

GEOPARK TOURISM TOOLKIT FOR GEOPARK MANAGERS



UNESCO Global Geoparks are 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, such as using our Earth's resources sustainably, mitigating the effects of climate change and reducing the impact of natural disasters.

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. The creation of innovative local enterprises, new jobs and high quality training courses is stimulated as new sources of revenue are generated through ecotourism, while the geological resources of the area are protected.

Excerpt from the UNESCO Global Geoparks Handbook

Whether or not your site is a UNESCO Global Geopark the principles espoused in the quote above are sound for any Geopark and in particular anyone aspiring to achieve UNESCO status.

INTRODUCTION

This document is designed to help audit the tourist "offer" that is available at any Geopark or from a specific GeoSite. It will assist managers in compiling the information required to have informed dialogue with other tourism providers and help in preparing marketing information for potential visitors to Geoparks or GeoSites.

The information obtained through the use of this document can be used to develop a strategic marketing plan and an action plan for the implementation of identified strategic objectives.
(Example attached)

DRIFTING APART

There is no single approach to the marketing of geological sites for tourism purposes that can be identified as the 'best way to do it'. Current experience of GeoSite marketing ranges from small single sites close to major cities to Geoparks covering the whole of relatively remote island groups. What suits one location may be totally inappropriate elsewhere.

Sites which depend on mass market tourism to a large extent will have a targeted approach aimed at larger tour providers and match it to an extent with destination marketing depending on the scale of that business. Other sites will be more directly aimed at a niche market with very specifically targeted marketing. Geoparks may contain a wide variety of GeoSites and in this case individual sites may need to be considered separately for marketing purposes.

In addition to individual Geosite and Geopark marketing the Global Geoparks Network can also be included as a "brand". The network represents 35 countries some containing many more than one Geopark. Within this overarching network there is capacity for building regional marketing through regional Geopark Networks or through initiatives such as the Drifting Apart project which can build on joint branding and a shared geological inheritance.

The questions asked in this document may help to identify operational shortcomings which might impact the potential marketing of specific sites but will not offer solutions for any problems identified. Access, infrastructure and financial issues can all restrict the opportunities to sell GeoSites or Geoparks but are beyond the scope of the tourism toolkit and must be dealt with on a site by site basis by managing authorities. This document will assume that sites need to be marketed within the resources currently available to do so.



PRINCIPLES OF MARKETING FOR GEOLOGICAL SITES

Tourism marketing must be somewhat differently focused as the elements that combine to make a successful holiday are rarely in the control of one company or organisation. Geology is currently, for many Geosites, a relatively niche market and may struggle to create mass market appeal if it is not combined with other attractions to create a package sufficient to attract the visitor. In order for this “critical mass” principle to work it will be necessary for Geoparks to work in conjunction with local tourism providers and the wider local community. Such co-operation matches the holistic approach advocated in the official definition of a Geopark.

In the past, destinations relied on airlines, ferry companies, tour operators and travel agents to achieve sales. These companies were backed by national, regional and sometimes local tourism organisations which carried out destination marketing aimed at creating an image or brand. This traditional model has broken down to a major extent with the dramatic growth of online booking. This has led to much more independent travel and the rise of segmented and niche marketing. An individual can now put together their whole trip on the internet, booking flights or ferries, car hire, accommodation, tour guides and even restaurants on their own initiative.

A characteristic of this new freedom to shop around is the use of the internet for research in advance of travel – with arguably those places with excellent on line information receiving most chance of a visit. The growth in new technologies, particularly smart phones and tablets, means that the younger generation (and in some cases the not so young) access information in ways which would have been impossible even a few years ago. Google searches, social media, blogs etc. form an everyday part of life and are the way many individuals both get and pass on information. The use of interactive elements in websites and apps has led to a massive increase in consumer based review sites and a consequent need for visitor attractions to be constantly vigilant regarding quality control. A UNESCO designation for instance scores highly with the independent traveller ensuring that sites are of recognised international significance and providing a quality standard.

