# CHAPTER I



La Grunj – Volcanic tuff (white volcanic ash) – Mânzălești (photo by the author).




The optimum geopark territory.

# Geoparks as the Territories of the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Every local culture reflects how people use a given territory, how natural complexity has long structured its human and cultural landscapes, how communities have interacted with one another, and how people value their local resources and history. A UNESCO Global Geopark is a valuable model of cooperation for turning a region's exceptional geological and cultural heritage into an economic, social, and educational resource.

The chapter reconstructs the making of the Buzău Land Geopark from its initiation in 2007 to its UNESCO designation in 2022 and revalidation in 2025. It argues that geoparks are far more than honorific titles; they are active, multi-stakeholder tools for territorial governance. The analysis is structured around five key operational elements: optimum territory, partnerships, governance, networking, and interpretation for education and tourism. Each is documented and validated through multidisciplinary research, community participation, public debate, international cooperation, and know-how transfer in an evolving socio-economic context.

Geoparks are an expression of respect for the past and a promise for the future; they are the new territories of development and resilience in the 21st century, as demonstrated by the continually growing Global Geoparks Network — 241 territories from 51 countries as of 2026 — within the framework of the UNESCO International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme.

## From concept to practice

The Global Geopark Concept emerged from the persistent efforts of committed specialists, coupled with innovation and international collaboration over the past 35 years. This innovative approach is based on leveraging local geodiversity and geological heritage—not only as a newly recognized value but also as a fundamental natural asset that enhances biodiversity, plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural identity of local communities, and contributes to the formation of unique landscapes. In 2000, four territories—the Réserve Géologique de Haute-Provence (France), the Vulkaneifel Geo-Park (Germany), the Lesvos Petrified Forest (Greece), and the Maestrazgo Cultural Park (Spain)—founded the European Geoparks Network (EGN), paving the way for global collaboration and innovation in geopark management. This initiative subsequently led to the creation of the Global Geoparks Network (GGN) in 2004 (Zouros 2004).

Due to the conceptual elements of geoparks and the measurable impact of those belonging to the Global Geoparks Network—which can be transferred across varied economic and

cultural contexts — the need for UNESCO's most recent program, the International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme (IGGP), arose in 2015.[1]

The adoption of the UNESCO program originated at the territorial level—a bottom-up process reflecting the desire of local communities to establish a geopark based on common engagement and partnership, and aligned with their own values, without government intervention. Furthermore, the evaluation and acceptance of a geopark as a UNESCO designation, as well as its continuous revalidation every four years, represent the recognition of this open process, supporting sustainable development and promoting local values at both national and international levels.

At first glance, the term "Geopark" evokes the idea of a natural park that conserves geological features, or even an amusement park—a kind of geological "Disneyland"—where the main attraction is the geology of an area. However, the term "geo" refers to the Earth in the primordial sense of Gaia, the ancient Greek goddess, to whom humanity and our civilization are intrinsically linked. A geopark is essentially, about people, and about the way in which human communities have built their identity by continuously using the natural resources resulting from the billions of years of the Earth's evolution. UNESCO Global Geoparks are territories that invite us to rediscover the connections between humans and the Earth and demonstrates how human history is intrinsically bound to our planet's history. Geopark uncover and narrate the stories of rocks, fossils, lost worlds, changes, natural resources, ancient communities, raw materials, and local cultural heritage (Andrășanu 2017).

An online search for the term "Geopark" yields several hundred thousand results originating from all geographic regions. The vast majority of this information concerns either ongoing geopark and geopark projects or to the general concept, as reflected in dedicated webpages, publications, and events. A geopark is an entrepreneurial strategy for building a brand around a clearly defined administrative, cultural, geographical, and historical territory. It serves as a tool for heritage enhancement, providing a basis for social, economic, and cultural development. As a means of promoting the Earth's billions of years of history and its right to memory, the Geopark has become one of the most dynamic concepts in recent years. As of 2026, there are 241 UNESCO territories from 51 countries, members of the Global Geoparks Network, a number which continues to grow.

An external observer may interpret the designation of a territory as a UNESCO Global Geopark (UGGp) as purely honorific or nominal recognition. However, it is crucial to distinguish between the formal UNESCO application process, which takes nearly three years, and the entire preparatory work that takes place beforehand. International and Romanian experience indicates that substantial work must be completed before the official timeline even begins. This includes a critical reflection on the geological and cultural values of the area, along with conducting feasibility studies, completing scientific inventories of geological sites, establishing a local governance structure and management team, developing a community-based sustainable development plan, national and international cooperation with other geoparks, and very important integrated interpretation of the local heritage for education and tourism.

