

# **Geotourism, Geoparks and Geotrails**

## **A Tourism Development Opportunity for Australia**

### **Geotourism**

Geotourism is emerging as a new global phenomenon which fosters sustainable tourism based upon landscapes. Its definition has recently been refined as a form of tourism that specifically focuses on the geology and landscapes which shape the character of a region. This advances an earlier concept of geotourism as strictly 'geological tourism'. Geotourism promotes tourism to 'geo-sites' and the conservation of geodiversity and an understanding of earth sciences through appreciation and learning. This is achieved through visits to geological features, use of 'geo-trails' and view points, guided tours, geo-activities and patronage of geosite visitor centres.

Geotourists can comprise both independent travellers and group tourists, and they may visit natural areas (including mining areas) or urban/built areas wherever there is a geological attraction. Urban examples are the sandstones of 'The Rocks' in Sydney (i.e. linking the geology to the early construction of Sydney's built heritage) or the city of Mount Gambier with its volcanic Blue Lake. This is a key distinction between geotourism and other forms of natural area tourism, as by definition natural area tourism takes place only in natural areas.

Thus geotourism is defined as 'tourism which focuses on an area's geology and landscape as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment'. It has links with adventure tourism, cultural tourism and ecotourism, but is not synonymous with any of these forms of tourism. It is about creating a geotourism product that protects geoheritage, helps build communities, communicates and promotes geological heritage, and works with a wide range of different people.

### **Geoparks**

Geotourism attractions are now being developed around the world primarily as a sustainable development tool for the development of local and regional communities. A major vehicle for such development is through the concept of 'geoparks'. A geopark is a unified area with geological heritage of international significance and where that heritage is being used to promote the sustainable development of the local communities who live there). Geoparks can choose to evolve through a series of levels from 'aspiring', 'national', 'regional' (e.g. European or Asia-Pacific Regions) to 'global'. There are now hundreds of geoparks around the world. Support to individual geoparks is offered through the Global Geoparks Network Bureau which is currently representing 111 members from 32 countries. The original target of the Global Geoparks Network is establishing 500 geoparks around the world. The number is growing at a rate of about 10 new global geoparks per year.

In China, there are three levels of geoparks: provincial, national and global geoparks. They are all managed by local county or municipal governments under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Land and Resources. Currently, there are over 320 provincial geoparks in China, among which 200 have already gained national status. With 31 of these national geoparks (including Hong Kong Geopark) having acquired global status, China manages by far the largest number of global geoparks in the world.

The Global Geopark brands is a voluntary, quality label and while it is not a legislative designation, the key heritage sites within a geopark should be protected under local, regional or national legislation as appropriate. UNESCO offers support to Global Geoparks on an ad-hoc basis via requests from Member States. Geopark status at any level, including 'global' does not imply restrictions on any economic activity inside a geopark where that activity complies with local, regional or national legislation. The focus of geoparks is on promotion and appreciation of geological heritage, geology and landscapes. These earth heritage sites are part of an integrated concept of protection, education and sustainable development

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/earth-sciences/global-geoparks>

Latest reports from UNESCO suggest that geotourism and geoheritage are now 'on the radar' in UNESCO and are supported, through the geoparks concept, by an increasing number of national governments worldwide. If this trend continues according to the wishes of apparently the majority of UNESCO's member states, then it is understood that the Global Geoparks Program may be able to join the World Heritage List and the 'Man and Biosphere' Program as one of UNESCO's big three official global heritage lists. That would mark a significant step forward for the future development of geoheritage and geotourism.

In summary, a geopark achieves its goals through conservation, education and tourism. It seeks to conserve significant geological features, and explore and demonstrate methods for excellence in conservation and geoscientific knowledge. This is accomplished through protected and interpreted geosites, museums, information centres, trails, mine sites, guided tours, school class excursions, popular literature, maps, educational materials and displays, and seminars. Geoparks are capable of being community-driven. Geoparks stimulate economic activity and sustainable development through geotourism. By attracting increasing numbers of visitors, a geopark fosters local socio- economic development through the promotion of a quality label linked with the local natural heritage. It encourages the creation of local enterprises and cottage industries involved in geotourism and geoproducts. The geopark concept is an iconic one, applicable across all continents. Up until very recently, Australia has had one geopark, Kanawinka Geopark covering the volcanic and karst region of western Victoria and south-east South Australia.

