Development & Community Engagement Issues -
Australian Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geoparks

Abstract

Two exciting UNESCO Global Geopark projects embracing large areas have emerged within two different Australian regions under the auspices of supporting local government agencies.

The Pre-Aspiring Etheridge UNESCO Global Geopark proposal is embraced by the Shire of Etheridge in Far North Queensland located west of the international tourist destination of Cairns. Forming part of a geological heritage spanning 1.7 billion years, two relatively recent geological events now feature as iconic geotourism attractions in the region, the most significant of which is the Undara Lava Tube System, truly unique in the world based on consideration of age, preservation and lineal extent. This landform, as well as other landforms in the area proposed for the Global Geopark, have resulted in a diverse range of bioregions including a rich assemblage of wildlife. Committed input from the Ewamian Aboriginal community is sure to identify sites exhibiting rich indigenous culture.

The Pre-Aspiring Warrumbungle UNESCO Global Geopark proposal, features as its core the ragged volcanic peaks and spires of the Warrumbungle National Park located within three local government areas in northwest New South Wales.

Both proposals have been engaging with the state National Parks and Wildlife Services and local townships and farming communities, subject to State Government approval and the resolution of a range of issues that are concerning local communities. This paper focuses on the genesis of these issues and what steps have been undertaken, and lessons learnt in endeavouring to obtain community engagement and support.

Land Management Governance Model and Tourism in Australia

In understanding the environment in which community engagement can take place to foster geopark development in Australia, it is important to take account of the role of the three levels of government.

The national Australian Government markets tourism globally and is the principal point of contact with UNESCO. At the second level, there are eight State and Territory Governments responsible for all land use management (including mineral resources) and planning, including tourism development and marketing. The third level, Local Government Agencies (Shire Councils), is controlled by State Governments and provide most community services and tourism information through the auspices of Local Tourism Organisations (LTOs).

The Kanawinka UNESCO Global Geopark Impasse

Whilst the concept of geotourism was first discussed in Australia in 1996 at an annual conference of the Geological Society of Australia, Australia’s first geopark, Kanawinka, was declared in 2008 and formally announced at the Inaugural Global Geotourism Conference in Fremantle, Western Australia, in August 2008. The Kanawinka Geopark (26,910 square kilometres in area) featured recent volcanism extending from the Naracoorte Caves in South
Australia into the Portland (Victoria) shoreline and north as far as Penola and Mount Hamilton. It represented the sixth largest volcanic plain in the world with 374 eruption points. The geopark was located across the two Australian states of Victoria and South Australia and was contained within eight Shire Council areas.

However, the Kanawinka Global Geopark was unable to gain State and Australian Government approval which would have enabled UNESCO to assign ‘global geopark’ status on an ongoing basis. This situation was reaffirmed when Australian Government Ministers for the Environment and Heritage Council (EPHC) met in November 2009. This Council decided that after consultation with Resource Management Ministers, whilst Australian governments support geological heritage, they had significant concerns with the application of the UNESCO Geoparks concept in Australia, especially without government endorsement. It was decided that existing mechanisms are considered sufficient to protect geoheritage in Australia. The Council requested that the Australian Government advise UNESCO that Australia would not recognise the Kanawinka Geopark because of the deficient UNESCO process in declaring it. Council also requested the Australian Government ask UNESCO to take no further action to recognise any future proposals for Australian members of the Global Geoparks Network, or to further progress Geoparks initiatives within Australia, including that for the Kanawinka Geopark, unless the formal agreement of the Australian Government has first been provided. In 2012, UNESCO had no other choice but to withdraw Global Geopark designation for Kanawinka.

In recent years, the Kanawinka region has been developed as a series of linked geotrails with support provided by community groups and several of the local government agencies.

**Overcoming Barriers to Geopark Development in Australia**

In reflecting on the Kanawinka experience, back in 2008, the concept of global geoparks was clearly not supported by government planning and tourism agencies; the concept did not fit at all well into the prevailing public land management arrangements administered by government agencies.