## The making of the Buzău Land UNESCO Global Geopark

Although one might assume that the Buzău Land Geopark came into existence only at the time of its UNESCO designation (in 2022), the initiative actually began in 2007, fifteen years

prior to that recognition. The effort to create a geopark in the Buzău region was originally set in motion by representatives of the University of Bucharest (Faculty of Geology's Geomedia Centre), acting in partnership with the Buzău County Council.

The Buzău Land is a territory situated at the transition between hills and mountains, characterised by natural and cultural heritage worth of discovery, conservation, and promotion. The Geopark provides access to the rich, symbolic connections between the physical, natural space, and the spiritual, human space, connections that local communities have constructed over generations. It invites visitors to journey through 70 million years of Earth's history, and explore the life and traditions of the local people (Popa et al. 2015).

Buzău Land is located in the Eastern Carpathian fold and thrust belt at the junction of three continental plates: Dacia, Moesia and East Europe. It is composed mainly of sedimentary rock, which records almost entirely the last 40 million years of environmental evolution and climate changes. The area preserves fossils of endemic marine species, as well as terrestrial vegetation, mammals and birds. Active tectonics have produced mud volcanoes, eternal flames, petroleum springs, and salt diapirism. Thus, Buzău Land encapsulates the complex geological history of the Tethys, the subsequent evolution of the Eastern Paratethys, and the formation of the Carpathians.[2]

Geodiversity has profoundly shaped the cultural values of Buzău Land. Salt springs and diapirs supported traditional salt extraction; while clay and stone enabled the development of pottery and vernacular architecture. Mud volcanoes and eternal flames inspired folklore and spiritual beliefs; and the region's geomorphology determined settlement patterns and trade routes. Consequently, the territory's cultural identity is intrinsically linked to its geological foundation.



*Colilia* – horsetail feather grass (Stipa tirsa) – Mud Volcanoes (photo by the author).



Muntele de Sare – Salt Hill Nature Reserve – Lopătari (photo by the author)

Drawing on the conceptual elements of a geopark, and on the experience gained from the Haţeg Country Geopark and other international geoparks, we consider that while each geopark is unique in terms of its values, its people, and its socio-economic and political context, there are five common and mandatory elements applied in the construction of a geopark in Romania, including the Buzau Land Geopark. These five operational elements are: (1) optimum territory, (2) partnerships, (3) governance, (4) networking, and (5) interpretation for education and tourism.

(1) *The optimum territory* for the Buzău Land Geopark was established following one year of multidisciplinary research studies initially conducted across 36 mayoralties. The final territory, comprising of 18 mayoralties, was then defined based on the following five criteria:

1. A relevant network of significant and valuable geological, biological, and cultural sites, with a balanced distribution, worthy of preservation;
2. A sufficiently large territory to foster sustainable socio-economic development. A territory that is too small lacks natural, and financial resources, while a territory that is too large is difficult to manage sustainably and may generate conflicts;
3. Cultural value as a distinct place of interaction between nature and people, and as a locus of local identity expressed through tangible and intangible heritage;
4. Strong cultural, social, and economic affinities among associated communities, supported by continuous consultation to guarantee effective conservation and the adoption of territorial policies for sustainable development;
5. Borders that overlap the administrative boundaries of associated mayoralties, enabling organisational arrangements involving public authorities, local communities, private interests, and research and educational bodies in partnership projects covering the entire geopark territory.

Located at the crossroads of cultural and historical influences mainly from Transylvania, Muntenia, and Moldavia, the Buzău Land Geopark area required a careful approach to territorial definition. Through multidisciplinary analysis, communities that were heterogeneous and strongly culturally influenced by neighboring regions were excluded from the optimum territory. Therefore, Buzău Land Geopark is not only a valid UNESCO Global Geopark but also a prime example of the successful application of the theoretical concept of an "optimum territory," particularly within the specific economic, social, and cultural context of South East Europe (Andrăşanu 2010). The selection process proved to be correct. Over time, the geopark has overcome different crises, and has been fully integrated into county development strategies, becoming a pillar for regional projects.

(2) *Partnerships* form the cornerstone of the Buzău Land Geopark. Starting with the initial partners, the University of Bucharest and the Buzău County Council, the network has grown to encompass the Buzău Land Intercommunity Association, the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, the Grigore Antipa Natural History Museum, the Geological Museum of Romania, the Buzău County Museum, the GeoEcoMar Research Institute, the Buzău Land Association, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), ANTREC, Slow Food Buzău Association, schools, tourism operators, and community associations. This multi-stakeholder network ensures shared ownership and effective management, supporting the development of numerous research, education and tourism projects.