However, in November 2009, a resolution of Australian Government Ministers for the Environment (EPHC) determined that existing mechanisms are considered sufficient to protect geoheritage in Australia, and that after consultation with Resource Management Ministers, EPHC has expressed significant concerns with the application of the UNESCO Geoparks concept in Australia, especially without government endorsement. Australia's only attempt to establish a global geopark (Kanawinka) has not been approved by the Australian Government, and Kanawinka Geopark was subsequently delisted from the Global Geopark Network. In May 2015, it is understood that the incorporated organisation managing the Geopark has been dismantled with two local government authorities (Mount Gambier and Southern Grampians) agreeing to oversight the development of a formative Kanawinka Geotrail arrangement, also supported by local community groups.

## Geotrails

A recent development in Tasmania, the Cradle Coast GeoTrail, has provided an alternative and attractive approach to celebrating geotourism, geological and mining heritage (in Northern and West Coast regions) and which has been well received by Tourism Tasmania as a credible strategy to support the 'Tasmania's Island Heritage' National Landscape

<http://www.cradlecoast.com/literature/Cradle%20Coast%20GeoTrail%20FINAL.pdf>

A geojourney (geotrail) program within another National Landscape – Australia's Coastal Wilderness employs a smartphone based application

<http://www.sapphirecoast.com.au/blog/take-a-sapphire-coast-geo-tour-withour-new-app/> as the first pilot for this GeoTreat application for Australia.

Queensland's 'Dig The Tropic' <http://www.digthetropic.com.au/> and NSW's 'Modern Mining Trail' <http://www.modernminingtrail.com.au/> represent other operating examples of geotrails.

Western Australia's Mid West Development Commission (MWDC) has recently contacted both the Geotourism Standing Committee and the Geotourism Forum of Ecotourism Australia Ltd (EA) for advice relating to a project which seeks to establish **WA's first major geotourism development to be built on a geotrail model**, focused on the Murchison subregion of WA. The MWDC believes that the ancient Murchison geology provides the ideal platform for unique, nature based tourism experiences of global significance, particularly to the 'experience seeker / dedicated discoverer' market. The Mid West Tourism Development Strategy (2014) concluded that the region's iconic nature based tourist attractions were not developed to their potential and that its visitor appeal was not fully realised. The Strategy identified geotourism in the Murchison subregion as a potential 'game changing' tourism initiative, with capacity to help the region realise its potential as a major tourism destination in its own right. A draft EOI proposal to has been submitted by the MWDC on the basis of a proposed partnership with Murchison local governments, the Geological Society of Australia, Forum Advocating Cultural and Eco-Tourism (FACET) and EA. The EOI has proposed that funding totalling \$600,000 be sought from the WA State Government for this project.

The concept of geotrails is also being promoted this year through two major geotourism workshops which form part of the SEGRA 2015 and Global Eco 2015 conferences.

## Australia's National Landscape Programme

In Australia a somewhat equivalent land use to geoparks is the Australian National Landscape (ANL) Programme. This government initiative is led by a partnership of Parks Australia and Tourism Australia, but embracing strong local development of strategies and activities. The programme represents a national long term strategic approach to tourism and conservation which aims to highlight the value of our remarkable natural and cultural environments as tourism assets, improving the quality of visitor experiences in those regions, and in turn, increasing support for their conservation. There are now 16 designated National Landscapes in Australia. With its integrative focus on landscapes as a whole, the development of geotourism within each landscape aligns with the core focus and sustainable development of each landscape region.

