

Geotourism

Carnarvon Gorge Field School with Savannah Guides

I have been a geologist for 25 years and have never had cause to regret it. I am now at a stage where I am grateful for the perspective that it gives me. It was not an obvious pathway, being first in my family, so I have wondered how it happened. The obvious answer is that I needed to fill a quota of first-year points, and geology offered field trips out of the city — yay! Once studying geology, I found it just fascinating and was hooked. I think, however, that I was primed well before that.

What's my interest in geotourism?

I grew up in a tourist town surrounded by the Grampians State Forest. When I was in Year 10, the forest was declared a national park. Tourism and conservation were therefore significant influences on my life, but overriding that were the ever-present mountains. They were the backdrop for most of my experiences for ten years; after that, they were either in my rear-view mirror or rising up to welcome me home for another ten years. When you love something, I think it is natural to want to share it. Even at that junior stage of my life, I found that people were interested in what I had to say about the geology of Victoria's western district, and encouraged me to tell them more.

Then for 15 years, I was just a consumer of tourism. Now I am tired of going on tours and being told things like "The Permian has some of the oldest fossils known" — what? Often this happens because tour operators do not know any better. I think a more concerning cause is that Permian fossils are the oldest they have, and they want to impress their guests. Generally it is a pretty safe bet that their guests will not know any better. Obviously this jars with me, because it is factually incorrect, but what I object to most is the lost opportunity to tell tourists a much more interesting story. There is so much more to tell — even if it needs to be chunked down into bite-size pieces.

Middle age is a great time for reflection. I certainly accept that I will never be an exploration manager or research scientist. I do have a lot of work experiences to draw on, however, and it struck me that I have significant skills in communication — particularly the facilitation and translation of concepts, ideas and information between different groups. When I thought about what I could do to 'share the love' more, I naturally gravitated towards tourism and education. For the past couple of years, I have been trying to work out how to move more into these fields.

Let's make no mistake — geotourism happens in the tourism industry. I figured that if I want to work on the ground and be part of how the general public access the experience of geology, then I needed a much better grasp of how tourism really works in modern Australia. I started with what I knew, which was the pre-eminent professional nature-based tourism body, Ecotourism Australia. At their 2017 conference I met the manager of Savannah Guides, Russell Boswell, who is responsible for running Ecotourism Australia's tour guide certification program.

What's the field school all about?

Savannah Guides has been around for 30 years. It was established by emerging tourism operators in northern Australia's Gulf Savannah region to provide high-quality and sustainable visitor access to unique natural features. It is now regarded as a leading body for the professional development of nature guides throughout Australia and has even assisted international organisations. Its primary purpose is to provide a platform for members to learn from each other and specialists, and to raise the standards of professional guiding throughout Australia. Its philosophy is underpinned by training, professionalism, conservation and cultural respect. This is summed up by their motto: 'Protectors and Interpreters of the Outback'.

Each year, at least two field schools are held at varying locations across the savannah lands. These give members and friends the opportunity for ongoing education, accreditation and networking. When I learnt in 2017 that the next one was at Carnarvon Gorge, Qld, then I could think of no better way of getting a deep dive into the 'what to do' element of tourism¹ while going somewhere I have always wanted to go. There is no denying that famils² can be a significant perk of working in tourism!

I found the school to be very well organised, from the great initial information and instructions from Savannah Guides administration (thanks Sam!) to smooth running once on the ground. The field school was hosted by Simon Ling and Michelle Whitehouse of Australian Nature Guides. The organisers were flexible, on top of their game and committed to everyone getting the most out of the event. There was a variety of accommodation choices, including lodge cabins. I chose free camping (no facilities) and pretty much had the grounds to myself, with a fabulous view.



Lookout Point for sunrise walk, Carnarvon Gorge field school. Image courtesy Savannah Guides

The 3.25-day program was varied and typically packed from 7 am to 8 pm. I found it pretty full on, but lots of fun. The main icebreaker was introductions around the room where I 'fessed up to being a geologist. The warm response ("ooh, our very own geologist!") was typical of the rest of the school. Only one day was spent inside, but the Australian Nature Guides Discovery Centre served generally as an excellent base with lots of resources (nature bits plus books, posters etc). Outdoor activities included a Q&A nature trail, evening wildlife spotting, twitch-a-thon (birds), sunrise walk, treasure hunt and a full-day walk up the gorge. We had a couple of talks from Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service rangers and were treated to dinner in the stables of the Sandstone Park accommodation provider.

