The Murchison's fabric woven in A-B-C

STEPHEN SCOURFIELD looks at how collaboration has unlocked the story of this ancient land.

You might expect this story about the launch of the world's first GeoRegion to be all about rocks. But it isn't.

fact file
- murchisongeoregion.com
- Download the free Murchison GeoRegion app at App Store and Google Play.
- Look out for the Murchison GeoRegion trail guidebook, Ancient Lands Brilliant Skies.
- Or follow the "brochure" link at murchisongeoregion.com to download the guidebook as a PDF.
rocks.
But it isn't.

What quickly becomes apparent in the Memorial Hall at Mt Magnet is that the Murchison GeoRegion is mostly about people.

On the grand scale, GeoRegions celebrate not just the geological quirks and foundations of landscape but its wildflowers and animals, and the cultures that have lived on and shaped it, and still live on it.

As Professor Ross Dowling, vice-president Geoparks WA, puts it, the ABC — abiotic (non-living; the rocks), biotic (living plants and flora), and culture of humans past and present. “An integrated approach to presenting an area.”

On a practical scale, the Murchison GeoRegion is the result of seven years co-operative work between seven local government shires (as rare an event, I might venture, as that which created the Boogardie orbicular granite which we’ll visit tomorrow).

But the shires of Mt Magnet, Murchison, Meekatharra, Cue, Yaigoo, Sandstone and Wiluna have done just that, in co-operation with the Mid West Development Commission and local communities.

Across those shires, there are 21 sites in the Murchison GeoRegion which tell the ancient and modern story of the region, from that orbicular granite, which at 2.6 billion years is the oldest in the world, to Jack Hills, which contain zircons dated at 4.4 billion years, just 100 million years after the planet was born. This is the oldest known material on Earth.

The self-drive trail takes tourists to London Bridge at Sandstone, Jokers Tunnel at Yaigoo, Walga Rock near Cue, with WA’s biggest gallery of rock art, and Poona, north of that, which is the home of WA emeralds.

Stephen Hopper, a world renowned botanist and conservation biologist at the University of Western Australia, adds the human, plant and animal story — again, over long timescales: “Some animals have had tens or millions, and in some cases, hundreds of millions of years, of evolution and adaption to aridity.” (Where else would you find the pebble-mimic dragon; a lizard that lives up to its name?)

To explain the Murchison GeoRegion route and features, there’s a good trail guidebook, app, website, and signage at the sites.

Karen Morrissey, one of the project’s great champions, says: “It’s all here — it’s about getting people to come here and stop.”

It is about people going back to country. All people.

Karen, a Mt Magnet councillor, explains: “The seven shires have formally recognised how important the geology, biodiversity and culture are — not only to the people who live here but to the whole world.

It’s all positive, about where you live.

“We are not competing as communities. We want a robust environment for families. We want sustainable economic growth.”

Emma Foulkes-Taylor, a Shire of Murchison councillor, agrees the project is “a triumph of positive co-operation”.

“Tourism plays a huge part in our town,” says Beth Walton, president of the Shire of Sandstone. “Tourists add vibrancy to our town and keep our businesses ticking over.”

And Mt Magnet Shire president Jorgen Jensen adds: “We would like to see people travelling in rather than through our region.”

At the launch, the Mid West Development Commission, and particularly chief executive Gavin Treasure and project manager Adam Murszewski, are praised.

The commission’s regional development director Mike Bowley says: “Natural landscapes support tourism in our communities. The objective is to keep people in the region, to stay one more day. It keeps our communities going ahead.”

CONTINUED PAGE 10
The 21 Sites

CUJ
1. Walga Rock has WA's biggest gallery of Indigenous rock art.
2. Wilgie Mia is the world's oldest continually used mine, as Indigenous people have collected ochre here for 30,000 years.
3. Poona is the home of WA emeralds.
4. Afghan Rock was visited by gold rush cameleers.
5. Garden Granite Rock is the site of gold rush market gardens.

MEKATHARRA
6. Jack Hills, north-east of Meekatharra, is home to the world's oldest found terrestrial material.
7. Mt Yagahong rises sharply 150m from flat land.
8. Peace Gorge has scattered piles of golden granite.
9. Bariangi Rock has a 2.23 billion-year-old meteorite impact crater.

MT MAGNET
10. The Granites has been visited by the Badimia people for 20,000 years.
11. Orbicular granite is rare and Boogardie's, the oldest in the world.
12. The Amphitheatre is a ridge of granite.

MURCHISON SETTLEMENT
13. Eradickly Bluff rises 100m.
14. Wooleen Lake is one of Australia's few inland freshwater lakes.
15. Blung Pool is a permanent waterhole on the Wooramell River.

SANDSTONE
16. London Bridge is a natural stone bridge.
17. Beer was brewed in The Brewery tunnel from 1907.

WILUNA
18. Shoemaker Crater is one of Australia's biggest and oldest impact sites.

YALGOO
19. Jokers Tunnel is 100m long and was dug with large pickaxes.
FROM PAGE 9

But it falls to Pat Barbett, founder of the Forum Advocating Cultural and Eco Tourism (FACE) to formally launch the Murchison GeoRegion. FACE is at the heart of the idea, and hosted the inaugural Global Geotourism Conference in 2006.

Professor Dowling (described by Pat as “the beating heart of this thing”), emphasises: “WA started world geotourism.” He has since been involved in taking the idea to Malaysia, Oman, China, Namibia and Uzbekistan.

Right on our doorstep, the Murchison GeoRegion project has worked with Indigenous groups, and Badimia man Warren Walsh accompanies us to The Granites and at Boogardie, shares stories about local plants and animals.

Artists from Mt Magnet’s Wirinda Barna Art Centre contributed to artwork used in the project. The centre was established for Aboriginal artists from Mt Magnet, Yalgoo, Meekatharra, Yulga Jinna, Cue and Sandstone.

The signage at GeoRegion sites is a showcase. The endgame for the Murchison GeoRegion is to achieve UNESCO World Geopark status but, for now, the seven shires and all the individuals involved should enjoy this moment of hard-earned achievement (and well-deserved glory). They have created something which will bring Western Australians, and eventually Internationals, closer to the essence of the story of this place.

They have worked together to bring new life and strength to their communities. Co-operatively, they focus on keeping their towns alive and vibrant, and adding to their future.

For us, as travellers, they have provided a tool in our ongoing education about WA. They have opened a doorway into the story of the very foundations of this ancient place.

And they are all rock stars.

HOW TO DO IT
I’m not suggesting that everyone would, could or should download the Murchison GeoRegion app or guidebook and set off on a big road trip to see all 21 sites.

While some rock hounds may do just that, for most travellers, I’d be thinking about the Murchison GeoRegion in clusters and drop-ins and loops.

CLUSTERS
The clusters of sites, for example around Mt Magnet, Cue and Meekatharra make those places in particular worth targeting.

• Either stop off in any of these for at least a couple of days when heading north or south up Great Northern Highway.
• Or set out to target one. For example, travellers who leave the Perth CBD at 7am can drive to Mt Magnet by mid to late afternoon, with plenty of time to stop. (It is 52km from Muchea, at the end of the Tonkin Highway, to Mt Magnet.)
• There are three great Murchison GeoRegion sites around there.
• Cue is 80km further on, with four good sites. Meekatharra is a full day’s drive from Perth, with three sites.

DROP-INS
On the way north or south, drop-in, for example at the Paynes Find Battery.

LOOPS
Work out nice loops to suit the time you have. For example, targeting Sandstone, Mt Magnet and Yalgoo. Or on another trip, Cue, then east past Lake Austin to Murchison Settlement then home again.