Moreover, the concept was not embraced or understood by the geological professions, hence there was no constituency support that could be translated into political lobbying. As far as the tourism industry was concerned, geotourism was simply written off as a ‘niche’ interest area for those visitors interested in geology. Even ecotourism (as part of the nature based tourism mix) was still a relatively young history with less than 20 years of development in Australia.

State/Territory Government Geological Survey organisations were also not supportive of geopark development and geotourism generally, with strongly expressed concerns about impact on access to land for exploration and mining, irrespective of UNESCO assurances that geopark development did not impact on these activities.

Largely in response to the Kanawinka experience, but also in recognition of overseas developments in geotourism and geoparks, the Governing Council of the Geological Society of Australia (GSA) decided in 2011 to establish a formal Geotourism Sub Committee of its Geological Heritage Standing Committee. Later in 2014, Council established a separate Standing Committee focusing solely on geotourism, and over the following 12 months, arrangements were put in place to provide linkages with two other large professional societies with significant geological membership – the Australian Institute of Geoscientists and The Australasian Institute of Mining & Metallurgy. The Institute subsequently provided strong support for the concept of geotourism and geoparks in its draft Australian Heritage Strategy of the Australian Government.

Notably, one of the achievements of this initiating Geotourism Sub Committee was to obtain formal approval and adoption in Australia by the Governing Council of the GSA of a definition of geotourism. *'Geotourism is tourism which focuses on an area's geology and landscape as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment'*. Moreover, the Geotourism Sub-Committee embarked on a campaign within the geological professional societies to promote the fact that geotourism is an emerging global phenomenon which fosters tourism based upon landscapes. It was explained that geotourism promotes tourism to ‘geo-sites’ and the conservation of geodiversity and an understanding of earth sciences through appreciation and learning, such learnings being achieved through visits to geological features, use of ‘geo-trails’ and viewpoints, guided tours, geo-activities and patronage of geosite visitor centres. It was pointed out that ‘geotourists’ can comprise both independent travellers and group tourists, and that they may visit natural areas (including mining areas) or urban/built areas wherever there is a geological attraction.

In summary, the campaign emphasised that geotourism achieves the following outcomes.

1. Celebrates geoheritage and promotes awareness of and better understanding of the geosciences.
2. Adds considerable content value to traditional nature based tourism which has generally focused only on a region’s biodiversity.
3. Provides the means of increasing public access to geological information through a range of new ICT technology applications.
4. Contributes to regional development imperatives through increased tourist visitation, particularly from overseas.
5. Creates professional and career development for geoscientists.
6. Can provide a means of highlighting and promoting public interest in mining heritage.
7. Celebrates geoheritage and promotes awareness of and better understanding of the geosciences.
8. Adds considerable content value to traditional nature based tourism as well as cultural tourism, inclusive of indigenous tourism, thus completing the holistic embrace of ‘A’ (abiotic) plus ‘B’ (biotic) plus ‘C’ (culture) (Dowling, 2013).
The Governing Council also decided that the principal purpose of the Geotourism Standing Committee was to provide advice to the Geological Society of Australia (GSA) about how best geotourism can best be advanced and nurtured in Australia with the following terms of reference.

- Promote tourism to geosites and raises public awareness and appreciation of the geological heritage of Australia including landforms, geology and associated processes through quality presentation and interpretation.
- Provide advice to the Governing Council about how best geotourism can best be nurtured throughout all areas of Australia, including within, but not limited to, declared Australian National Landscapes, World Heritage and National Heritage areas as well as within National Parks and reserves, urban environments and mining heritage areas.
- Review and recommend strategies that offer the potential for active participation of governments, land managers, tourist bodies and GSA members in geotourism and related interpretation activities.
- Undertake conference/symposium and seminar activities directed at raising awareness of geotourism amongst Society members and others.
- Foster the publication of content which serves to raise awareness and appreciation of geotourism amongst governments, land managers, the tourism industry, the geological profession and the Australian public.

Geotourism (and the work of the Geotourism Standing Committee) is now prominently featured on the Society’s website www.gsa.org.au

As a further development, in 2016, the Australian Geoscience Council (representing all nine geological societies in Australia) decided to appoint the Chair of the Geotourism Standing Committee as its official expert spokesperson on geotourism.

