Geotourism

It has come like a tempest — 2020.

The last decade finished, and the new year began with two tragedies in our part of the world. First, the volcanic eruption in New Zealand in early December claimed many lives. Then, the escalating fires have devastated large parts of NSW and Vic (particularly the national landscapes of the Greater Blue Mountains, Australia’s coastal wilderness and the Australian Alps) as well as SA (particularly the Kangaroo Island national landscape), following the fires in the Scenic Rim and Sunshine Coast regions of Queensland in earlier months.

Fires burning during the hot summer months are something we all know and prepare for, and we have had bad ones previously, but the intensity of this year’s bushfires were beyond anything imagined or previously encountered. All of us have watched in shock and horror as it unfolded.

While the debate rages about the causes of these bushfires, and whether human-induced climate change has contributed or not, it is evident that the catastrophe exceeded our capacity on multiple fronts to deal with it. The firefighters, volunteers and everyone involved in the firefighting, evacuation, assessments and recovery have my — and I believe the country’s — admiration and heartfelt gratitude. While I was not directly impacted in Darwin, I had family and friends who I was very concerned about, and our Christmas holidays with our family in the Adelaide Hills and Limestone Coast had us on high alert while we were there. I am sure others reading this will have their own story to tell.

But viewing things from a geotourism perspective, both events have been sobering reminders of the power of nature: its raw beauty, and its other darker and dangerous side. While geotourism is a celebration and appreciation of the landscape, habitats and culture of this beautiful planet of ours, recent events are reminder of risk, danger and impermanence, and how the titanic forces that shape our world can quickly overwhelm us. If anything — and I am certainly not casting blame — the New Zealand tragedy is a terrible reminder that many sites that are interesting and worth visiting for their scientific, aesthetic or adventurous appeal also have risks that must be considered and managed as far as ALARP (as low as reasonably practicable) principles can support. A weighted decision is required from any individual on whether to attend that site or not.

In Australia, the devastation from the bushfires has been more widespread and the impacts will be felt long after the bush starts to recover. It has before and ‘should’ again. The impacts to people and communities are clear, obvious and have been well publicised in our media and social platforms.

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Bushfire extents (top) South Australia and (bottom) New South Wales and Victoria, as at 19 January 2020. Images sourced from Bushfire Boundaries – LOA – Suburbs and Population Density webapp, MSINA (https://arcg.is/1nXWqQ)
Other implications have just started to become apparent. It is grim
reading, but the *Sydney Morning Herald* article from 18 January and the NSW Government’s Department of Planning, Industry, and Environment website outlines a sobering assessment of the current impacts in NSW on terrestrial systems: and, as the ash finds its way into our waterways, the likely consequences for aquatic systems and species (tinyurl.com/2019-2020fire-impact and tinyurl.com/unprecedented-devastation).

Many commentators, including the former Chair of the Geotourism Standing Committee Angus M Robinson, have also highlighted and correctly predicted the detrimental effect on tourism: a result of the perceptions of Australia from the recent mainstream and social media deluge. Reports of cancellations from overseas are the manifestation of people choosing to reconsider their holiday plans as per the point about ‘weighted decisions’ above. These flow-on effects from the bushfire crisis have promoted the Australian government to invest $76 m to Rebuild Australian Tourism and it has re-established its brand. It is encouraging to see this response and the encouragement of domestic and international tourism. Until further details of this funding emerge, it can only be hoped the funding is used to rebuild the entire industry, but specifically purposed to those communities most severely impacted.

It is even more satisfying to learn of communities leading their own recovery efforts, with Kangaroo Island prominent and loud in their ‘keep visiting us’ appeal. It is easy to feel overwhelmed when confronted with the scale of complexity of the issues, and the geographical extent. But hope is never far away when other responses are evident, such as the animal rescue efforts, community spirit and engagement and massive donations to our charities.

The reality for geotourism efforts in Australia is that much of the natural landscapes and environments that have historically been promoted and located near our major cities and on the main tourist routes have been compromised. There had been some significant momentum and pursuits in expanding geotourism in Australia in the years leading up to 2020, culminating in the proposal to develop a National Geotourism Strategy championed by the Australian Geoscience Council. But we have now taken a physical, emotional and international reputation ‘hit’, and a well-planned, well-coordinated and well-executed response will be needed on multiple fronts to reposition the industry in the face of the new realities it now faces. Luckily, Australians love a challenge and adversity — it is where we shine.

Geotourism aside, we still need to face the realities of the issues faced by habitats, ecosystems, communities and individuals struggling to recover and we wish them the very best in their efforts to rise — literally — from the ashes.

I trust that our colleagues in the geoscience profession will assist those communities in which they reside. Plant trees, rescue and care for wildlife, help with assessments and recovery, highlight a local geological or natural feature that may be of interest in your area, volunteer your time and efforts and your skills. It is the Australian way.

MARK ASENDORF
Chair, Geotourism Standing Committee

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**GeoField**

*Do you have a story from the field? This is your opportunity to share your personal experiences of life in the field. Sometimes those stories can have a surprising twist. Please send columns to tag@gsa.org.au.*

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**Tectonic beer from Scotland**

The Harviestoun Brewery in Alva Scotland makes a range of craft ales; among them, a pale ale named ‘The Ridge’. The back-label for this beer says:

*The Mid-Atlantic Ridge is where two tectonic plates meet at almost exactly the midpoint between America and Scotland. With this geological symmetry in mind, we’ve created a rock solid union between American Amarillo and British Fuggles hops to produce a US style Pale Ale with distinctive Scottish origins. And whilst we can’t promise that the earth will definitely move for you while drinking Ridge, we can guarantee you’ll be savouring something with a seismic depth of flavour.*

Harviestoun also makes a Pilsener-style lager called Schiehallion, named after a famous mountain in Scotland.

I wonder if there are more beers out there with geological/Earth Sciences allusions?

PAUL BISHOP
Baldernock, Scotland

*The Ridge pale ale from Scotland’s Harviestoun Brewery. Image courtesy Paul Bishop*