(3) *Governance* in Buzău Land Geopark refers to a participatory management system involving key stakeholders: the Buzău County Council, the University of Bucharest, and the Buzău Land Association (which signed a Partnership agreement in 2020). The Buzau Land Association created the management structure and has played an important role in the management and recognition of the Geopark through multiple projects. The ideal governance structure comprises: a coordination partnership consisting of the County Council, the University of Bucharest, the Buzău Land Association, and the Buzău Land Intercommunity Association, a management team, a Scientific Council, and a Consultative Council. Private companies are involved as consultants in the Geopark's strategy and management plan. This approach ensures that the Geopark is managed collaboratively, reflecting the needs and aspirations of the local area and inhabitants. The process is still under development.

(4) *Networking* is compulsory for Buzău Land Geopark and refers to the systematic process of establishing, maintaining, and leveraging connections with other geoparks, international organisations, academic institutions, and professional networks at local, regional, national, European, and global levels.

(5) *Interpretation* in Buzău Land means telling the story of the territory's values in an accessible and engaging manner. It transforms science into an experience, educates visitors and the local community, promotes the area and develops sustainable tourism. The visitor experience is shaped by the Geopark's essence: the link between geology and local mythology. These connections, identified through interdisciplinary research carried out in partnership with the the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, reveal Buzău Land as a place where tangible elements generate the intangible, giving rise to mythological stories of ogres, dragons, heroes, giants and living water and dead water. The Geopark invites visitors to explore seven symbolic geological features: the mud volcanoes, amber, salt, eternal flames, sulphur and petroleum springs, trovants, and the Grunj (a rock formation consisting of volcanic tuff and marl). Together, they tell the story of a territory shaped by the forces of nature and by human hands. Here, rock has become a hermitage, salt has flavored the local cuisine, and amber has been transformed into adornment. Every place has its legend, every spring its purpose, and each landform its interpretation. Visitors are invited to explore a land where the tangible and the intangible meet, and where the stories are written both in stones and in the memory of the people.

Tracing the geopark's evolution from 2007 to 2026, after its revalidation by UNESCO, reveals the great efforts required by the community and the geopark partnership to achieve internationally recognised status. A very brief overview of key milestones and projects could help to clarify this:

*2007–2010—Multidisciplinary studies, educational and cultural projects.* The main results included: defining the optimum territory and the geopark name; establishing a database of geological, geographical, biological, and cultural values; developing local, regional, and national partnerships and working groups; creating the Buzău Land Intercommunity Association and "Prietenii Ținutului Buzău Grup" [Friends of Buzău Land Group]. The geopark was presented at national and international conferences and events. It became an official area of research and field application for undergraduate and master's students of the University of Bucharest, as well as a site for international field applications. An AFCN [National Cultural Fund Administration] project resulted in four simultaneous and complementary

exhibitions, which were opened at the Grigore Antipa National Museum of Natural Sciences, the Geological Museum of Romania, the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant, and the Buzău County Museum, under the brand "Ținuturile României—Ținutul Buzăului" [The Lands of Romania— Buzău Land]. The Geopark Strategy was developed and adopted by the Buzău County Council through an official decision (Andrășanu 2008).

*2010–2013—Promotion and visitors infrastructure strategy.* The geopark was promoted through official meetings with the local administration, tourism groups, and schools. A tourism infrastructure plan was developed, along with events and publications on local cultural heritage, in partnership with ANTREC Buzău and the County Council. A second AFCN project produced the "Seven Stories for Seven Places" exhibition (in partnership with the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant and ANTREC), and the "Book of Places" was published (Apachiței and Palcu 2012). The Geo-Team management group was established to oversee the management of the Geopark and its projects.

*2014–2020—The "GeoSust" project* was a key EEA-funded interdisciplinary applied research project that supported research, cooperation and infrastructure development, as well as the definition of the geopark management structure and strategy. Key partners included five Romanian institutions (the Institute of Geodynamics of the Romanian Academy, the University of Bucharest, GeoEcoMar, Babeș-Bolyai University, and the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant) and three Norwegian institutions (the Telemark Research Institute, the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and the Gea Norvegica UGGp). The project generated further projects, boosted management activities, and established two visiting centres: "The Time of Man" Museum" (in Mânzălești) and "Seven Stories for Seven Places" (in Lopătari). The first educational site Educație de Senzatie [Sensational Education] was established in Manzalesti.[3] In 2017, the Peasant Museum organized an exhibition within the GeoSust framework titled "Ținutul Buzăului. Privelişti, rosturi, povești."[4]

The Buzău Land Association was established in 2017 to support the management of the Geopark. In 2020, an official agreement was signed by the main partners: Buzău County Council, University of Bucharest, and Buzău Land Association. They aim to continue developing geopark activities and preparing the UNESCO application dossier.