Some sound principles for geology marketing are as follows:

- Marketing is essential for the growth of tourism and can be used to develop it sustainably.
- Marketing effort must be appropriate to the scale of the site(s) and the tourism product available;
- Marketing should recognise the type of products available, the carrying capacity, access and the type of visitors;
- Marketing should be a partnership process involving suppliers and where appropriate the community;
- Advertising and promotion should utilise channels appropriate to the scale and the potential visitors targeted;
- The development of a distinctive brand and strap line for a site or region may help achieve ‘stand out’ but is not essential for success;
- The use of the internet, including social media, is an absolute essential for successful marketing;
- Products marketed must conform to standards of quality that are recognised at least at a regional and preferably national or international level;

Access and the environment

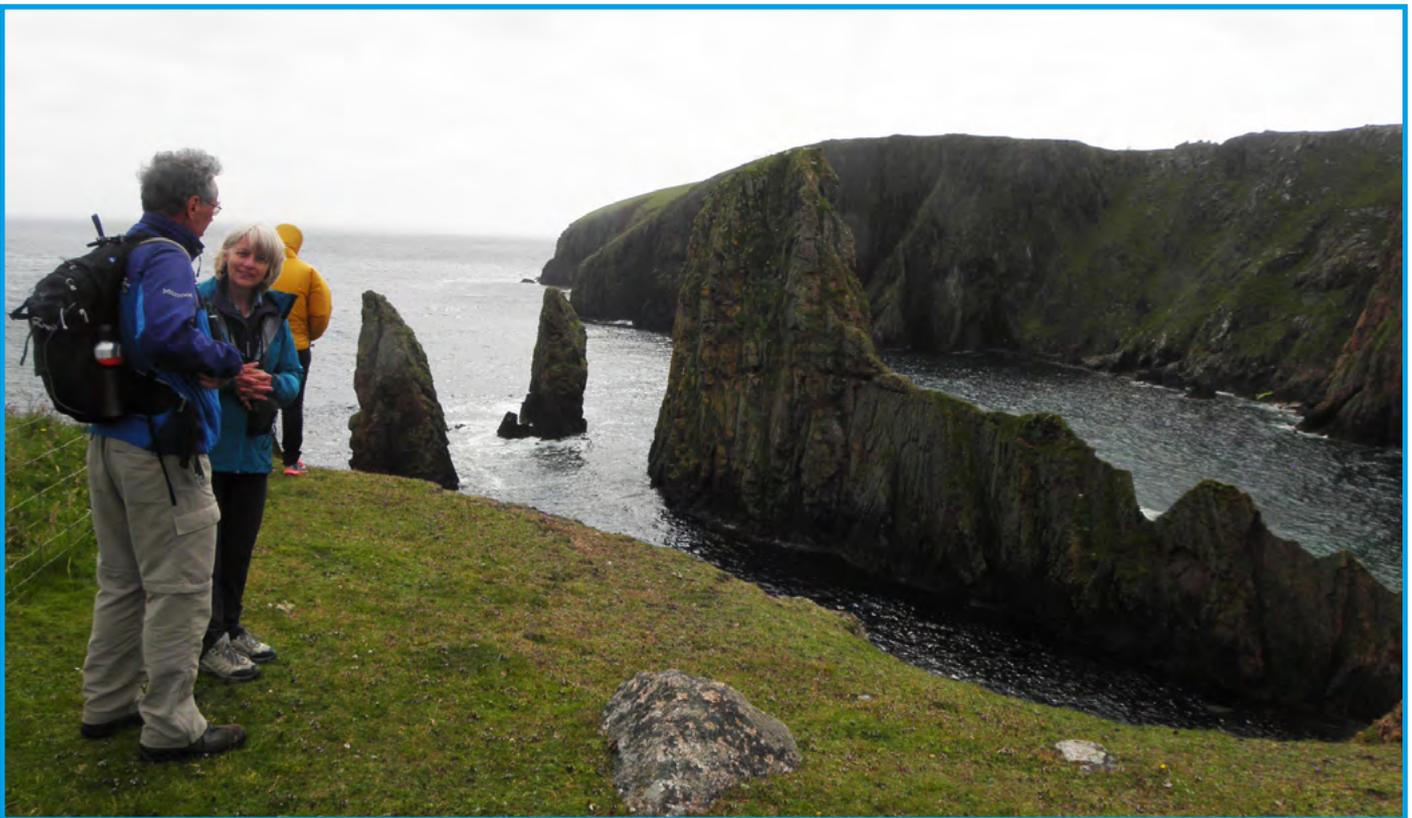
The problem with marketing can be that, when successful, it might destroy the very nature of the site which it is designed to sell. This is why it is important to take preventative action in relation to access, visitor management, carrying capacity and so on before the damage is done. It is not possible to market ones way out of a problem that has arisen through poor management and planning, resulting in a damaged tourism environment.