The Geotourism Standing Committee is now moving to establish state/territory based subcommittees with groups already established in South Australia and Tasmania. The GSA has also been active in promoting interest in geotourism symposia at various biennial Australian Earth Science Conventions (AESC) and the 34th International Geological Congress held in Brisbane, Queensland in 2012.

**Australia-China Memorandum of Cooperation**

A highlight of the AESC 2016 convention was the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Geological Society of Australia and the Geological Society of China. This Memorandum of Cooperation seeks to promote better understanding and closer cooperation between the two associations for the promotion and advancement of geotourism. At this stage, it is proposed that any co-operation agreement could embrace areas of activity which could include

- growing and enhancing the level of best practice ‘nature-based’ tourism in both China and Australia;
- progressing protection, conservation and presentation of the geoheritage of natural and mixed protected areas, geoparks, national parks and reserves (in Australia);

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Australian National Landscapes and areas on the World Heritage List (as defined in the World Heritage Convention 1972) areas (both countries);
- exploring opportunities to promote ecotourism and geotourism;
- raising the profile of China and Australia as world- leading ‘nature-based’ tourism destinations;
- exploring other co-operative projects such as participation in conferences; and
- fostering the development of ‘sister park’ relationships between China and Australia.

**Engagement with Government Geological Survey Organisations**

During 2016, the Geotourism Standing Committee commenced a dialogue with the then Chief Government Geologists Committee (now known as the Geoscience Working Group - GWG), a body representing all the state and territory geological surveys as well as the national Geoscience Australia agency. This dialogue was focused on explaining the principles of geotourism and delivery mechanisms such as UNESCO Global Geoparks and geotrails. In July 2017, this body responded to the Standing Committee, noting the following operating trends in Australia relevant to geotourism development.

- The considerable interest in promoting geoheritage for public information and increased tourism revenue in regional Australia.
- The significant efforts by individual State/Territory Geological Surveys and Geoscience Australia in promoting geoheritage by publishing books, pamphlets, GIS-based apps, erecting explanatory signage etc describing sites and geotrails.
- Collaboration between State/Territory Geological Surveys, ‘parks and wildlife’ agencies, member-based geoscience organisations, tourism bodies, and local governments or regional authorities in their jurisdictions to increase awareness of geo- and mining heritage generally and geoheritage sites, geotrails and areas.
- Many geoheritage sites are contained within and protected by conservation reserves and some State/Territory Geological Surveys have established small geoheritage reserves to further protect important sites.

The GWG then advised the Geotourism Standing Committee of the following views.

1. While more collaboration between interested parties would accelerate development of geoheritage benefits, the lead should probably come from local governments, regional authorities, and tourism bodies who have the most to gain from increased tourism activity.

2. Although geoheritage is not core business for Geological Survey organisations, they are willing to assist with specialist knowledge and where possible, minor funding.

3. Support could be given to the establishment of UNESCO Global Geoparks within existing conservation reserves. Outside of this protection, isolated sites and groups of related sites linked by geotrails should be the focus of geoheritage efforts.
4. Consistent with the position communicated by the EPHC, the GWG does not support the creation of UNESCO Global Geoparks without Commonwealth and State/Territory Government agreement.

**Engagement with the Tourism Industry through Ecotourism Australia Ltd**

Progress has also been made in gaining support from the nature-based tourism operators. The peak nature-based tourism industry association, Ecotourism Australia Ltd (EA) established in November 2013 a new industry grouping, the Geotourism Forum, to advocate and nurture the development and growth of geotourism recognising that it is sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing the earth’s geological features in a way that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation, and is locally beneficial. The purpose of the Geotourism Forum is to advise EA of how best geotourism can be advanced and nurtured having regard to the EA’s interest in inspiring environmentally sustainable and culturally responsible tourism.

In late 2014, EA communicated with the Australian Government Minister for Environment in response to his expressed need to understand better how a coordinated review of the opportunities that could be achieved through Australia embracing the concept of geotourism and the introduction of geoparks, as well as advice that could assist government in the delineation and assessment of geopark proposals. The Minister subsequently advised EA that, after reviewing the national policy UNESCO’s Global Geopark Network, he is ‘positively disposed’ towards Australia joining this initiative subject to a number of funding conditions. The Minister also indicated that he needed to consider how best to progress Australia’s involvement in this initiative having sought the views of state and territory environment ministers and the Australian Local Government Association.

