underlines: '*There are, for example, privileged places, qualitatively different from all others – a man's birthplace, or the scenes of his first love...*'

In the second half of the XXth century we find three very important approaches of alternative spaces: Foucault's '*Des espaces autres*' (1967); Lefebvre's '*La production de l'espace*' (1974) and Perec's '*Especies d'espaces*' (1974). Perec proposes the re-examination of our own relation with different spaces, from the one on a white sheet of paper to the Universe. On another hand, Foucault shapes the mental space and proposes typologies of the present space. Amongst the exterior categories of space, the author defines the heterotopies as real utopic spaces, where one can evade from the mundane. Foucault's ideas were analysed in a multidisciplinary way in 2001 during a symposium under the coordination of Ciprian Mihali, the result being a modern philosophical approach on mental spaces.

The alternative space created by popular geographical knowledge can be associated with Lefebvre's *third space* or *social space*. This dimension of space is of a complex nature, composed by multiple levels and having several different meanings. Soja (1996) follows Lefebvre in presenting a series of *relational spaces*, a notion also suitable for naming the complex spaces generated by popular information. For example the same piece of land from a village in Hațeg Region could mean, in the same time, a garden for the local owner, a good place for a restaurant for a tourism investor, a possible fossil site for a palaeontologist or a place of great personal significance for someone.

Studies involving Mythical Geography have been done in other domains: philosophy (Blaga, 1944), history of religion (Eliade, 1956) and of course ethnology (Gherman, 1928; Ghinoiu, 2004; Niculiță-Voronca, 2008; Semuc, 2008; Bădescu et al., 2009; Olteanu, 2009).

Popular geographical knowledge is more complex and at present in the case of (semi) isolated regions with a rich and old culture. Hațeg Region fits this description. It is a clearly limited space with one thousand years of recorded history. The complex interaction between man and nature found here is the reason for the creation of the Hațeg Country Dinosaurs Geopark.

The notion of Mythical Geography is strongly related to the Intangible Heritage term, in the sense that it focuses on the peoples own view of the world around them. The Geoparks and Intangible Cultural Heritage Working Group (GICHWG) of the European Geoparks Network and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage define Intangible Heritage as:

*...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (GICHWG, 2016)*

There are five domains of the Intangible Cultural Heritage:

1. Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
2. Performing arts;
3. Social practices, rituals and festive events;
4. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
5. Traditional craftsmanship.

to which we add a UNESCO Programme:

- Living Human Treasures
- and a UNESCO thematic initiative:
- Religious and Sacred Sites

Mythical Geography deals with the 4<sup>th</sup> domain, Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and especially with the Religious and Sacred Sites Thematic Initiative

This study is part of an ongoing research made by the Geoparks Administration. The primary data used here was gathered during the projects and programmes implemented by the Geopark since 2004 focusing on the *Popular Geographical Knowledge of Hațeg Region* – finding the mythical space features and on the *Identity in Hațeg Region* – finding the spatial symbols of belonging. The most important primary data resources were collected during the projects:

- *Preliminary data for the creation of the Geopark*, qualitative and quantitative data gathered by multidisciplinary volunteer teams who visited all villages in the region. The information was comprised in a locality sheet and contained administrative data (number of inhabitants, population structure,

economic indicators etc.), social data (living standards, social groups, leaders of opinion, resource persons etc.), ethnographic data (space perception, customs, beliefs, myths etc.). This was coupled with unstructured interviews, discussions and focus groups.

- *Santamaria Orlea – European Self Portrait* (2006), qualitative and quantitative data gathered by multidisciplinary teams (sociology, ethnography, anthropology, geography, architecture, biology and geology) and by the locals themselves. The purpose of the project was to encourage the inhabitants to tell their own story about themselves, rather than to be an object of study for the specialists. The most useful qualitative data was gathered by letting the locals choose what objects to put in the exhibition opened in Bucharest, at the Peasant's Museum. Another set of important data were the photographs took by local children when asked to show the village as they see it. A part of the results were published (*'Poveștile Nanei Vineruca', 'Vorbe și bucate', 'Ghid de călătorie', 'Port și Purtări', 'Autoportret', 'Meserii', 'Vorbe și cântări cu Nea Doenel Vulc'*).
- *The Identity Map of Santamaria Orlea Community* (since 2013), qualitative data of the community's mental space, namely the paths, limits, landmarks, good or bad places. This is an ongoing project managed by the teachers of the Santamaria Orlea School.
- *A Century in Pictures* (2011), qualitative data about the paleoimages of local mental space, put together by the children from Densuș School.
- *Activities of the Explorers Children Clubs* (since 2013) and the *Programme Volunteers for the Geopark* (since 2013), qualitative and quantitative data gathered during several projects. The most relevant are two surveys applied in 2015, one investigating the mental map of Hațeg Region seen by the young locals and the other being a study about the identity pillars of the Hațeg communities.

