

## Understanding the meaning of Geopark Naturtejo Da Meseta Meridional, the first Portuguese application to the European Geoparks Network

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Naturtejo is an intermunicipal major state-owned company, with 13 associated private companies, established in 2004 aiming at creating conditions to the economic development relying upon tourism. The municipalities forming Naturtejo, namely Castelo Branco, Idanha-a-Nova, Nisa, Oleiros, Proença-a-Nova and Vila Velha de Ródão, have a total area of 4625km<sup>2</sup>. In this wide region ruled by a cultural heterogeneity based on historical and even ecological criteria, Geology appears as a levelling element, since the geological evolution of this region was ruled, *grosso modo*, by the same fundamental stages which, through millions of years, have moulded the landscape. The elements that have built landscape are ubiquitous, although creators of diversity: wide areas flattened with mesocenozoic polygenic evolution over a major Proterozoic basement (Beiras Group); numerous residual relieves, which *ex-libris* are the Ordovician quartzitic crests and the late-Variscan granite *inselberge*; intramountain basins with alluvial to fluvial coarse sediments deposited during the Alpine Orogeny paroxysms; hydrographical nets deeply carved during the climate crisis of the Pleistocene and induced by important neotectonics in the fragile domain, which broke the landscape in a block succession and motivates the thermal richness of the region.

It is due to a necessity of territorial levelling that Geology is applauded – i.e. without precedents nationwide – as the fundamental thematic to this region in a large scale economic strategy, already in an implementation phase, but planned in medium/long term and interacting with other numerous projects of cultural nature. As an area with low historical level of economic development, the Naturtejo region is seen nowadays as one of the most genuine - from their cultural traditions and their historic-archaeological point of view. The much low impact of Man upon the nature of this region, enhanced by the existence of the Tejo Internacional Natural Park, one of the most important sanctuaries of avifauna from Europe. This way Geology appears as a strong bet from Naturtejo - and from the municipalities that form it – in the increment of ecotourism that allows the visitor to get an idea of the landscape at all levels he/she wishes. In 2004 proposals and projects brought up, promoting Geotourism in Naturtejo region, as a strong and attractive touristic product, a different way of thinking and doing tourism in Portugal. In that sense, this is the originality Naturtejo searches to a sustainable tourism in this central area of Iberian Peninsula: Geology brings the explanation to many of the natural phenomena that enrich municipalities, neglected until now (such as the granite morphologies or the ancient mining areas) or solely admired by specialists (the case of ichnofossils of Penha Garcia and of Portas do Ródão epigenic valley), allowing economically profitable preservation and usufruct measures. On the other hand, regional Geology interacts with several other cultural aspects: constructions and their implementation were conditioned since Pre-history by basic needs intimately related with the geological substrate; tending the flock and agriculture - traditional activities – are conditioned by the morphology of the ground, soil types and water availability; the millenary mining activity took roots and left traces in an mainly agro-pastoral culture; The abundance of etiological legends and of reference to the “cult of stones” and “cult of waters” in popular Christian religion, still so much patent in the countryman. This project application from Naturtejo to *European Geoparks Network* results from the almost perfect chaining between a diversified Geology and geosites (from regional to international value) with the remaining multidisciplinary elements that form the cultural patrimony.

Naturtejo strongly bets in Geotourism as anchor-project for a candidature to the governmental program PITER (Tourism Integrated Program of Structuring Nature with Regional Basis) for tourism development, which foresee an investment higher than 54 million euro in projects of sustainable tourism.

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