It is easy to find examples of issues about tourism sustainability, with overcrowding in peak season leading to complaints by both visitors and residents. Competitive costs and extensive promotions can bring visitors with little or no real interest in the geology of sites and little respect for their sometimes fragile nature.

Unregulated marketing and access can bring about unwelcome aspects of tourism such as:

- Overcrowding/congestion during peak periods;
- Increased need for intrusive signposting;
- Erosion and other damage to sites due to increased footfall,
- Perceptions that the area is a day trip destination;
- Seasonality and difficulties with staff/volunteer recruitment and retention.

Marketing per se may not be the cause of these problems – it is word of mouth reputation and easy access which can lead to overcrowding and an unhappy atmosphere for both visitors and locals. All of these issues can be dealt with through careful site management and co-operation with tourism providers. They need not be a barrier to the successful marketing of geological sites but should be recognised and planned for in the development of marketing strategies.



Things you need to know?

In order to prepare a strategy for selling a geological site to a tourism market a number of questions need to be answered. Some of these are operational in nature and will help plan the actual requirements of bringing visitors to the site and ensuring they have a safe and pleasant visit. Others will deal with the business of attracting visitors and what aspects of the site should be promoted. Operational considerations should always be dealt with first as there is little point in attracting extra visitors if their safety and the quality of their visitor experience cannot be assured. Some of these questions may seem very simplistic but it is surprising how often they are not asked and the result can be unfortunate for both the visitor and the attraction.

The diverse nature of GeoSites dictates that some of the following questions may not be relevant to your site or sites in which case they should be ignored. You should consider them all however before deciding whether you need to answer or not. Any reputable tour operator with whom you might wish to work will want answers to at least some of these questions particularly with regard to facilities, health and safety and the capacities of the sites themselves to cope with visitor numbers. Nobody wants to turn up with more visitors than the site can comfortably handle and suffer the consequent complaints from their customers. You will also need to factor in visitors who are not part of organised tours.

Once you have established the operational parameters you can decide whether your site can handle more visitors and if so how many and once you have made this decision you can make a start on the marketing aspects of your tourism offer.



What would you estimate is the operational visitor capacity of your site at any given time?

Consider the following:

Site management – Do you own or lease the site? If not do you have delegated management authority over the site? If so who from? What changes are you legally allowed to make to the site without seeking permission from an exterior body? Do you have all your relevant insurances in place?

Access - Do you have legal access to all your sites? If not do you have the co-operation of local landowners? Do you have path networks? Can your road network cope with increased traffic? Is there good signposting? Are there any potential accident blackspots? Are you going to inconvenience local drivers if you increase the amount of cars, coaches or caravans on the roads?

Car parking - How many cars can you park? How many coaches? Do you have dedicated spaces for coaches? Have you allocated turning space? Do you have site orientation and directional signage if your car park is not immediately adjacent to your site?