The ANL Programme currently includes the following regions: Australian Alps (New South Wales/Victoria), Australia's Green Cauldron (New South Wales/SE Queensland border region), Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics area (Queensland), Australia's Red Centre and Australia's Timeless North (Northern Territory), Australia's Coastal Wilderness (New South Wales/Victoria), the Flinders Ranges and Kangaroo Island (South Australia), the Great Ocean Road (Victoria), the Greater Blue Mountains and Sydney Harbour (New South Wales), the Kimberley, Ningaloo-Shark Bay and Great South West Edge (Western Australia), and Tasmania's Island Heritage.

The then Geotourism Sub Committee of the Geological Society of Australia (GSA) had previously established a structured relationship offering geological expertise in developing experiences for individual landscapes within the ANL Programme. In addition, at the Annual Forum of the ANL Programme in 2013, a Geotourism Sub Committee member, Bruce Leaver, delivered a presentation about the GeoTreat pilot global smart-phone based project being developed to support geological interpretation of the Australia's Coastal Wilderness National Landscape. Since then there has been additional interest in this technology to access expert geological information in Australia's Green Cauldron, Kangaroo Island and the Flinders Ranges. The Geotourism Standing Committee was also represented at the Annual Forum of the ANL Programme held in the Flinders Ranges in August last year.

As part of the 'Seeing the Results' phase of the programme, Parks Australia (and Tourism Australia) have announced that they have stepped back from a central coordination role, and instead have offered limited funding to Ecotourism Australia Ltd (EA) to enable it to administer the programme and co-ordinate the development of a transition plan for the programme to become financially sustainable. EA has currently sought commitments from all of the national landscapes so as to secure the Tourism Australia matching funding.

With EA now assuming a coordinating role, it is envisaged that as geotourism continues to develop both globally and within Australia, it is believed that more opportunities for geoscientist employment within government land management agencies, areas embraced by the national landscapes, and within the tourism industry will be created.

Geotourism also offers another benefit by raising public interest in geoscience, particularly as a means of encouraging young people to see that a career path based on a geoscience qualification can open up a wider range of future employment opportunities. Based on the anecdotal observations of travellers enjoying a quality geotourism experience 'in the field', it is now being recognised that the educative (and 'excitement') value greatly augments the more traditional experiences such as offered by special exhibitions and by natural history museums.

## **Geotourism Standing Committee of the Geological Society of Australia**

Since the EPHC determination, a Geotourism Sub Committee of the GSA was established in 2011 and has worked to sort out the various issues which are seen to be impediments to geopark development in Australia, and to develop an information briefing document for government geologists. In November 2014, the Governing Council of the GSA replaced the Sub Committee with a newly established Geotourism Standing Committee which is chaired by Angus M

Robinson, Managing Partner, Leisure Solutions® <http://gsa.org.au/heritage/Geotourism.html>

The recently retired CEO of Geoscience Australia and immediate Past President of the Australian Geoscience Council, Dr Neil Williams, has joined the Standing Committee to assume the role as an independent Chair of a special panel to advise on mechanisms for delivering geotourism.

It is worth noting that The Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy (another one of the key constituent societies of the Australian Geoscience Council) has provided strong support for the concept of geotourism and geoparks in its draft Australian Heritage Strategy of the Australian Government.

## **Geotourism Forum of Ecotourism Australia Ltd**

The peak nature-based tourism industry association, EA [www.ecotourism.org.au](http://www.ecotourism.org.au) established in November 2013 a new industry grouping, the Geotourism Forum, to advocate and nurture the development and growth of geotourism recognising that it is sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing the earth's geological features in a way that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation, and is locally beneficial. The purpose of the Geotourism Forum is to advise EA of how best geotourism can be advanced and nurtured having regard to the EA's interest in inspiring environmentally sustainable and culturally responsible tourism.

The Steering Committee of the Geotourism Forum now comprises EA Director Dan Cove, (Chair); Angus M Robinson, Managing Partner, Leisure Solutions® (inaugural Chair); Professor Ross Dowling OAM, Foundation Professor of Tourism and Associate Head, School of Business, Edith Cowan University; Bruce Leaver, Chairman, Sapphire Coast Tourism; Rick Murray, Director, Middle Star Pty Ltd; Dr Young Ng, Founder and current chairman of the Association for Geoconservation, Hong Kong; and Rod Hillman, Chief Executive, Ecotourism Australia Ltd.

