

Report to	-	Cabinet
Date	-	13 March 2017
Report of the	-	Executive Director of Business Operations
Subject	-	Fossil Collecting Code of Conduct

Recommendation to COUNCIL: That the Rother District Council Fossil Collecting Code of Conduct be approved and adopted.

Service Manager: Brenda Mason
Lead Cabinet Members: Councillor Ian Hollidge

Introduction

1. This report seeks Members' approval for the Code of Conduct for fossil collecting on Rother's beaches, as set out at Appendix 1. The purpose of the code is to encourage responsible collecting and to provide clarification on the ownership of fossil material found on Rother's beaches.

Fossil Collecting Code of Conduct

2. The need for a code of conduct has arisen following incidents of commercial and irresponsible fossil collecting creating damage to the beach environment and constituting a loss of important heritage material.
3. The code has been drawn up by Bexhill Museum with the active encouragement of Sussex Police Heritage Protection Office, university academics and other local authorities faced with similar challenges.
4. The code, if approved, will be published on the Council's website and promoted through posters and flyers. Coastal Officers will be charged with monitoring compliance with the code in their patrols of the beach and foreshore.
5. In the event of a serious breach of the Code of Conduct further action will be taken under powers conferred by the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, in conjunction with the police using a Fixed Penalty Notice.

Dr Anthony Leonard
Executive Director of Business Operations

Risk Assessment Statement

If unchecked, irresponsible fossil collecting poses a risk to the enjoyment of beach users and to the safeguarding of the local fossil heritage.

Rother District Fossil Collecting Code of Conduct

1. Introduction

This Code of Conduct has been developed to give greater protection to Rother District's geological and palaeontological heritage and to provide clarification on the status and ownership of beach finds. It encourages all those looking for fossils on the beach to:

- Collect fossils responsibly
- Record and report fossil finds
- Stay safe and ensure the safety of others
- Protect the wildlife and preserve the environment

The significance of the local geology and the fossils that occur in Rother is perhaps not as well-known publicly as that of the Isle of Wight or Dorset. This has provided a degree of protection in the past but as public awareness increases, and with ample evidence of commercial collecting occurring, a Code of Conduct is now required. Rother District Council wishes to encourage public understanding and appreciation of the local geological heritage and safeguard against threats to that heritage.

2. Objectives of this Code of Conduct

- Clarify the ownership of all fossil finds
- Promote better reporting of finds on the beach and other sites
- Ensure that scientifically important finds remain within the public domain
- Inform the public about safe and appropriate use of the beach

3. Area covered by this Code of Conduct

All land belonging to Rother District Council including the beaches at Normans Bay, Herbrand Walk, Cooden Beach, South Cliff, Bexhill West Parade, Bexhill Central Parade, Bexhill East Parade, Galley Hill and all land Rother District Council leases from the Crown Estate at Fairlight, Pett Level, Winchelsea Beach, Rye Harbour and Camber.

4. The Geology of Rother District

The rocks along the Rother coastline are all part of the Cretaceous age Hastings Group and are some of the oldest rocks in the Wealden Formation. They were laid down as sediments in freshwater lakes and rivers some 135-140 million years ago in the Lower Cretaceous Period. It was once thought that there was just one vast 'Wealden Lake' in which these rocks were formed, but scientists now think it was a low lying floodplain with a braided river system.

The rocks lie at the centre of the Wealden anticline, a dome-like structure with Bexhill's rocks at the base and the chalk deposits at the top. These layers of rock were laid down horizontally, but during a period of intense Earth movements about 20 million years ago they were pushed up to the surface and eroded to form the

present landscape. Moving west or east from Bexhill the rocks get progressively younger in age until they reach the chalk at either the North or South Downs.

The local rocks are rich in natural iron, which gives them their characteristic orange tones and was the reason why this part of the country was the centre of the iron industry from at least the Roman period until the 17th century. Clay has also been extracted commercially and brickmaking is still an important local industry.

5. Responsible Fossil Collecting

Fossil collecting offers an opportunity for the public to learn about palaeontology and to contribute to the development of the science. Looking for fossils on the beach is to be encouraged, particularly for children, as it is educational, recreational and inspires an understanding, interest and appreciation of the natural world.