## Mental space features of the Hațeg Region

The perceived space in the Hațeg Region is dominated by three key elements:

1. *The clearly defined enclosed space limited by mountains which defines the region;*
2. *The resources as the basis of the local economy and the main reason for human activity and culture*



intangible local heritages and valuable in the Geopark's approach on interpretation (Andrășanu, 2015).

3. Hațeg Region has a very rich recorded history. The ancient Roman capital Sarmizegetusa Ulpia Traiana was here, while the Dacian capital is situated in the neighbouring Șureanu Mountains. Medieval towers, fortresses and stone churches, 18<sup>th</sup> century mansions and castles as well as natural features complete the landmarks landscape. Thus, each community in this region has at least one monument (cultural or natural) which they recognize as an *identity pillar* and a mental space landmark. Usually these features are also the main touristic attractions. The strategy of the Geopark is not to superimpose the academic interpretations of these features, but to integrate both the scientific and the local stories involving that particular heritage element. For example the *Peșteana Marsh* is a natural reserve protecting the carnivorous plant *Drosera rotundifolia*. In the same time, the place is known by the name of *The Bottomless Pond*, being the centre of many legends involving evil monsters that hunt animals and people and drag them into the pond which has no bottom, but communicates with the Black Sea through a tunnel.

This approach on tourism interpretation and particular on geotourism follows the Arouca Declaration (2011), which at point four states:

*We encourage territories to develop geotourism focused not only on the environment and geological heritage, but also on cultural, historical and scenic value. In this sense, we encourage the effective involvement of local citizens and visitors, so they are not restricted to the role of tourist spectators, thus helping to build a local identity and promote what is authentic and unique in the territory. In this way we ensure that the territory and its inhabitants obtain environmental integrity, social justice and sustainable economic development.*

## Time of Man/Time of Earth

A Geopark has to offer a time dimension and a dynamic vision of its territory as a whole and in particular to the special sites subject of interpretation. The perception of time is essential not only to understanding the geological and historical phenomena, but also to raise the awareness about the fact that present actions will influence the future. The best examples in this case are climate change and risk management issues.

There are two different time scales and consequently two stories for the heritage interpretation:

1. The Story of Earth. It starts in the same time as the formation of the Planet and it explains everything that happened on Earth using Geological Time;

2. The Story of Man. It starts with the factual traces of humans and it follows the cultural events that happened on Earth since then using Historical Time.

Both these stories can be applied either on micro space or on macro space.

### Macro space - cosmogony

The cosmogony in traditional mythology can have the most diverse forms, but all see space as totally sacred from the beginning because is made by the divinity. In some myths God makes the Earth out of sand from the bottom of the sea, but the Earth is too large to fit under the sky so God shrinks it and this is how hills and mountains were formed. An interesting fact is that every cosmogony myth has water as the primordial element.

### Micro space – the rituals

The space is explained and often sacralised in the small human universe in order to give meaning to all things. Similar to the macro creation, man had to create its own universe. This small creation starts from a primordial point from which all space receives its meaning, a reference point that makes the rest to be up or down, east or west, good or evil.

*For it is the break effected in space that allows the world to be constituted, because it reveals the fixed point, the central axis for all future orientation. When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no orientation can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center [...]*

*If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded-and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space. The discovery or projection of a fixed point - the center - is equivalent to the creation of the world. (Eliade, 1956: 21-22)*

Starting from that point all spaces receive certain meanings, the final purpose being to arrange things, to explain them and to give them meaning. In the Hațeg region there are still places with sacred significance like the threshold, the intersection or the boundary. There are also points of communication with other worlds like waters, the mirror, the rainbow or the chimney. All this is a depository of knowledge about Earth and the cosmic space so precise that an old person may have known



more about heaven, hell and the stars than about the neighboring village.

## Heritage interpretation in the Geopark

### The interpretation strategy

The interpretation strategy takes into account how local people view their heritage and how they are mapping their spaces and places. The tagline is ‘*Journey through Ages*’ in order to underline and combine the two types of time scales. The map (Figure 4) shows the distribution of sites and trails, grouped in four categories:

- *Terra* – geodiversity sites,
- *Natura* – biodiversity sites,
- *Aegis* – monuments and
- *Fabula* – local traditions.