*2021–2026*—The Geopark's governing body established a management team and developed a strategy and an operational plan to build the visitor infrastructure, including the Geo Gate (in Berca), the Trovants Museum (in Bozioru), visitor trails, numerous publications, conferences and an events calendar. Following an evaluation visit in 2021 and the UNESCO Council re commendation, Buzău Land was officially designated as a UNESCO Global Geopark in April 2022, joining the Global Geoparks Network and the European Geoparks Network. Since 2024, it became a member of the Romanian Geoparks Network, and co-signatory of the Romanian Geopark Charter in 2025, actively promoting UNESCO programs and designations. The geopark has developed local and international projects, and prepared a new strategy. However, as our contributors demonstrate, this designation is not an endpoint, but a beginning. UNESCO Global Geopark status is performance-based and subject to a rigorous revalidation process every four years.



Master students field application—Slănic Valley (photo by Dan Palcu).



Rumanit / Piatra Soarelui (Lapis Solis) / Amber / Sunstone (photo by Gabriela Leonida).



Searching for fossils—Slănic Valley (photo by the author).



Mud Volcanoes – Pâclele Mici (photo by the author).



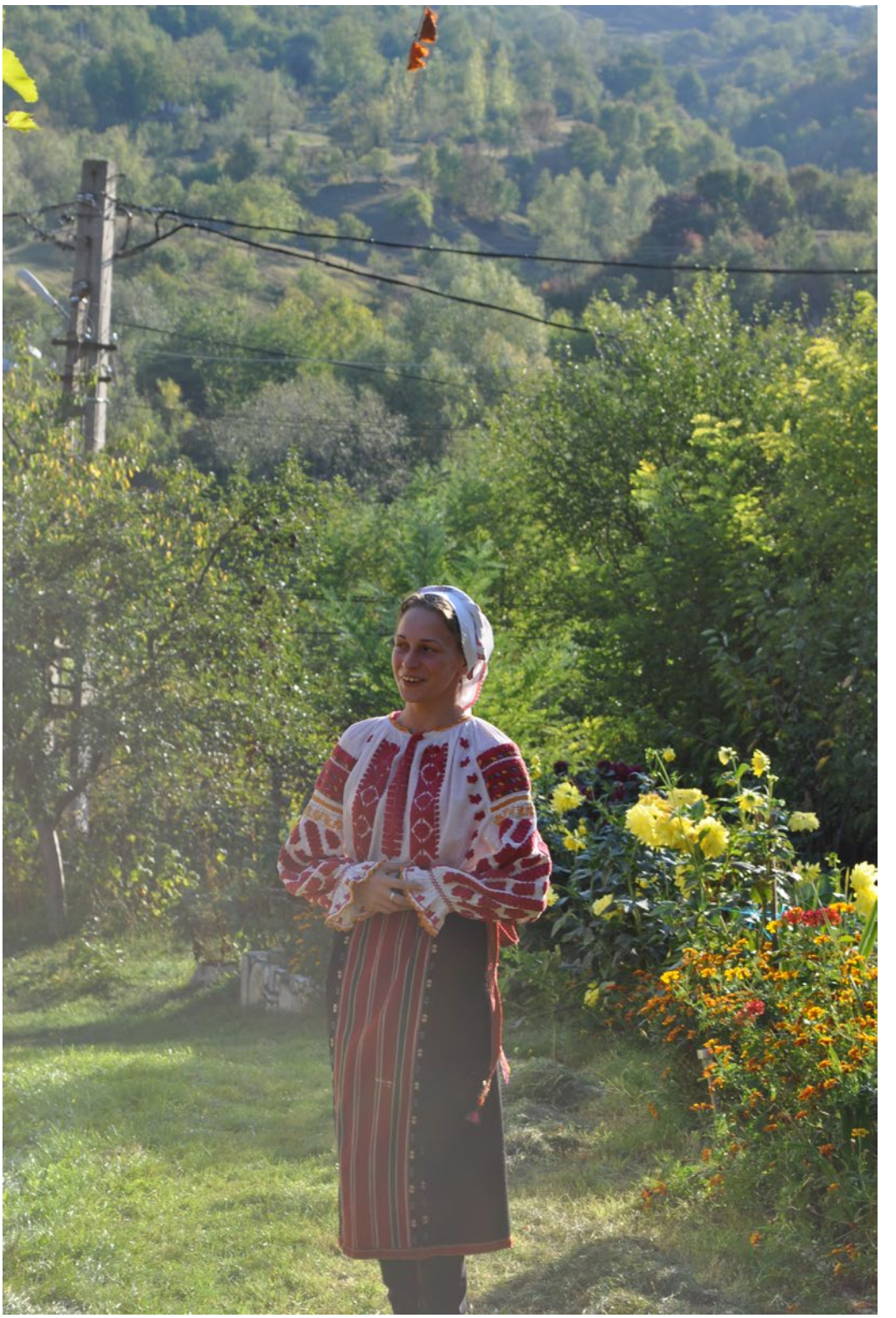
Slănic Valley—geology field research (foto Dan Palcu).



