

# Geotourism — new opportunities from global engagement!

**T**he 5th Asia-Pacific Geoparks Network Symposium was held in September within the Zhijindong Cave UNESCO Global Geopark, Guizhou Province, Central West China. Guizhou lies within the Yungui Plateau in southwestern China and covers an area of 170 000 square kilometres. Labelled by China's President Xi as 'the Geopark Province', Guizhou is an immensely beautiful region dominated by spectacular karst landforms embracing a total area of 100 000 square kilometres, including the world famous and magnificent Zhijindong Cave of Triassic age. Guizhou also hosts spectacular national geoparks, such as Xingyi, Suiyang Shuanghedong Cave, Chishui Danxia, Guizhou Guanling Fossil, Quiandongnan Mialoling, Pintang, Liupanshui Wumeng Mountain and Sinan Wujiang Karst.

Guizhou is rich in fossil assemblages, notably the mid-Triassic reptile genus *Keichousaurus* of the pachypleurosaur family. The region is also rich in mineral resources, with its extractive industry being a large contributor to its economy. Guizhou mines mercury as well as manganese, zinc, lead, aluminium, copper, iron and gold. Its nonmetallic mined natural resources include coal, oil shale, phosphate, gypsum, arsenic, limestone and fluorite. It is a large power producer through both coal plants and hydropower, and exports its significant surplus to Guangdong Province.

Participation in this symposium, which predominantly involved delegates from East Asia, enabled Geotourism Standing Committee member Young Ng and I to network with

representatives from other countries aspiring to establish geoparks. In my presentation to the Symposium, delegates were informed that in Australia the term 'Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark proposals' is used to describe those undergoing assessment to obtain community and government support prior to any application lodged with UNESCO, at which stage the project status changes to 'Aspiring'. It was reported that the Etheridge proposal is being developed through a new geotourism strategy as a 'defacto geopark', and is now not subject to any global geopark assessment process. It was also explained that Warrumbungle Pre-Aspiring Global Geopark is currently subject to discussions with the NSW State Government as to the scope and size of the project; the application is not being lodged with UNESCO this year and is currently on hold.

My discussions with representatives of the Japanese Geopark Network identified a detailed approvals process which, if emulated in Australia, could help address various issues that have arisen in Australia relating to government approval of geopark development. This new information will be discussed with Australian Government officials who are currently developing new administrative procedures to facilitate the growth of geotourism in Australia.

Following the symposium, a tour of Guizhou Province was arranged for the Standing Committee members by the National Commission on Tourism Earth Science and Geopark of the Geological Society of China. The tour was hosted by the Bureau



*Karst landforms of Xingyi National Geopark, Guizhou Province. Image courtesy Angus M Robinson*





One of the fascinating formations inside Zhijindong Cave, Zhijindong Cave UNESCO Global Geopark. Image courtesy Young Ng

of Geology and Mineral Exploration and Development of Guizhou Province, and led by Professor Anze Chen and Ms Yanjun Wang, the Executive Deputy Secretary General of the National Commission of Tourism Earth Science and Geopark of the Geological Society of China. The group visited several significant karst geosites and fossil museums/research centres within the Xingyi and Guanling National Geoparks. Based on what we observed during the tour, there is no doubt that geotourism, geoparks and geotrails are at the forefront of economic development of this region, and are strongly supported by all levels of government in China.

The visit also included detailed discussions with senior governing officials of the City of Xingyi about geopark development, and separately with executive members of the Bureau of Geology and Mineral Exploration and Development of Guizhou Province about potential areas of collaboration between Australia and China. This collaboration is embodied in a Memorandum of Co-operation between the Geological Society of China and the GSA. This document was executed in 2016

by Professor Anze Chen and past President Graham Carr, representing respectively the two geological societies. In our discussions with Professor Chen, we identified 11 specific opportunities with assigned action items, including a proposed geotourism collaboration between Guizhou Province and Far North Queensland.

Following the visit to China, I travelled to Taiwan to deliver a keynote address to the 2017 International Geopark Conference in Taiwan. The topic selected was *The development and community engagement issues associated with the two Australian Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geoparks*. At this conference, I met delegates from a range of other countries (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, UK, Germany, Poland and New Zealand) — all engaged in the promotion of geopark development. In particular, considerable time was spent conferring with Dr Nguyen, the Chief of the Department of Economic Geology — Mineral Materials for the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Vietnam Institute of Geosciences and Mineral Resources. Dr Nguyen is



driving Vietnam's Global Geopark development program and intends to visit Australia next year on an exploratory basis to exchange knowledge and experience on the regulatory operating environment for exploration and mining in Australia, in comparison with Vietnamese regulations. He also expressed interest in promoting cooperation between his agency and Geoscience Australia and Geological Surveys on geological research, especially in the areas of hidden deep mineral resource exploration, and the development of geopark networks in Vietnam and Australia.

In North Asia, I also made contact with researchers in China, Japan and South Korea, who expressed some interest in collaborating with Australian researchers in the area of 3D visualisation (<http://www.ausgeol.org>). 3D visualisation can be used for geosite identification in geotourism, and has potential

applications in geological hazard mapping in geologically unstable areas of Asia, where this need is a core area of interest for government agencies.

As the rest of the Asia-Pacific region is rapidly embracing geotourism and geopark development, active Australian engagement in this movement will continue to open up hitherto unrealised opportunities for Australian geological agencies and geologists in a whole range of geoscience-related endeavours. To see and appreciate the central role of government geological surveys in both China and Vietnam in furthering this movement was a revelation.

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*Pachypleurosaur* Keichousaurus (dorsal view). Image courtesy Department of Land and Resources of Guizhou Province