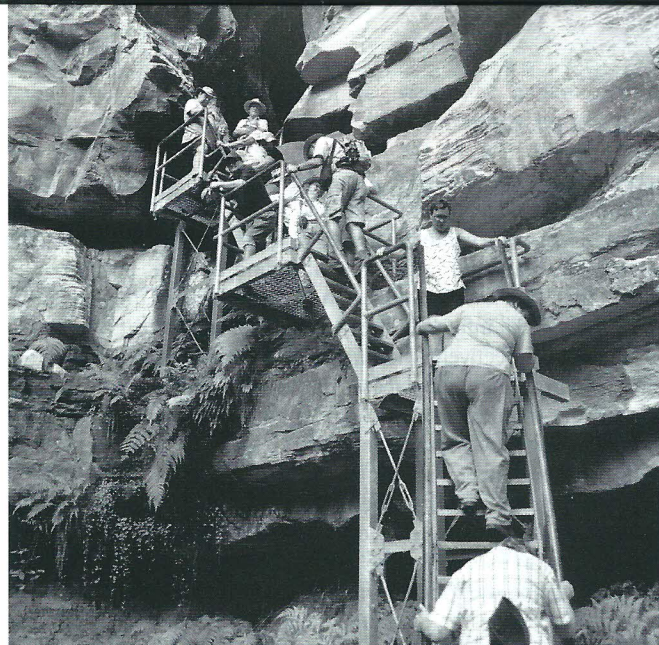
This school was based around the theme 'Ways of knowing and interpreting nature.' Everything from the program manual to talks and activities tied into it well. I also found that the theme was reflected in the high level of openness, curiosity and sharing displayed by the group. It was the kind of place where there were no dumb questions, but was instead underlined by 'How can we do better?'

Standout memories

One activity used basic observations to name rocks. It was designed to build guides' confidence in saying something sensible when presented with an unfamiliar rock. The emphasis was on what can you and your guest see or test that would help you deduct what the rock is, and therefore, how it came to be. I thought this was a really useful and well-pitched exercise. Purely focusing on observation and Geology 101 principles helped make geology more accessible to everyone. I was delighted to be asked to help. It was wonderful to congratulate guides when they got it right and help turn their frustration into confidence when they were stumped. This was as simple as taking the hand lens and rock outside, where the light was best, to get a genuine "Oh yes, I can see what you're talking about". Otherwise, focusing on the processes that produced the features the guides could see was a very effective way to help them learn.

Another highlight was unexpectedly becoming the centre of attention when we reached the lookout point for our sunrise walk. The view was dominated by the sandstone cliffs of the Precipice Sandstone and multiple erosional surfaces of the Moolayamber Formation, Evergreen Formation and Hutton Sandstone. I had read up on the geology beforehand, just using GSA and Geological Survey of Qld publications. On that basis I thought the walk leader, Vicki Jones of Red Dirt Tours, did a great job of telling the geological story and answered a wide variety of questions well. One curly one she threw to me. I answered in a general way, partly because I am not an expert on the area, but also I did not feel at that stage that I had a great handle on the audience. As a result, the discussion ranged over the dynamic landscape, rates of erosion, geological time — and even earthquakes. The sense I got from the group of a deep desire to understand was exciting and the real essence of this highlight for me.

Then I had a great reminder of the Law of Uniformitarianism on our day walk, for space rather than time. At various places along the Lower Gorge are extensive swaths of river pebbles. They are textbook smooth and well-sorted, but oligomictic and big (10–50 cm)! If I did not look up just then, I felt I could have been back in a river gorge in the Himalayas. I was pretty gobsmacked making that association, because I realised just how much water must come down the gorge from time to time. I got the sort of thrill that living geology often gives me. What has really stayed with me, however, is that one of the guides said "This looks just like the Himalayas!". When others make the association, then it is easy to share what the implications of the observation are. That was a great reminder that geology does not need



Entrance to The Amphitheatre, Carnarvon Gorge field school.
Image courtesy Savannah Guides



Carnarvon Gorge, Queensland. Image courtesy Tourism and Events Queensland

to be an intellectual exercise to be of value. It is eminently hands-on, because it is fundamentally part of our environment — and therefore, as accessible to a child playing in mud as to a worldly traveller.

Takeaway insights

This field school was very valuable for me. It gave me the exposure I was looking for on how modern guiding is done to a high standard. It also made me realise other things I had not fully appreciated to date. Listening to dinner conversations was at times as instructive as the formal activities. For example, some of the pressures and difficulties in making a living struck me as surprisingly familiar. I think I adapted to the uncertainties of life in the mining industry because of my early exposure to tourism. There is a similar potential for factors outside our control to devastate our current course, whether it be an international stock market rout or a bushfire. Do not go into either mining or tourism if you like to be secure. If that is not a core value, then they can both be very exciting and personally rewarding.

My understanding of communicating geological time also deepened. The difficulties in doing this to people who think 1000 years is ancient is obvious to anyone who has tried it. I do not think any of

us ever get a full sense of deep time, but at some point geologists get comfortable with it. If it is treated too superficially for people brand-new to the concept, then all the numbers just become meaningless. I came away determined to do a better job of providing that meaningful framework, as well as conveying some of the awe I feel when contemplating geological time. It is OK to say "the Mesozoic is really old," especially at a dinosaur site, because on a human timescale it is. But without further explanation, this leaves the audience with an infinite bucket of time and no context. We do not communicate effectively when we treat something most people never think about as commonplace — but we do when we respect the wonder the vastness evokes. And we can do it by using relatable examples, like how many generations could fit into the slice of geological time under discussion.

