

Geotourism — future directions for Australia

A recent submission to the Chief Government Geologists Committee, prepared by the Geotourism Standing Committee of the GSA, has detailed recent geotourism developments in Australia. The submission also explained the potential for the geotourism industry to employ geoscientists, and to become an important customer for the goods and services of geological surveys of Australia and their equivalents. This submission has been supported by the Australian Geoscience Council and is available at http://www.leisuresolutions.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Geotourism_Chief-Govt-Geologists_briefing_4-January2016.pdf.

Geotourism is an emerging global phenomenon that fosters tourism based on landscapes. The GSA has recently defined it as 'tourism [that] focuses on an area's geology and landscape as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment' — all of which serves to shape the character of a region.

A 'geotrail' can deliver geotourism experiences through a journey linked by an area's geology and landscape 'as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment'. Geotrails can offer the advantages of relating directly to the tourism experience of a journey linking destinations, and should incorporate the biodiversity and cultural components (including mining heritage) of the region through which the geotrail traverses.



Global Eco conference

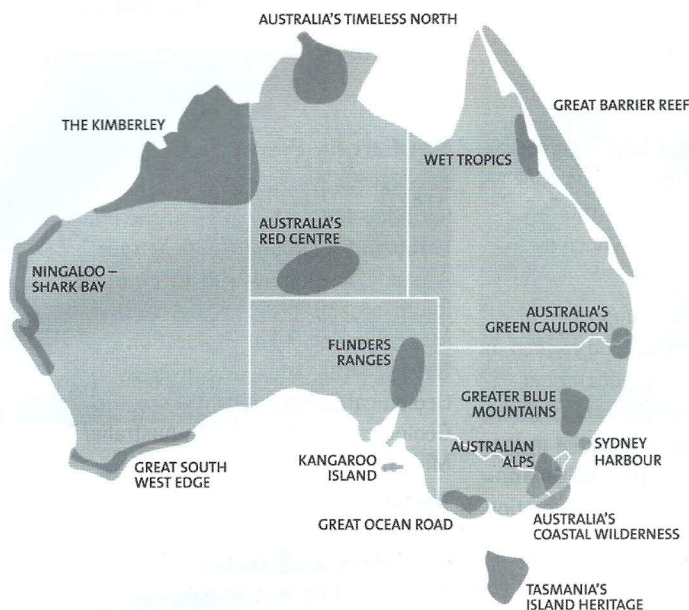
Geotrails were discussed at the Geotourism Workshop at the *Global Eco Asia-Pacific Tourism Conference* hosted by Ecotourism Australia at Rottnest Island on 19 November 2015. Representatives of the GSA Geotourism Standing Committee (including Ross Dowling) made various presentations. Ivor Roberts and Michael Freeman of the WA Department of Mines and Petroleum, referring specifically to the Rottnest Island geological setting, explored links between geotourism and ecotourism. Their presentation focused on how geotourism can expand visitors' experiences in natural areas, and deepen their understanding of how the features formed through geological time to arrive at their present forms. Alan Briggs from Murdoch University referred to research that considers the process for establishing a community-led geopark — initiated by the community, for the community. Albert Teo, Deputy Chair, Asian Ecotourism Network, illustrated how geotourism was being incorporated in the strategic plan to take his companies, Borneo Eco Tours and Sukau Rainforest Lodge, to 'National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World' status. In a keynote address to the main conference, Standing Committee member Young Ng presented how geoparks in China have considerably contributed to public interest in geology and have boosted visits to regional areas of the country.

The convening of the Global Eco Geotourism Workshop has resulted in government officials from South Australia, Western Australia and Norfolk Island all expressing interest in reviewing how geotourism can stimulate regional development and tourism. Global Eco 2016 will be held in Hobart on 21–23 November 2016 and will most likely include another geotourism workshop.

Global geoparks

Geotourism attractions are also being developed around the world primarily as a sustainable 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 where that heritage is being used to promote sustainable development in local communities who live there. Geoparks can evolve through a series of levels from 'aspiring', 'national', 'regional' (eg. 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 currently represents 120 members from 33 countries. The original target of the Global Geoparks Network is to establish 500 geoparks around the world. The number is growing at a rate of about 10 new global geoparks per year.

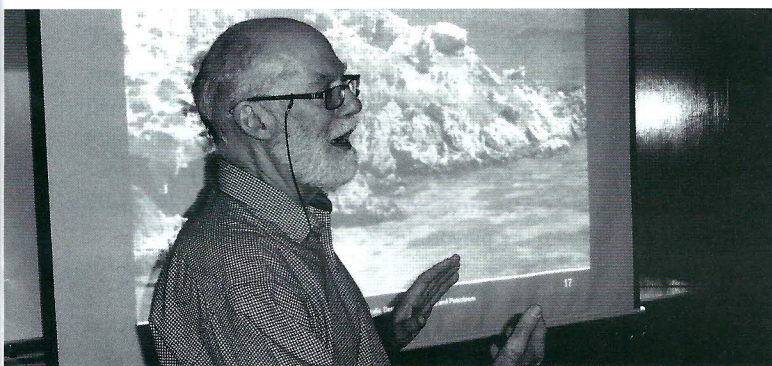
Ormiston Gorge, Australia's Red Centre National Landscape. Image courtesy Angus M Robinson



Australia's National Landscapes. Image courtesy Parks Australia and Tourism Australia



Brachina Gorge Geological Trail, Wilpena Pound, Flinders Ranges National Landscape. Image courtesy Angus M Robinson



Ivor Roberts speaking at the Global Eco 2015 Geotourism Workshop. Image courtesy Angus M Robinson

In November 2015, Member States at UNESCO's General Conference took a decision to establish global geoparks as UNESCO sites. Under this arrangement, UNESCO Global Geoparks can raise awareness of geodiversity and promote protection, education and tourism best practices. Together with World Heritage sites and Biosphere Reserves, UNESCO Global Geoparks now form a complete range of sustainable development tools and make an invaluable contribution to the realisation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals by combining global and local perspectives.

During this General Conference, Member States also endorsed the statutes of a new International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme. This action allows UNESCO to more closely reflect the societal challenges of Earth Science today and provides an international status to a former network of sites of geological significance.

Considering the implications of these developments for Australia, one option for geopark development involves the establishment, at the behest of state and territory governments, of geoparks over lands (eg, national parks) that are already protected. While automatically removing any land alienation (perceived or otherwise) concern about geoparks, it provides a

mechanism for improved branding for national parks. Whatever model is selected, the Geotourism Standing Committee recognises that the future establishment of geoparks lies within the jurisdiction of, and funding by, state and territory governments alone. The Australian Government's role is to assess the geoheritage protection considerations of any geopark proposal and determine whether it should or can be submitted to UNESCO for global geopark determination. With this framework in mind, discussions have been initiated with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service about a proposed geopark development over an area embraced by the Warrumbungle National Park and/or geotrails linking key geosites across the Orana region. In Queensland, discussions with Etheridge Shire in north-west Queensland are proceeding with a scoping meeting to consider geopark and/or geotrail options mooted for early 2016.

It is also worth noting that in Australia a somewhat equivalent land use to geoparks is the Australian National Landscape Program. Of the 16 designated national landscapes in Australia, the iconic Australia's Red Centre and Flinders Ranges offer opportunities for major geotrail or geopark development. 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.

Future geotourism

Geotourism's key benefit is 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 offered by special exhibitions and natural history museums. Further information is available at: <http://www.leisuresolutions.com.au/index.php/geotourism-industry-groups/>.

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