The trails on the map are the focus of the interpretation strategy, they follow the paths and nodes of local mental maps and also the most important heritage elements identified by scientific studies. The Interpretation Strategy Map follows

a multidisciplinary approach as it is constructed with data collected during more than 10 years of studies made by teams of geologists, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, biologists, architects and artists. The innovative aspect of the map is that the scientific information gathered for interpretation is combined with the popular geographical knowledge of the locals.

Hațeg area is the place of some unique dinosaur species dating from the Upper Cretaceous. These fossils were actually the basis of creating the Geopark in the first place and the particular geological outstanding feature characterizing the territory. At the same time this region has a long history of different cultures that started in Palaeolithic and continued to Bronze Age, Dacian and Roman times, Medieval up to modern times.

The question rising from these two time scales is how can we expand Historical Time in order to make people (both local and visitors) to relate to the Geological Time. The answer is the core of the Geopark’s Interpretation Strategy following the Arouca Declaration (2011):

1. *Information must be accessible and intelligible for the general public, presented in a few basic concepts and with clarity, resulting in the combined efforts of scientists, interpretation experts and designers;*
2. *Any presentation of geological heritage that does*

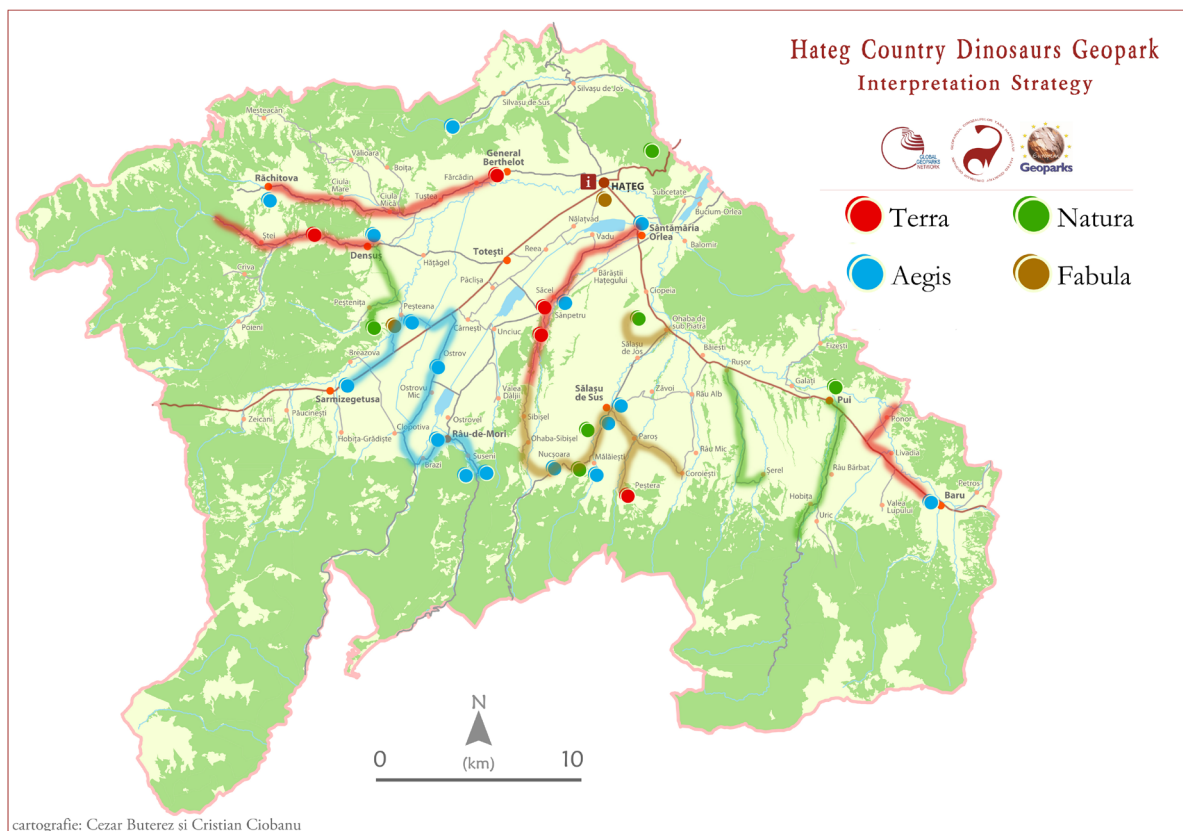


Figure 4: Interpretation Strategy Map (Ciobanu and Buterez, 2013)