I also had a moment when I realised that I needed to more consciously adapt to the new environment I had put myself in. The scratch test was used in the geology exercise, but rather than the steel blade scratching the rock, the instructions were to scratch the blade with the rock. In my default mode, my initial reaction was "perhaps it's a typo". Then the penny dropped that this was a different

way of seeing. I was not in my past, with kilometres of drillcore to log. The expectation was that this exercise would be applied to a question in a National Park or similar. Doing it the way instructed would be consistent with the context of conservation values. It spoke to the nature of the social licence that Savannah Guides seek to protect. By promoting themselves as protectors of the environment, then there are higher standards to live up to.

In conclusion

I found connecting with the Savannah Guides extremely worthwhile. They are a key organisation to be aware of, particularly with their level of knowledge of all things Australian and natural. Without exception, I found the field school participants to be welcoming, open to new ideas and fascinated by the world around them. I really appreciated their commitment to high standards. I feel confident that using this experience as a benchmark would stand me in good stead for any guiding skills I want to develop.

Geology as a field of knowledge seemed well respected by the group. It forms the key attractions for a number of the enterprise members, such as the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum, Capricorn Caves and Undara lava tubes. Staff from these organisations in particular displayed an in-depth knowledge of their specialty subjects, and obviously had some great connections with the Queensland Museum.

I highly recommend a Savannah Guides field school to anyone with an interest in geotourism — particularly those wanting to test the waters as to whether guiding would suit them as an alternative or supplementary career. If your interest extends to working for one of their members, then it is important to be aware that geological knowledge alone will not be enough to carry you. Members of Savannah Guides are expected to keep learning across all areas of natural history, but are given a lot of support, resources and opportunities to do so. Much of the work is seasonal, so field schools tend to be held immediately before (March/April) or after (Oct) the core working period.

I would like to end on a general science communication point. Building an interesting story takes a lot of thought and a thorough knowledge of your audience to really pull it off. By this I mean that they walk away feeling that they have gained something valuable. I saw this done a number of times during the Carnarvon Gorge Field School. We, as geologists, need to always remember just how much we know and sometimes take for granted. Others often do not even have what we may consider the basics in their framework of thinking. By a lack of awareness, we often run the risk of our audience missing out on what we find so fascinating, what inspires us and why we always want to know more.

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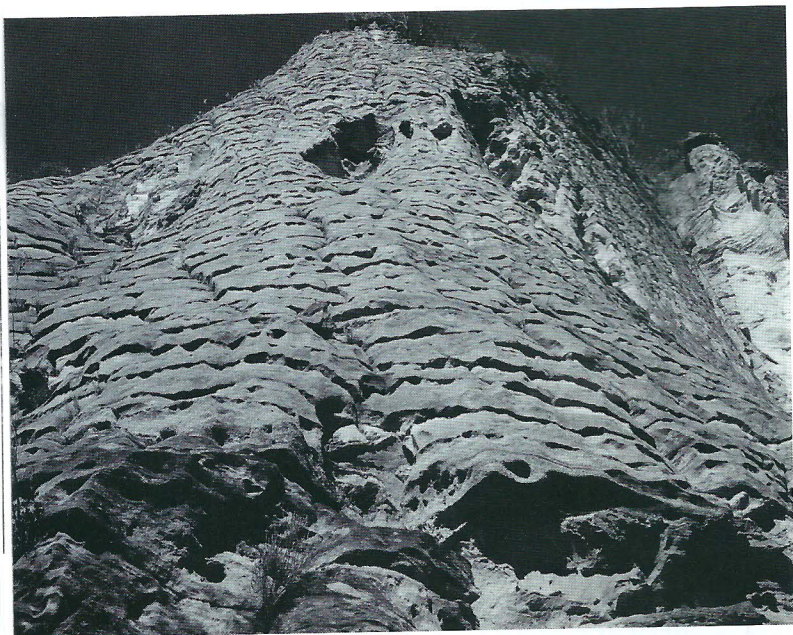
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Links

www.savannah-guides.com.au and for further information:
 Russell Boswell, info@savannahway.com.au
www.npsr.qld.gov.au/parks/carnarvon-gorge
www.carnarvongorge.info
www.sandstonepark.com.au

¹ In the broadest sense, the way tourists spend money, and therefore create business opportunities, can be broken into three categories: where to stay, what to eat and what to do.

² In the tourism industry, 'famils' (familiarisations) allow trade professionals and media to experience a region, product or package.



Cathedral Rock at Carnarvon Gorge. CC BY 2.0, greatlettuce, Flickr



Crossing Carnarvon Creek, Carnarvon Gorge field school. Image courtesy Savannah Guides