I am writing this in mid-April and know it will be read in the June issue of TAG.

I mention this, as the world in the next two months, between writing and publication (if the previous two months are any indicator) may have rapidly changed again. Since March, COVID-19 and its associated mitigation and treatment controls have dominated how we live our lives and disrupted supply chains across the world. At the time of writing we are successfully ‘flattening the curve’, but all indications are that we have a way to go. Wherever you are reading this, first and foremost, I hope you and your families and friends are safe.

In the March issue of TAG (written in January), I discussed the impact of the bushfires and stated the following: “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.”

And that geotourism has: “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.”

These statements are just as relevant now.

Social distancing is likely to be the new normal for the medium term. Tourism has virtually stalled due to border and regional movement restrictions and controls. Businesses, especially transport and hospitality, are in survival mode. Governments across the world are spending to keep economies afloat. In short, for the travel industry, the situation is currently pretty grim.

However, I am again reminded of the resilience of individuals and communities with some of the things I have seen, read and heard recently. Some of the varied responses and methods of coping with the constraints and restrictions on their lives are — well — quite ingenious. It is a prime example of people coping with the current realities, enduring and moving on.

The same is true of geotourism.

There is no quick fix to the current situation, but ironically the forced slow-down has offered the opportunity to plan, consider and develop strategies for the future. At our recent Geotourism Standing Committee meeting, I was encouraged and impressed by the amount of thinking and planning that has been happening around the country, and feel that a few highlights are worth sharing.

WA, Tas, SA and NSW continue to advance the geotourism interests in their states, with several geotrails proposed or in development. Qld, NT and Vic also show some promising developments, but these are still in planning phase. As a national body, the Geotourism Standing Committee is reviewing the development of standard geotourism potential assessment templates. Things are still happening; just differently from those originally imagined.

One promising development includes more thought around the potential of virtual and augmented reality tours. The authentic experience of a place may be irreplaceable, but the digital technologies available today are widespread and offer a real opportunity to showcase otherwise inaccessible, vulnerable or sensitive sites in ways unimaginable even 10 years ago.

In the broader context, the Australian Geoscience Council is currently consulting with the state chief geologists as the Geoscience Working Group (formerly the Chief Government Geologists Committee), about initiating and developing a national geotourism strategy based on consideration of the following topics:
1. Geotourism as a means for celebrating geodiversity.
2. Enhanced national coordination of geoheritage listings.
4. New geotrail development at local, regional and national levels through engagement and open dialogue with other interest groups.
5. Mechanisms for collaboration with providers of other areas of natural (bioregion) and cultural heritage content, particularly mining.
6. Using geotourism to strengthen Australia’s international geoscience standing.
7. Providing professional development opportunities for geoscientists.

The GSA will be able to contribute to the development of this strategy and have a key role in its implementation.

So there are still positive things happening, and I encourage you to contact your state and territory representatives if you want to find more.

But given the circumstances we all face, it’s perhaps fitting to conclude with another passage from my last TAG article.

“Luckily, Australians love a challenge and adversity — it is where we shine”.

Wherever you are, stay safe and well.

MARK ASENDORF
Chair, Geotourism Standing Committee

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