Visitor flow - Do you need to or wish to regulate visitor numbers going on to the site? Is your site self-guided? Does it have a fixed route for visitors to follow through the features? How do you ensure they remain on that route? Do you have onsite interpretation? Are there viewpoints or trails and if so what is their capacity? Is there disabled access?

Facilities - Do you have a visitor centre? Does it have a café, shop, interpretive displays, and toilets? If so how many people can each element of your visitor centre cope with? (Consider for instance that if you only have single male and female toilets how that would work with three coaches bringing 150 visitors all at once!)

Health and safety - Are all your risk assessments up to date? Is all your safety equipment inspected regularly? Do you have trained first aiders available if appropriate for your site? If you employ staff or use volunteers are they given health and safety training? Do you have a disaster management plan? Do you undertake regular site inspections and maintenance?

Environment – Are increased visitor numbers likely to lead to problems with erosion? What plans do you have for dealing with litter? Are there any issues with disturbance of wildlife associated with your site? Do you have specific environmental activities related to your sites?



What are you selling?

This may seem a very strange question but in many cases people who are intimately familiar with tourism sites sometimes lose track of what it is about their site that the public wishes to see. Perhaps more than most visitor attractions Geoparks have a range of different potential markets. They will, of course, be attractive to geologists but depending on the nature of the geology and the surrounding landscapes they might also have a much wider appeal. The next section is designed to explore what you can offer to the potential visitor.

Write two short descriptions of your Geopark/GeoSite. Assume that you are writing for:

1. An interested amateur. Someone with a reasonable knowledge of geology.
2. A member of the public with no knowledge of geology at all.

The contrast between these two descriptions will illustrate the necessity for identifying target markets and preparing each piece of marketing material with a specific audience in mind. All too often when a visitor attraction is asked “Who is your target audience?” the reply is “Oh, everybody”. This approach may be effective if selling beach holidays in Majorca but is less likely to work for a geology site in a remote area.



When writing your descriptions consider the following:

- What is unique about your site? What makes it different from other geological features? Why should a visitor come to see it?
- Is your geology easy to explain? Can you use technologies and interpretation to make it easier to understand? Is your interpretation “layered” to allow people with different levels of understanding to take something away from it?
- Has the geology of your site provided you with other visitor attractions?
 - Is it in an area of great natural beauty? Is there wildlife for visitors to watch?
 - Is there a cultural aspect to your site? Do you have indigenous stories or stories that relate the site to particular individuals or cultural groups?
 - Are there activities that can be done nearby (windsurfing, mountain biking etc.)?
 - Are there other visitor attractions in the area?
 - Are there hotels, bars or restaurants?
- Is there any part of your interpretation that is specifically designed for children?
- Is there any part of your interpretation that is specifically designed for geologists?
- How accessible is your geology? Do you need to be young and fit to visit the site? Can you drive to it or do you have to walk? Can you give “virtual” access?

Description 1

Description 2



How are you selling it?

The preceding exercise should have encouraged you to think about your site. About how it is interpreted and about how it fits into its surrounding landscape and the local culture. It should also hopefully have encouraged you to think about who your visitors might be. If you have child friendly interpretation and are within easy travelling distance of a local seaside resort then you can probably safely market to families but if you are trying to explain complex geology at the end of a windswept peninsula on a remote island then probably not. Similarly if you are close to a major road and a famous castle you should be able to encourage coach parties but if your site consists of a six hour walk along a mountain trail they are unlikely to be interested. Somewhere out there is the ideal market for your site. All you have to do is find it!

Assuming that your marketing budget is not limitless you are going to have to make some decisions about what you are going to spend and where. Some of your options are:

- Posters, fliers and leaflets – Considered by many to be “old school” there are still many people who will pick up a leaflet or a flier and browse through it. Relatively cheap and good for distributing to local accommodation providers and other visitor attractions.
- Magazines and newspaper adverts – Magazine and newspaper advertising can be very effective. It can also be very expensive. Try to find specialist magazines where you are reaching a targeted readership. Many magazines are now going online because of printing costs but the same principles apply. Never accept the first price you are offered. Negotiate and the price will nearly always come down. Try to get editorial space along with your advert. Local newspapers are good if you have a special event coming up.