The Geotourism Forum co-convened a major geotourism workshop as part of the 2015 Global Eco Conference held at Rottnest Island, Western Australia, at the 2016 Global Eco Conference held in Hobart, Tasmania with another workshop planned for Adelaide, South Australia later in 2017.

Subsequently the Australian Government Department of Environment advised that geopark proposals supported by state/territory governments would be considered and could ultimately be referred to the Australian National Commission for UNESCO.

**Engagement with Local Government/ Regional Development Agencies through SEGRA**

Geotourism has been featured at annual conferences of ‘Sustainable Economic Growth Regional Australia’ (SEGRA) since 2012; with the GSA Geotourism Standing Committee and the EA Geotourism Forum convening the inaugural geotourism workshop at the 2014 conference at Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. SEGRA 2015 was held in Bathurst, New South Wales, an event which saw the genesis of the Etheridge and Warrumbungle global geopark proposals. SEGRA 2016 was convened in Albany, Western Australia. Geotourism workshops are also scheduled at both SEGRA 2017 at Port Augusta in South Australia. It is worth noting that Adelaide will be the venue in October 2018 for the Australian Geoscience Convention which will also include a theme on geotourism. Themes
embraced by these workshops have included Australian National Landscapes, Global Geoparks, geotrails and digital applications to support geotourism activities.

Engagement with the Australian National Landscapes Programme

A number of the Geotourism Standing Committee’s members have been actively involved in and have championed the Australian National Landscapes (ANL) Programme because of the opportunity to promote geotourism concepts. The Programme was the first time the tourism sector, nature conservation managers and tourism advocacy organisations had worked closely together to present Australia’s top nature tourism experiences. The Programme facilitated coordinated tourism planning and management and provided a focus for international marketing. The Programme was delivered bottom up, with coordinating bodies for each ANL made up of land managers, regional tourism bodies and local government. The system is ‘blind’ to land tenure boundaries and in that sense, resembles the geopark structure. Three of the ANLs straddle state borders, demonstrating a unique level of cooperative management.

The Australian National Landscapes Programme included the following regions: Australian Alps (New South Wales/Victoria), Australia’s Green Cauldron (New South Wales/SE Queensland border region), Great Barrier Reef and Wet Tropics area (Queensland), Australia’s Red Centre and Australia’s Timeless North (Northern Territory), Australia’s Coastal Wilderness (New South Wales/Victoria), the Flinders Ranges and Kangaroo Island (South Australia), the Great Ocean Road (Victoria), the Greater Blue Mountains and Sydney Harbour (New South Wales), the Kimberley, Ningaloo-Shark Bay and Great South West Edge (Western Australia), and Tasmania’s Island Heritage (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Australia’s National Landscapes

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Unfortunately in 2014, the two key participating Australian Government agencies advised that they had stepped back from a central coordination role, and would instead encourage local steering committees and the tourism industry to further advance this concept. However, in 2017 the peak tourism industry lobby group has released a white paper extolling the virtues of the ANL programme, a move that can only assist in promoting the development of geotourism.

**Agreed Key Factors for UNESCO Global Geopark Development in Australia - 2017**

It is now understood that the following factors are essential requirements that need to be met to achieve Australian Government support for a UNESCO Global Geopark nomination.

1. Pre-Aspiring Geopark development needs to be state/local government agency initiated and supported.

2. A high level of community (including other land-user) engagement is essential to meet UNESCO requirements.

3. The key driver of geopark development must be focused on regional development – i.e. jobs and growth and demonstrate economic benefit to offset perceived political risk.

4. The approval of State/Territory Government Geological Surveys for individual projects is an absolute necessity.

5. Australian Government approval for UNESCO nomination may well be achieved if state/territory government endorsement and funding is clearly established.

The Geotourism Standing Committee is currently in discussions with Geoscience Australia to consider a new process for assessing and seeking community and government support for UNESCO Global Geoparks development in Australia.

**Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark Proposals in Australia**

Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark proposals are currently those projects undergoing assessment to obtain community and government support prior to any application being lodged with UNESCO.

The process of developing a Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark involves an ‘on ground’ assessment of the feasibility of any proposal brought forward by any grouping including government agencies. With compelling regional development imperatives in mind, two such proposals, the Etheridge region of Far North Queensland (some 40,000 square kilometres in area) embracing the entire Shire of Etheridge (Figure 2); and the Warrumbungle region embracing three Local Government Areas - Warrumbungle, Gilgandra, and Coonamble (Figure 3) located in Northwest NSW (some 27,000 square kilometres in area) have been subject to intensive assessment during 2017, following advice submitted to the Secretary General of the Australian National Commission of UNESCO advising that the ‘pre-aspiring’

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nomination process had commenced. Progress achieved for these projects was reported to the 7th Global Geoparks Network Conference held in the United Kingdom in September 2016 and at the 5th Asia Pacific Network Symposium held in China in September 2017.

Figure 2: Etheridge Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark area comprising Etheridge Shire, Far North Queensland.

Figure 3: Warrumbungle Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark area comprising the whole of Warrumbungle, Gilgandra and Coonamble Shires, North West New South Wales.

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UNESCO Global Geoparks are ‘single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2016).

Even if an area has outstanding, world-famous geological heritage of outstanding universal value, UNESCO has determined that it cannot be a UNESCO Global Geopark unless the area also has a plan for the sustainable development of the people who live there. To succeed, a UNESCO Global Geopark nomination must have the support of local people.

By raising awareness of the importance of the area’s geological heritage in history and society today, UNESCO Global Geoparks provides local people with a sense of pride in their region and strengthens their identification with the area. The creation of innovative local enterprises, new jobs and high quality training courses is stimulated as new sources of revenue are generated through geotourism, while the geological resources of the area are protected (UNESCO, 2016).

Of importance in the process is the realisation that ‘while a UNESCO Global Geopark must demonstrate geological heritage of international significance, the purpose of a UNESCO Global Geopark is to explore, develop and celebrate the links between that geological heritage and all other aspects of the area’s natural, cultural and intangible heritages.’ In this context, the first task of the proponent is to address the issue of geological heritage of ‘international significance’. In 2017, the Governing Council of the GSA assigned the Geotourism Standing Committee the role of assessing the international geological merit of the current (and any future) pre-aspiring UNESCO global geopark proposals, based on the advice provided by the appointed geoscience/mining heritage reference groups, provided that any assessments are to be endorsed by the Governing Council before they are made external.

**Etheridge Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark Proposal**

For the Etheridge proposal, a highly knowledgeable Geoscience and Mineral Reference Group has undertaken a considerable amount of work in defining the international significance of this region located west of the Atherton Tablelands in Far North Queensland, identifying some 20 key geosites in addition to the existing tourism attractions of Undara and Cobbold Gorge and the Talaroo Hot Springs area managed by the Ewamian Aboriginal Corporation. In addition, the reference group has developed a sophisticated GIS map of the region with smartphone connectivity, as well as excellent geological content for the proposed Savannahlander rail geotrail. A heritage specialist has also generated a fascinating overview of the mining heritage of the region.

Ian Withnall, Chair of this reference group, has produced the following general geological description of the proposed geopark (Robinson, 2017).

The Etheridge region’s geological history extends back 1700 million years when its oldest rocks were possibly deposited on the edge of a continent now forming the core of North America. They amalgamated with the Australian continent about 1600 million years ago during supercontinent assembly, and were deformed and metamorphosed. After continental breakup, quiescence was punctuated by episodes of intense geological activity. The most violent resulted in vast outpourings of silica-rich magma in the Carboniferous–Permian.

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Fluvial and marine sediments blanketed the region in the Jurassic–Cretaceous, but the older rocks were re-exhumed after Cenozoic uplift. Basaltic volcanism has occurred without major breaks for the last nine million years, and features lava tubes and very long lava flows. The region is potentially still volcanically active.

These events have contributed to a fascinating diversity of geology, mineral resources and landscapes, which influenced the lives and customs of Aboriginal people and patterns of European settlement.

