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**MEDIA RELEASE**

**UNESCO Global Geopark a possibility for Orana Region**

RDA Orana and the Warrumbungle Shire Council were thrilled to host a Round Table discussion concerning the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network in Coonabarabran last week. Participants included representatives of Coonamble, Gilgandra and Warrumbungle Shire Councils, National Parks and Wildlife Service, the local Indigenous community, Siding Spring Observatory, the Australian National University and the Geological Society of Australia (GSA).

Professor Patrick McKeever, Head of Earth Sciences at UNESCO, is an expert in the establishment and maintenance of Geoparks, and had travelled to the Orana region from Paris via Adelaide and Canberra to provide information about the benefits that Geoparks bring to their communities.

Professor McKeever described geoparks as single, unified areas that have as their centrepiece geological formations of international significance. They are managed with a holistic approach that includes protection, education and sustainable development. Depending on the location, geoparks may also involve areas of special environmental or cultural significance. Applications for registration always require evidence of strong community support, particularly where significant Indigenous cultural heritage is involved.

“The Global Geoparks network currently comprises 120 parks, of which 33 are in China. There are none in Australia – yet” said Steve Loane, General Manager, Warrumbungle Shire Council. “Warrumbungles National Park exists in large part because of its geological significance – this could form the core of a geopark in the Warrumbungle and Castlereagh area. We already have a host of other tourist attractions, research and educational facilities, and areas of significance for Indigenous cultural heritage that could contribute to the establishment of a UNESCO Global Geopark. The recent announcement of the Warrumbungles National Park as a Dark Sky Place will also be a positive contribution should we decide to make an application.”

“There is a strong tourism partnership between the three LGA’s surrounding the park and this opportunity has the potential to enhance the attractiveness of the area to international visitors as well,” he continued.

“Geopark status does not impose any obligations on the Australian Government, and does not place any additional constraints on development” said Robyn Lamont, Acting Executive Officer, RDA Orana. “Provided that the criteria for registration are met and maintained, the potential for a Geopark to contribute to the regional and wider economy is huge.”

The possibility certainly warrants further investigation, which will be led by Warrumbungle Shire Council with support from RDA Orana. Geotourism and other special interest tourism is a growing industry, and the Orana region has a lot to offer in this regard. “A Memorandum of Co-operation has just been signed between the Australian and Chinese Geological Societies, paving the way for the development of ‘sister park’ arrangements in future” said Angus M Robinson, Chair of the Geotourism Standing Committee, GSA.

“Future designation as a Geopark with membership in the UNESCO Global Geopark network would provide a significant boost and international exposure to the Orana Region” said Robyn.

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**Media contact:**

**Robyn Lamont, Acting Executive Officer 6885 1488**

Photo included (credit: Angus M Robinson, GSA)

**L-R:** Professor Patrick McKeever, Earth Sciences, UNESCO; Peter Shinton, Mayor, Warrumbungles Shire Council at White Gum Lookout, Warrumbungles National Park.