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- Websites – less immediate than social media your website is still the best way of getting detailed, accurate information about your geology out to the wider world. When someone is researching their visit and wants to find out about places to go in your area they will, in all probability, do a Goggle search and if you are not there on the first page then you won't be part of their travel plans. Get yourself on the listings on your local and national destination marketing websites. Link to other people. Get them to link to you. Co-operation can pay big dividends on the web.
- Social media – The current buzz words in marketing. There are literally hundreds of social networking sites and millions of pages and links. Facebook is currently by far the largest with over 2 billion members. Instagram is, for now, the front runner with young people.
All this can change in a matter of weeks so you need to keep an eye on trends. There are pages upon pages on these sites dedicated to geology never mind the number of geology blogs with millions of followers. You could spend all day every day just dealing with social networking.
Be selective. Remember that if you are going to start a page on a social networking site or run your own blog then it must be sustained and new content added on a regular basis. Gather "friends" and "followers" and get them to share your content with their friends. That is how to get the maximum reach for your information.



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- Travel writers - If you have a local destination marketing organisation find out if they are bringing any journalists to the area and offer to host them for an afternoon. It's a great way to get coverage if they have a positive experience of your site so make sure everything is going to go like clockwork and you have done your homework on the publication beforehand. Not perhaps strictly speaking word of mouth but you do have the opportunity to sell your site directly to the person writing the article.
- Word of mouth - Often underestimated. This is the area where networking can really pay its way. The simplest way to get good word of mouth marketing is to ensure that your visitors have such a positive experience that they will want to share with friends, family and neighbours. No amount of marketing spend or reviews on Trip Advisor can beat a personal recommendation from someone your potential customer knows and trusts.

Your next target might be to get personal recommendations from other local tourism companies. Accommodation providers, tour guides, local shop keepers and restaurateurs can all send people to your site. Invite them along; give them a cup of coffee, a biscuit and the grand tour. If they are going to give you a recommendation they need to know about your site and what they are recommending. Local guides and tour operators especially will not only recommend your site but actually bring people there as part of their tours.

Make sure that it is a two way street, people who recommend you have a right to think that you will do the same for them. Ensure that a quality standard is maintained by people you give your recommendation to. You want the visitor experience to be universally positive. Experienced travellers will often put more trust in local knowledge than internet reviews.



Who will you work with?

As the previous section has indicated your site does not exist in a vacuum. The holistic approach adopted by Geoparks requires each Geopark to work with local communities and businesses to help preserve and promote the particular geology of its area. Implementing this approach however does not mean that sites are required to abandon any notions of quality control with regard to which organisations they choose as partners.

Think about those involved in tourism who could be relevant to your Geopark. The numbers involved could be in the dozens, hundreds or even thousands. If this is the case you will have to be selective about listing only those whom you consider to be capable of real co-operation. You should aim to include at least some of the following:

- Accommodation providers (hotels, guest houses, B&Bs, self-catering, hostels etc.)
- Catering establishments (restaurants, cafes, bars, takeaways, etc.)
- Retail establishments (shops, markets etc.)
- Producers (artists, crafters, food & drink producers, etc.)
- Tour operators (guides, tour companies etc.)
- Transport providers (cycle hire, ferries, airlines & airports, railways, taxis, bus companies etc.)
- Community groups (schools, uniformed organisations, sports groups, environmental groups, senior citizens groups etc) NB. Community involvement will be dealt with in a separate document.
- Agencies (destination marketing organisations, environmental agencies, historic and heritage agencies, national parks authorities etc.)

You may now have a fairly extensive list and will have realized that it is almost impossible to build a close working relationship with all of the companies and organisations you have just thought of. You must therefore prioritise your list according to which organisations are most relevant to what you hope to achieve.



