

Geotourism, Geotrails and Geoparks

A Regional Development Opportunity for Australia

Current Status

The Australian Geoscience Council Inc (AGC) is the Peak Council of geoscientists in Australia. It represents eight major Australian geoscientific societies with a total membership of over 8,000 individuals comprising industry, government, and academic professionals in the fields of geology, geophysics, geochemistry, mineral and petroleum exploration, environmental geoscience, hydrogeology, and geological hazards.

The AGC has set up a National Geotourism Strategy Reference Group (NGSRG) that includes representatives of other key active stakeholders, and under the guidance of this reference group, other key stakeholder groups will be best placed to help deliver different parts of a National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) that has now been launched by the AGC on 7th April 2021. https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AGC_nationalgeotourismstrategy_strategicgoals.pdf

Seven key strategic goals are being implemented by a series of working groups. https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AGC_Geotourism_media-release-explanatory-notes_7-April-2021.pdf

The NGS is being designed to support the orderly development of major geotourism projects and activities in line with overseas trends and domestic regional development imperatives. The AGC sees the articulation of a strategy with a staged and incremental approach as being essential to ultimately gain government endorsement at all levels. The development of a National Ecotourism Strategy in 1994 and subsequent state/territory-based initiatives is considered as a particularly useful precedent and guide. Of significance internationally is the development of geotourism in Australia that lags many countries' approach, notwithstanding the fact Australia has taken the initiatives in several areas in development of the concepts underpinning geotourism.

AGC recognises that geotourism is a significant emerging and growing global phenomenon. Geotourism has been defined by a key AGC member, the Geological Society of Australia as 'tourism which focuses on an area's geology and landscape as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment'. It has links with adventure tourism, cultural tourism, and ecotourism, but is not synonymous with any of these forms of tourism, although in broad terms it actually embraces them all.

The pursuit of geotourism offers the potential for new industries and employment opportunities through the development of major projects within Australia.

Tourism Industry development benefits in the context of addressing the current COVID-19 pandemic can be realised through the holistic approach of geotourism which enhances the value of traditionally structured, nature-based tourism by generating new product development (i.e., including geology, landscape, flora and fauna, as well as cultural heritage attributes, both Aboriginal and post European settlement).

The consideration of well-considered proposals underpinning the NGS is timely and is likely to be well received by governments, the tourism industry, and regional communities across Australia.

Geotrails

A geotrail can deliver geotourism experiences through a journey underpinned by an area's geology and landscape. Geotrails are therefore best constructed around routes currently used by tourists i.e., geotrails should form logical journeys linking accommodation destinations.

Geotrails can comprise roads, walking and biking trails, and disused railway easements.

Geotrails should meld the geological heritage features of a region with a cohesive story and should incorporate and package in the biodiversity and cultural components (including mining heritage) of the region through which the geotrail traverses.

Geotrails do offer the advantages of having universal appeal, and do not compete with or impact on land management/access issues. They are relatively easy to establish and represent a very cost-effective means of enhancing regional development.

They are also an effective vehicle for promoting broader community interest in Geoscience and recognition of it as one of the four fundamental sciences along with Physics, Chemistry and Biology. As such there are long-term educational and cultural benefits in fostering the appreciation of how our Earth influences landscape, ecology, and our lifestyles.

Geoparks

Geotourism attractions are now being developed around the world primarily as a sustainable development tool for the development of local and regional communities. A major vehicle for such development is through the concept of 'geoparks'. A geopark is a unified area with geological heritage of particular significance and where that **heritage is being used to promote the sustainable development of the local communities who live there.**

Unlike World Heritage Areas and national parks, geoparks can embrace both protected and any resource extraction areas, focusing on sustainable development objectives. Geoparks also focus on community engagement and ownership. In Australia, national parks focus generally only on biodiversity and often with insufficient attention given to geological heritage.

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.** Whilst World Heritage Areas and national parks are created in perpetuity, the status of global geoparks are reviewed by UNESCO every four years.

While a geopark must demonstrate geological heritage of particular significance, the purpose of a 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. It is about reconnecting human society at all levels to the planet we all call home and to celebrate how our planet and its 4,600-million-year long history has shaped every aspect of our lives and our societies. Geoparks are both a regional development concept as well as a branding tool. They achieve these goals through conservation, education and geotourism. **Geoparks can comprise both protected and non-protected areas and enable and celebrate sustainable development of primary industries such as mining, agriculture, and forestry.**

Geoparks can choose to evolve through a series of levels from 'aspiring', 'national', 'regional' (e.g., European or Asia-Pacific Regions) to 'global'. There are now hundreds of geoparks around the world. Support to individual geoparks is offered through the Global Geoparks Network Bureau which is currently representing

169 members from 44 countries. The original target of the Global Geoparks Network is establishing 500 geoparks around the world. The number is growing at a rate of about 10 new global geoparks per year.

In 2018, following consultations with the national government geoscience agency, Geoscience Australia, it was recognised that a national approach was needed to better manage major geotourism projects to maximise these indicative benefits and to take account of current perceived government and community group concerns.

The Friends of Ku-ring-gai Environment Inc (FOKE), a community organisation, has initiated a project with the objective of making a positive contribution to conservation based in and around Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, by seeking recognition of the very significant natural and cultural heritage values as exemplified by a wide range of geosites which exist in this area. This is not unprecedented as other geosites and geotrails have similarly been recognised at Port Macquarie, Newcastle, Warrumbungle National Park, Central Darling River region and Mutawintji National Park. Future branding of this GeoRegion as a UNESCO Global Geopark as has been achieved in over 44 countries is also a future possibility.

Western Australia's Mid-West Development Commission (MWDC) is working with seven shire councils to establish WA's first major geotourism development to be built on a geotrail model, focused on the Murchison GeoRegion of WA, with the potential of being nominated as an Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark. The MWDC believes that the ancient Murchison geology provides the ideal platform for unique, nature-based tourism experiences of global significance, particularly to the 'experience seeker / dedicated discoverer' market. The Mid West Tourism Development Strategy (2014) concluded that the region's iconic nature-based tourist attractions were not developed to their potential and that its visitor appeal was not fully realised.

Geotourism Projects and the National Geotourism Strategy

As a preliminary step in considering a National Geotourism Strategy, consultations with GWG members were resumed in early 2019 in the context of considering a range of discussion topics that might underpin the foundation of any national strategy. These discussion topics have embraced the following issues and have now formed the basis for the formulation by the AGC of the seven strategic goals underpinning the Strategy.

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