Ethnographic documentation – Mânzălești (photo by the author).



Anthropology field research (photo by Ioana Daia).



Traditional Slănic Valley costume (photo by the author).




Buzau gastronomy (photo by the author).



Multidisciplinary field studies (photo by the author).

## Conclusions

The Buzău Land UNESCO Global Geopark designation is not just a label, but a dynamic, multi-scalar governance tool that imposes binding performance criteria in exchange for international prestige. Its history shows that the UNESCO label validates a long-term process of community building and sustained commitment, rather than providing a shortcut. The "green card" revalidation in 2025 demonstrates that the label merely provides entry to a perpetual process of sustainable development. For heritage, tourism, and regional planning scholars, Buzău Land offers a critical lesson: designation marks the start of the work, not the end. Mistaking it for a simple label would be to misunderstand the political economy of global heritage management and the decades of local investment that underpin it.

Geoparks—Buzău Land being a prime example—represent the territories of the 21st century. They embody a new development model, that is participatory, multi-stakeholder, performance-based, and globally connected, while remaining locally grounded (Martini, 2009). They are also committed to integrating natural heritage with cultural identity and economic sustainability. They replace static protection with dynamic governance, top-down mandates with bottom-up initiatives, and the isolation of exemplar with public engagement. Within the UNESCO system, as demonstrated by Buzău Land, the Geopark designation is not the culmination of efforts, but rather the commencement of an ongoing process of sustainable development. Understanding geoparks is key to comprehending the future of territorial management.

Romania was at the forefront of the geoparks movement. The first geopark project, coordinated by the University of Bucharest—the only national institution with expertise in this area—began in 2000. It combined scientific research, local initiative, and international collaboration. After five years of work involving multi-stakeholders, the Hațeg Country UNESCO Global Geopark was validated as a member of the European and Global Geoparks Networks in 2005, and has been revalidated in 2008, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022 and 2026. Its innovative approaches to education, interpretation, geotourism, and adaptive management adopted by Hațeg Geopark have made it a model and inspiration for new geopark projects. As for 2026, there are six geoparks in the Romanian Geopark Notwork, each in a different stage of evolution: two UNESCO Global Geoparks (Hateg Country and Buzău Land), two aspiring territories (Oltenia de sub Munte and Carpaterra) and two geopark projects (Gutâi-Maramureș and Cimmerian Dobruja).

The expansion of the UNESCO Geopark Programme in Romania is not just about adding new designations; it is a strategic investment in a 21st-century territorial model that leverages the intrinsic link between geodiversity and cultural diversity to foster sustainable development, community empowerment, interdisciplinary education, and geotourism This approach also ensures the conservation of natural, tangible, and intangible heritage for future generations. Taking into consideration the country's high geodiversity and its deep connection with cultural diversity, Romania has the potential to develop at least 12 UNESCO Global Geoparks. Imagine the potential of a national network of this kind in terms of conservation, research, education, intelligent tourism, and the global promotion of Romanian heritage and values.

## NOTES

1. See https://www.unesco.org/en/iggp/geoparks/about, last accessed: 03.06.2026.

2. See https://tinutulbuzaului.org/, last accessed: 03.06.2026.

3. See https://tinutulbuzaului.org/proiecte-si-noutati/geosust-tinutul-buzaului-si-dezvoltarea-durabila/, last accessed: 03.06.2026.

4. See https://sitevechi.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/acasa/tinutul-buzaului-privelisti-rosturi-povesti-ro.html, last accessed: 03.06.2026.



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