*not somehow relate to something in the personal experience of the visitor will be sterile;*

3. *Information is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information. The two things are entirely different, but all interpretation includes information;*
4. *The interpretation of a natural space must provoke and arouse curiosity and emotion much more than teaching;*
5. *Locals and visitors must be involved, must have an active role in the interpretation process.*

Furthermore, the two time scales can be integrating using a new and unique concept – Past-Present-Future (PPF). This concept proposes an interpretation approach which allow space to be *felt* and time to be *thought*. This means to interpret a particular site not only using the present and the past but also to simulate several *futures*, by doing so we can ‘*set the present within a past-future continuum*’ (Martini, 2009: 90).

## Trails and Interpretation Points

The Strategy proposes not to build a single grand visitors’ centre, but to develop small interpretation points inside every community emphasizing the particularity of that community. The result is a series of *Houses*: *House of Dwarf Dinosaurs*, *House of Volcanoes*, *House of Miniatures*, *House of Traditions* etc. One example is the creation of the *House of Dwarf Dinosaurs* and the *House of Traditions* in the Sânpetru community, to interpret both the traditional values and the new, scientific facts. At the same time, the permanent exhibition ‘*Balaurs, Dragons, Dinosaurs*’ at the Geopark’s Headquarters in Hațeg town, uses tradition, myth and science to interpret the connection between fabulous animals and dinosaurs.

Other examples of interpretation using mythical geography are the trails: The Lime Road is a mental path at the bottom of the Retezat Mountains used to carry limestone from the village of Peștera (The Cave), marked by lime kilns, whirlpools and river mills. The Geopark created the trail and also the Traditional Technical Complex of Peștera to interpret both the space memory and the scientific significations.

## Identity Pillars

Literature on this subject (Tuan, 2003: 878-879; Eliade, 1956:24) underlines the connection between space, myth and identity, leading to self-esteem and development of the community. The Geopark’s objective is to see the

mechanisms involved in this relation and the extent of Mythical Space influence on identity. To achieve this the Geopark’s Administration is gathering data on what the locals identify with (e.g. some surveys show *Retezat Mountains*, the *Roman Ruins* and the *Stone Churches* as the main three general basis of identity, more or less related to space). An interesting fact is seeing if there are some new additions to this *pantheon* of symbols (e.g. the unique dinosaur species found here since 1900) and if they are space related.

The next stage is to create a theoretical model to be implemented in the official Heritage Management Strategy of the Geopark having Mythical Geography as the main tool of re-enhancing local identity.

The communities of Hațeg area have social and economic difficulties. The lack of a professional perspective makes the young people to find success elsewhere. The economic problems made the systems of values to change, bringing financial success on top of integrity, morals or value. One of the tasks of a geopark is to enhance the identity of the communities and their deep connection with Earth as a way of sustainable development (e.g. the fast rivers coming from the mountains and several types of stone provided by the same mountains led to the development of water mills in *Râu de Mori* village meaning ‘*Mills’ River*’).

## Best Practice Guide

Finding the Best Practice Guide on space related issues that are still in use, (e.g. People from some villages have a lot of unwritten rules when it comes to building a house) by gathering every information about the household, the weather, health, food, drinks, arts and crafts etc. is an ongoing preoccupation for the Geopark. This means to collect primary data from the inhabitants about their spatial and to compare it with secondary data about the traditional spatial beliefs. Some of the data were already published (Mihalache and Pascu, 2006), other is yet to be completed.

## Conclusion

Hațeg Geopark is a UNESCO Global Geopark created and administered by the University of Bucharest through a bottom-up approach. Its education activities, tourism infrastructure and interpretation strategy are created with a great importance given to the locals and their culture.

Using the theoretical tools provided by Mythical Geography and the Geoparks Intangible Cultural Heritage Work Group, the Geopark’s Administration collects data



and shapes its strategies according to the local popular geographical knowledge and adding the scientific information. Since 2001, all the projects and initiatives implemented by the Geopark had this component and each of them was a step forward.

The result is an innovative interpretation strategy that takes into account both Geological Time and Historical Time, macro space and micro space, scientific facts and myths, beliefs and memory. Thus, the heritage interpretation process consists not only in transforming the scientific data, but also combining it with local popular knowledge. The results are used to enhance the local identity in order for the communities to benefit from it.

The Geopark's approach on involving the local communities along with their culture, tangible and intangible, real or perceived, could establish a model of territorial development and heritage interpretation.

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