The assessment process included consultation with all key stakeholders (e.g. indigenous communities, national parks, tourism resorts) undertaking individual self-assessments; consultation with key State Government agencies; and community consultation including information bulletins, public meetings involving Shire Councillors.

The assessment identified the following natural and cultural assets.

- Geosites – In abundance with some 20 key geosites readily accessible to the public. Two geological events of Cainozoic age now feature as iconic geotourism attractions in the region, the most significant of which is the Undara Lava Tube system (figure 4), truly unique in the world based on consideration of age, preservation and lineal extent, as well as the geomorphological expressions within flat-lying sediments at Cobbold Gorge (figure 5). Both of these landforms, as well as the other Proterozoic and Paleozoic landforms in the area proposed for the Global Geopark, have resulted in a diverse range of landforms with unique biodiversity characteristics including a rich assemblage of birdlife.

- ‘Geo villages’ – Four small townships, all with community engaged geosites (including agate, sapphire and gold fields); key established ecotourism resorts of Undara and Cobbold Gorge; and the indigenous Talaroo Hot Springs development.

- Geotrails – The Lava Tubes, Gems and Gorges Geotrail of the Savannah Way (Figure 6) with connections to nearby mining heritage locations.

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Figure 6: The Lava Tubes, Gems and Gorges Geotrail of the Savannah Way

- National Parks – Undara Volcanic Park and four other park areas.
- TerrEstrial Mineral/Fossil Museum – the most significant mineral museum in Queensland.
- Many heritage mining sites and small gold mining operations underscores Etheridge’s status of one Australia’s most diversified mineralised areas.

The geological (and natural and cultural heritage) assessment proved the easy part of the process. A relatively short 12 month period allowed for the assessment and nomination completion process, a decision which proved to be far too short to gain full community support.

Whilst National Parks, indigenous groups, and residents of townships were very supportive, because they understand the economic benefits of tourism, agricultural and small scale mining groups as well as gemstone fossickers were not supportive, with a vigorous program implemented to dissuade Council from finalising the application. It was believed that the establishment of a Global Geopark upset the status quo. Issues raised were essentially fears of UNESCO control, more environmental regulation and increased levels of tourism. The labels of ‘UNESCO’, ‘Geopark’, ‘Ecotourism’ etc. raised a range of concerns and fears.

Moreover, landholders, essentially graziers with long-term pastoral leases, feared that the proposed UNESCO affiliation would result in further regulation and restrictions curbing current and future activities and potentially leading to a World Heritage Listing. Many considered that the large area of the application across the whole Shire which included large

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land tracts which were considered unlikely to be of interest for tourism. The use of the term ‘geopark’ which was interpreted by many to imply some form of existing or potential environmental protection (aligned to an expanded national parks network). There were also fears that the UNESCO branding will generate a response by the State Government to impose an additional layer of environmental protection, even though UNESCO Global Geopark status does not imply restrictions on any economic activity within a UNESCO Global Geopark where that activity complies with indigenous, local, regional and/or national legislation. These fears were also shared by some elements of the mining industry involved in small scale mining operations.

Facing strong opposition, the proponent Etheridge Shire Council, decided not to proceed with the UNESCO Global Geopark application, and instead to establish a stakeholder Geotourism Advisory Committee chaired by the Mayor to advance geotourism using the natural and cultural assets that have so far been identified.

**An Alternative Geotourism Development Strategy for the Etheridge Scenic Area**

Etheridge Shire Council is committed to developing tourism along with agriculture and mining as the three-fold basis of their forward regional development planning.

Council has now approved within the Shire of Etheridge, development of a major geotourism strategy which captures the aspirations of the pre-existing ‘Unearth Etheridge’ tourism strategy, providing additional natural and cultural heritage content; and through collaboration with other adjacent Local Government Agencies, establishment of strong geotrail linkages with geotourism attractions outside of the Shire. This alternative focused on developing an expansive principal focus on key geotourism areas within the Shire of Etheridge but to create linkages with key attractions outside the Shire utilising dedicated geotrails (Robinson, 2017).

The nominated ‘Etheridge Scenic Area’ will now be developed as a ‘defacto geopark’, but is now not subject to any assessment process through UNESCO.