Responsible fossil collecting involves:

- collecting loose lying fossils only
- collecting just a few representative specimens
- not hammering or digging into the cliff face or rocky ledges
- avoiding disturbance to wildlife
- respecting other people

The Council will consider taking action against those collecting irresponsibly.

6. Ownership

Landowners have legal title to the fossils found on their land; Rother District Council has title to the fossils which may be found on Rother-owned beaches. Rother District Council supports responsible collecting; encouraging people who wish to find and keep small numbers of fossils from the beach. Rother District Council discourages irresponsible collecting, the collecting of fossils for commercial sale, systematically stripping the beach of fossil material, damaging or diminishing the natural heritage of the area.

7. Looking for Fossils

The beach is a dynamic system and a complex habitat for marine life. There are distinct zones to the beach, with loose material roughly sorted by size, with larger flint cobbles at the top of the beach reducing to shingle and then sand. All of this material is slowly moving along the coast, from west to east, due to the process of longshore drift.

Beach processes naturally erode the bedrock and fossils may often be found mixed in with the shingle on the beach or occasionally in rock pools. One of the best ways to look for fossils locally is to ignore the flint on the beach and look out for flat pieces of the grey or rusty coloured siltstone and sandstones. Fossils often appear as black flecks or inclusions within these rocks. Fossil plant material appears matt black, but bone, teeth and fish scales are usually black and glossy. Fossil bone is very dark (brown to black) with a wood-like grain on the outside and a honeycomb-like internal structure.

Please remember: rock pools are an important eco-system and provide shelter for many animals between tides. Please approach them quietly, try

not to cast a shadow over the pool or disturb the water. If examining rocks in the rock pools please ensure you replace them carefully to avoid injuring or killing any wildlife.

8. Finding a Fossil

If you look long enough you should be able to find a fossil on the beach. Fossil plant debris is abundant and fossil bivalve shells are frequently found. Fossilised bone, teeth and scales are less common, but can still be found if you search long enough.

Fossilised dinosaur footprints occur at Bexhill, either as *in-situ* trackways or as individual, freestanding blocks. Please do not attempt to remove them from the beach. If you find a fossil footprint or a track of prints take a photograph of them, using an object for scale, and note the location of the find. Bexhill Museum is extremely interested in such discoveries because they may be of scientific importance.

Remember, always collect responsibly so that others can continue to see and enjoy fossils on the beach. If you are collecting fossils it is always important to record when and where you found each specimen and attempt identification. The local Museum is the best place to take your find as it may be able to assist you with this.

9. The Role of Museums

Many museums hold natural history and geological collections in trust for the public. The role of these museums is to promote community ownership of the natural heritage in the area. In a museum fossils are safely conserved, stored, exhibited and interpreted so that people can learn from them. Once registered in such collections they can also be loaned out for study by the scientific community.

Specimens need to be accessioned and registered in museum collections for scientific papers to be written about them and to be available for future research by other scientists.

A visit to the local museum is the best way to find out about the local geology and get help in identifying your fossils and the appropriate place to offer any local finds in case they prove to be scientifically important.

10. Responsible Use of the Beaches

Beach Safety:

- Read beach safety signs. Beach environments are hazardous and it is advisable to make yourself aware of the hazards prior to entering.
- For oiled seabirds East Sussex Wildlife & Ambulance Service can be contacted on 07815078234
- In an emergency call 999 and ask for the Coastguard.

11. Please do not:

- Attempt to break up *in-situ* rock formations to find fossils
- Litter or pollute the beach
- Start fires on the beach
- Throw stones
- Disturb or endanger wildlife, including any found in rock pools

12. Please Note:

Any persons not following this Code of Conduct place themselves and others at risk and may be in breach of local byelaws and could lead to prosecution under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014.

Removing any fossil or archaeological material from the foreshore or cliffs contrary to this code of conduct may be regarded as theft and appropriate legal action taken.

Further information and fossil/geology identification is available from:

Bexhill Museum, Egerton Road, Bexhill, TN39 3HL
01424 213026
Registered Charity 1102638

Rother District Council
February 2017