The Geotourism Forum convened a geotourism workshop at SEGRA 2014 (Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Development) in October 2014 at Alice Springs. The SEGRA workshop informed participants about the globally emerging role of geotourism (which is generally defined as sustainable tourism focusing on an area's geology and landscape as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment) in developing Australia's National Landscape Programme. SEGRA 2015 will be held in Bathurst in October 2015 and it is planned to include another geotourism workshop which will focus on geotrails as well as the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area and Jenolan Caves.

The Geotourism Forum will also be convening a major Geotourism workshop as part of the 2015 Global Eco Conference to be held at Rottnest Island, Western Australia, 17 – 19 November, 2015.

At an Asia Pacific Geotourism conference held in Hong Kong on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2013, steering committee representatives of the Geotourism Forum initiated discussions with a senior representative of the Chinese Academy of Tourism Earthscience of the Geological Society of China and representatives of a number of Chinese Global Geoparks that are interested in developing structured relationships with Australian national landscapes/world heritage areas, and the ecotourism/geotourism industry.

In recent months, efforts have focused on discussions with the Geological Society of China to develop a broader co-operation arrangement with geotourism interests in Australia i.e. the Geotourism Standing Committee of the GSA and the Geotourism Forum of EA, on the basis that such an agreement might well be endorsed by the respective national governments.

At this stage, it is proposed that any co-operation agreement could embrace areas of activity which could include

- growing and enhancing the level of best practice ‘nature-based’ tourism in both China and Australia;
- progressing protection, conservation and presentation of the geoheritage of natural and mixed protected areas, Geoparks (in China), national parks and reserves (in Australia), Australian National Landscapes and areas on the World Heritage List (as defined in the World Heritage Convention 1972) areas (both countries);
- exploring opportunities to promote ecotourism and geotourism;
- raising the profile of China and Australia as world- leading ‘nature-based’ tourism destinations;
- exploring other co-operative projects such as participation in conferences; and
- fostering the development of ‘sister park’ relationships between China and Australia.

On 21 October 2014, EA wrote to the Minister for Environment, the Hon Greg Hunt MP in response to his expressed need to understand better how a coordinated review of the opportunities that could be achieved through Australia embracing the concept of geotourism and the introduction of geoparks, as well as advice that could assist government in the delineation and assessment of geopark proposals. The Minister has subsequently advised that, after reviewing the national policy UNESCO’s Global Geopark Network, he is ‘positively disposed’ towards Australia joining this initiative subject to a number of funding conditions. He has also indicated that he needs to consider how best to progress Australia’s involvement in this initiative having sought the views of state and territory environment ministers and the Australian Local Government Association.

## **Geotourism Resources**

- <http://www.leisuresolutions.com.au/index.php/geotourism-industry-groups/>
- LinkedIn Discussion Group – Australian Geotourism Development  
<https://www.linkedin.com/grp/home?gid=4013225>

## **Policy Recommendations for the Australian Government Relating to Geotourism Development**

1. The Australian Government, with the assistance of both geotourism interest constituency groups, to undertake a comprehensive study of global geoparks so as to obtain a better understanding of the positive impacts of geotourism and geopark/geotrail development on regional development (including regions where mining is or has been active) and new job creation.
2. The Australian Government to seek any further information about geopark/geotrail development through advice obtained from the panel of specialists chaired by Dr Neil Williams and constituted within the Geotourism Standing Committee of the Geological Society of Australia.
3. The Australian Government, through its various agencies, and state based parks agencies to encourage 'sister park' relationships with the Chinese Geopark Network, having regard to the proposed collaborative agreement being finalised between geotourism- interest associations of both countries.
4. Tourism Australia to be encouraged to work with the state tourism agencies to promote geotourism as an extension of nature-based tourism including ecotourism, particularly through the Australian National Landscape Programme.

### **Angus M Robinson**

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