Emulating a program being undertaken in the United Kingdom, it is proposed that a ‘geo village’ approach be adopted for the Shire of Etheridge; thus enabling individual townships to take unique ownership of any activity e.g. community operated museum which has a natural or cultural heritage characteristic.

Two of the small townships (Mt Surprise and Forsayth) have strong associations with agates and gems, and another (Einasleigh) has strong mining industry heritage. The main township, Georgetown, is the location of the TerrEstrial Centre mineral and fossil museum which might benefit from even a higher level of community involvement and the recently established Peace Monument has already made its mark. (Figures 7 and 8).
Warrumbungle Pre-Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark

In New South Wales, the Warrumbungle proposal focuses on the Warrumbungle National Park (Figure 9) which is already included on Australia’s National Heritage List, a fact which in itself would seemingly pre-qualify the area as being of international geological significance.

This heritage listed Park extends over a rugged mountainous area of sandstone plateaux and ridges and many prominent trachyte spires, domes and bluffs (Fairley, 1991). The 233 square kilometres of the Park are part of the Warrumbungle Mountains, an eroded volcano of about 13-17 million years in age. In addition to its monumental scenery, the Park contains a varied complex of important plant and animal communities. In July 2016, the Park was the first within Australia to be certified as a Dark Sky Park by the International Dark Sky Association.
The remainder of the Shire areas include pastoral areas as well as native bushland such as parts of the iconic Pilliga Forest. In this instance, however, there is concern within State Government that the establishment of any designation with some form of nominal ‘park’ status would result in land use conflicts with interests which are anti-development in nature. The Geological Survey of NSW would prefer that the geopark be contained only within the Warrumbungle National Park. It is quite evident that this issue will take some time to resolve even though there is strong support emerging from the State Government agency - Destination NSW that a creation of a UNESCO global geopark will substantially enhance tourism visitation to the region.

Regional Development Australia (RDA) Orana, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Sidings Springs Observatory, and local indigenous communities have been identified by the project Steering Committee chaired by the Mayor of Warrumbungle Shire Council.

As the three Councils progress their application, they expect that other partners will choose to join in, including local and regional tourism organisations.

Conclusions Relating to Local Community Engagement for Geopark Development

Lessons have been learnt from the experience gained over the past 12 months. The following conclusions are offered.

- More focus and time needs to be applied to communicating the ‘geo-regional’ nature of geoparks. Whilst the promise of UNESCO branding offers the potential for economic benefit, it is a brand that can be seen by landholders as conveying overseas control and more environmental regulation.

- More work is needed to overcome perceived fears about the detrimental impact of geoparks on other existing land users such as miners and other primary industry stakeholders.

- Geopark proposals must be supported by State Government Geological Survey organisations to the extent that these organisations are prepared to commit professional geological service when it is realised that geoparks can contribute to community outreach programs of government.

- Far more time must be allowed to gain community engagement/support to ensure geopark sustainability.

The Global Geopark Network Can Help Too!

The Etheridge assessment and community engagement experience has identified a number of areas where more flexibility can be offered in assessing and overseeing geopark development.

- By enabling pre-existing fossicking activities and ‘rock shop’ sales where these activities have been part of a region’s cultural heritage. If large scale mining is
permitted within a UNESCO Global Geopark, there is a fundamental inconsistency where the collection and sale of gemstones is not permitted as a geopark activity.

- By amending the guidelines to specifically provide that UNESCO will not require governments to impose new environmental regulations should a global geopark nomination be approved. The current guidelines leave open the claim by parties opposed to geopark development that State and Territory Governments will move to amend existing statutes and regulations to accommodate the establishment of geoparks.

- By clarifying the need or otherwise to publicly define a specific geopark boundary on official government maps and making it clear that landowners within a designated geopark areas have the right to opt out of geopark activities if they elect to do so.

- By simplifying the Global Geoparks Network Code of Ethics to become a less prescriptive document. It is suggested that the current document is too rigid and contains requirements which do not allow flexibility for interpretation purposes, particularly having regard to local circumstances.

These are issues that may be worth of consideration by the Global Geoparks Network.

References