Factors to consider when undertaking this exercise might be:

- Does your potential partner have any statutory control or obligations regarding your site? Does your site have a legal designation that ensures its protection under law? Will any increased footfall to your site require consultation with local or national government bodies? If any of these are relevant to your site you will have to build up a good working relationship with the organisations concerned with enforcing regulations and keep them informed of your activities, even if those organisations are able to offer little or no practical assistance.
- Does the potential partner hold any awards under a recognised local or national quality control standard? If they do then at least you know that someone else has inspected them and graded them according to the quality of the service they provide. Note that small companies and establishments may choose not to be involved with these schemes because of the cost involved. In that case you will have to form your own opinion based on personal experience.
- Does the potential partner share a similar ethos to your own? Are they environmentally aware? Do they recognise the value of culture and heritage? Are they already involved with their local community?
- Do you have any personal experience of working with them? Do they already visit your sites with tours? Have they previously helped you to cater an event or provided accommodation for visiting specialists? Do you stock their products in your shop? If these relationships already exist it may be unnecessary to look further.
- How many partners will your resources, both human and financial, allow you to work with? Do the partners you are considering have the necessary resources to work with you?



Write a list of potential partners including those organisations which you have a statutory obligation to work with and giving priority to those organisations or companies which you would want to work with.

Take the six organisation that you have identified as your most likely partners and write a brief description as to how you see yourselves working with them. Discount statutory partners unless they are in a position to contribute positively to your plans.

You should now be in a position to look at each of these partners and identify whether you are ready to offer them the opportunity to work with you as part of your overall strategy for visitor management at your Geopark. Examine each potential partnership in terms of site management and marketing. You may wish to run a SWOT analysis on each one so that you can address any weaknesses and threats at an early stage.

(SWOT analysis allows you to identify the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats linked to your potential partners)

Partner 1

Description

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Strengths	Weakneses

Opportunities	Threats

Partner 2

Description

Strengths	Weaknesses
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Opportunities	Threats
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Partner 3

Description

Strengths

Weaknesses

Opportunities

Threats



Partner 4

Description

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Strengths

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Weaknesses

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Opportunities

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Threats

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Partner 5

Description

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Strengths

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Weaknesses

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Opportunities

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Threats

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Partner 6

Description

Strengths	Weakneses
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Opportunities	Threats
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Global Networking

Up until now this document has largely dealt with local conditions and marketing but Geoparks are different from most local companies in that they are part of an established international network. Involvement in the Geoparks network and in joint projects with other Geoparks can be a valuable marketing tool. Many independent travellers will value being able to identify a consistent high quality product at potential destinations while researching their next trip. International tour operators will likewise be happy to pick up on consistent products over the range of their organised tours.

In particular the UNESCO brand has a strong reputation of being assigned to high quality visitor attractions of international significance and geoparks belonging to UNESCO Global Geoparks should take full advantage of the opportunities this opens up. This designation can of course be used for direct marketing of your Geopark but can also be used in conjunction with local tourism providers to enhance the reputation of their product.

Joint marketing initiatives with other Geoparks and related sites such as National Parks and designated nature reserves should also be considered as shared costs can often allow potential advertising opportunities which might be beyond the pocket of a single Geopark.

The sheer geographical distance between Geoparks does however make any kind of multi centre offer difficult to sell to any but the most enthusiastic. Only the most seasoned of geology buffs is likely to want to cover the whole North Atlantic but there might be some merit in looking at cruise ships as an already existing transport network, particularly if your area is part of their existing schedule.



Conclusions

If you have worked your way through this document you should now have a clear idea about your potential for interaction with your local tourism industry and who your best potential partners might be. You also should be aware of what information those partners might ask you for and how you might be able to provide that information.

Over and above this you should also have examined your own direct marketing and looked at opportunities where you might feed into joint marketing or destination marketing.

It may be that the principles outlined here are already part of your marketing plan but it is never a bad thing to re-examine such plans from a fresh perspective. Hopefully this document has encouraged you to do so.

