Geotourism and Geoparks
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
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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. Australia has a single geopark (currently without global status) – Kanawinka Geopark – but it is the world’s largest, 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 has recently been delisted from the Global Geopark Network.

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

Geotourism Standing Committee of the Geological Society of Australia

Since the EPHC determination, a Geotourism Sub Committee of the Geological Society of Australia (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 Director of the Kanawinka Geopark has since joined the GSA which, after considerable deliberation, has decided to set up a special panel with the task of providing on reference specialist advice to the GSA Executive and to government agencies. The recently retired CEO of Geoscience Australia and immediate Past President of the Australian Geoscience Council, Dr Neil Williams, has agreed to assume the role as the inaugural, independent Panel Chair.

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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.


Australia’s National Landscape Programme

In Australia a somewhat equivalent land use to geoparks is our National Landscape 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 Australian National Landscapes 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 Geotourism Sub Committee had previously established a structured relationship offering geological expertise in developing experiences for individual landscapes within the National Landscape programme. In addition, at the Annual Forum of the National Landscapes Programme last year, a Geotourism Sub Committee member, Bruce Leaver, delivered an excellent 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. In addition, members of the Geotourism Sub Committee are now actively liaising with the Great South West Edge, Australia’s Timeless North, Australia’s Red Centre, Australia’s Coastal Wilderness, Sydney Harbour and Australia’s Green Cauldron National Landscapes. The Geotourism Sub Committee was represented at the Annual Forum of the Australian National Landscapes Programme held in the Flinders Ranges in August this year.

The GSA has been active in raising awareness about the opportunities offered for the geoscience profession through the pursuit of geotourism and geoparks at a symposia for the 34th International Geological Congress in Brisbane (2012), at an Australian Earth Sciences Convention (AESC) Geotourism workshop in 2010, and at a full symposia at AESC 2014 in Newcastle.

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 most of the national landscapes so as to secure the Tourism Australia matching funding. It is worth noting that EA has been represented by its Chief Executive, Rod Hillman, on the former Australia’s National Landscapes Reference Committee until its recent abolition.
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 Forum of Ecotourism Australia Ltd**

The tourism industry association, Ecotourism Australia Ltd (EA) [www.ecotourism.org.au](http://www.ecotourism.org.au) has recently established 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 Geotourism Forum (with Angus M Robinson as its inaugural chair) was formally launched at the GlobalEco Asia Pacific 2013 Conference which was held in Noosa, Queensland on 18-20 November 2013 [http://inspiringaustralia.wordpress.com/2013/11/19/great-initiative-ecotourism-australia-geotourism-forum/](http://inspiringaustralia.wordpress.com/2013/11/19/great-initiative-ecotourism-australia-geotourism-forum/).

The Steering Committee of the Geotourism Forum now comprises EA Director Dan Cove, (Chair); Angus M Robinson, Managing Partner, Leisure Solutions®; 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 [http://www.segra.com.au/segra_workshops.html#workshopone](http://www.segra.com.au/segra_workshops.html#workshopone). 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.


At an Asia Pacific Geotourism conference held in Hong Kong on 30th 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. It is understood that the Academy and the World Leisure Organisation in collaboration with the Global Parks Network will now host...
the 1st World Geotourism Conference sometime in 2016. It is also understood that the conference is fully supported by China’s Ministry of Land and Resources and that key Australian geotourism representatives will be invited to attend, as well as an invitation to be sent to the Australian Minister for the Environment, the Hon Greg Hunt MP.

On 21 October 2014, EA wrote to the Minister in response to his expressed need to understand better how a co-ordinated 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. Accordingly, Ecotourism Australia has submitted for consideration of the Minister draft recommended criteria and a process for selecting areas for geopark consideration (customised for Australia), which is based on procedures adopted by the Global Network of National Geoparks.

Policy Recommendations for the Australian Government relating to Geotourism Development

1. Tourism Australia to be encouraged to work with the state tourism agencies to promote geotourism as an extension of nature-based tourism including ecotourism, having regard also to the need for respecting geoheritage considerations.

2. 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 development on regional development (including regions where mining is or has been active) and new job creation.

3. The Australian Government, through its various agencies, and state based parks agencies to foster ‘sister park’ relationships with the Chinese Geopark Network.

4. The Australian Government to seek any further information about geopark development through advice obtained from the panel of specialists chaired by Dr Neil Williams and constituted within the Geotourism Sub Committee of the Geological Society of Australia.

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