



11th June 2021

The Hon Martin Ferguson AM
Chair, Reimagining the Visitor Economy Expert Panel
Austrade Trade and Investment Commission
Levels 1-2, Nishi Building, 2 Phillip Law Street
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Ferguson

Submission to the 'Reimagining the Visitor Economy' Discussion Paper

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

The AGC has set up a National Geotourism Strategy Reference Group which includes representatives of other key active stakeholders (e.g., the Geotourism Standing Committee of the Geological Society of Australia, the GSA), 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.

This National Geotourism Strategy, launched on 7th April 2021 by the AGC, 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.

Geotourism adds considerable content value to traditional nature-based tourism (the primary motivator of travel to Australia) as well as cultural tourism, inclusive of Aboriginal tourism, thus completing the holistic embrace of 'A' (abiotic – landscape and geology) plus 'B' (biotic – flora and fauna) plus 'C' (culture) aspects. In essence, in Australia, geotourism has been defined as 'tourism which focuses on an area's geology and landscape as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment'.

The pursuit of geotourism offers the potential for new industries and employment opportunities through the development of major projects within Australia. Also, very significantly from a strategic perspective, the AGC recognises that the development of geotourism may be one of the best ways to communicate the value of geoscience to the broader Australian community. The AGC considers that this improved profile for geoscience is likely to have a positive impact in other areas of strategic importance, most notably the need

for continuing tertiary enrolments in geoscience, which is required to meet Australia's needs for highly qualified geoscience graduates and researchers into the future.

It is recognised that this objective can be achieved if the National Geotourism Strategy is structured to deliver and interpret for the traveller or visitor, quality natural heritage content, highlighting geology and landscape. The recent intervention by the Geological Society of Australia, in compiling along these lines a submission to Parks Australia for the Draft Kakadu Tourism Plan 2020-2030, underscores the need for this level of work to be undertaken across Australia when opportunities exist to comment on future tourism strategies for Australia's large network of national parks.

The benefits of geotourism development in Australia are many.

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).

Employment benefits through the adoption of a strategy to support and promote geotourism include the following, all of which have the potential to significantly improve Aboriginal employment, and more broadly, regional employment.

- New domestic employment and consulting opportunities for natural/cultural heritage professionals – design of interpretation signage/boards, design of geotrails etc.
- Management roles in geoparks and mining parks, regional development, and local government agencies.
- Flow-on employment in tour operations and townships resulting from increased tourism visitation.
- Opportunities for pastoralists to develop 'farm stay' and 'station stay' tourism operations.

Societal benefits for local communities, particularly in rural and regional Australia, include the following.

- A mechanism for celebrating and raising awareness of mining heritage, past and present.
- An opportunity to enhance community engagement and build value into 'Social Licence' considerations.
- By celebrating geological heritage, and in connection with all other aspects of the area's natural and cultural heritage (and most significantly, Aboriginal heritage), geotourism enhances awareness and understanding of key issues facing society, such as using our Earth's resources sustainably.
- By raising awareness of the importance of the area's geological heritage in society today, geotourism gives local people a sense of pride, and strengthens their identification with their region.

The strategy acknowledges the need to protect the scientific and cultural sensitivity of some geoheritage and geosites, and to ensure protection from geotourism where appropriate.

In summary, the over-riding socio-economic benefits of geotourism are measurable economic outcomes through enhancement of traditional nature-based tourism - additional visitors, direct and regional economic output, household income and wages, and local (including Aboriginal) employment.

This strategy will support the economic benefit by:

- Establishment of a higher level of central coordination in areas of product development, travel and hospitality services, and tourism promotion, with a view to improving the overall visitor experience, consistency of the branding, and ultimately leading to an increase in visitor numbers.
- Maximisation of sustainable development and management of 'over tourism'.
- Establishment of a framework for focus on the 10 UNESCO Topics including culture, education, climate change, geoconservation etc.
- Maximisation of community engagement.

Geotourism can be readily delivered through the development of both 'geotrails' and 'geoparks'.

Looking beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, discernible changes in visitor needs and behaviours are starting to emerge. e.g.,

- An increased interest in nature-based activities, evidenced anecdotally from observations in overseas geoparks.
- A shift from large group to small (family) group tours and free and independent travellers (FITs).
- A move to patronising tourist destinations 'close to home'.
- An increased usage and dependence on the internet for purchasing and information gathering purposes.
- A higher level of interest by governments to create employment opportunities and to support regional tourism.

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

The National Geotourism Strategy has seven strategic goals. These span pathways for identifying and implementing major geotourism projects, to the development of digital platforms to provide information for travellers on geological features in the landscape. The Strategy will link three 'geos' – recognising our geoheritage and establishing new geotrails that are suitable for various styles of geotourism.

Key documents relating to the launch of the Strategy can be downloaded.

- National Geotourism Strategic Goals https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AGC_nationalgeotourismstrategy_strategicgoals.pdf
- Media Release, Launch of the National Geotourism Strategy, 7 April 2021 https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AGC_Geotourism_media-release_7-April-2021.pdf
- Media Release Explanatory Notes and Contact Details for Participating in Working Groups https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AGC_Geotourism_media-release-explanatory-notes_7-April-2021.pdf

The AGC is currently engaged in discussions with the Geoscience Working Group of the Australian and State/Territory Governments with the objective of obtaining formal endorsement of the Strategy.

Responses to Specific Questions

Industry-led, government enabled recovery

- How can we better foster collaboration between businesses and governments to offer great experiences, create and sustain high-yield destinations and make the best system wide decisions?
- How can we increase collaboration between businesses within regions and destinations to improve the visitor experience?
- How can industry bodies enhance their offerings and engagement to drive business improvement and resilience?

Based on the concepts underpinning geotourism, collaborative mechanisms such as the establishment of geotrails and geoparks (as has been implemented overseas) can crystallise collaborative activity in Australian regional areas.

Capturing the domestic travel opportunity

- What needs to be done to encourage domestic visitors to travel for longer, spend more and diversify the destinations they visit?

The adoption of geotourism (holistic nature-based tourism incorporating cultural elements) as a basis of new product development will deliver a superior tourism experience and encourage domestic tourists to spend more time in destinations.

Diversifying our international customer base

- How should Australia sustain and support its existing core international markets?

By providing geotourism based products and experiences which are well developed and well understood within these core international markets e.g., China, Europe and increasingly in other parts of Asia.

Labour, skills and workforce

- How can the sector develop and promote career pathways to make the visitor economy a career of choice?

Geotourism can provide new domestic employment and consulting opportunities for natural/cultural heritage professionals – design of interpretation signage/boards, design of geotrails etc, as well as management roles in geoparks and mining parks, regional development, and local government agencies.

Indigenous Tourism

- What opportunities can be created to empower local Indigenous communities to get involved in the visitor economy, start-up businesses and provide in-demand authentic travel experiences?
- How can Indigenous experiences be enhanced, and given a greater profile – in both the regions and cities, and to domestic visitors?

- How can industry bodies and governments of all levels best enable an Indigenous tourism sector that is resilient, sustainable and profitable in the medium to long term?

Goal 5 (addressing cultural landscapes) of the National Geotourism Strategy specifically addresses these questions.

This goal focuses on geotourism opportunities in regional areas which occur outside parks and reserves, but which may contain interesting features and narratives including geological, biological, and cultural elements. Goal 5 is designed to develop geotourism in areas with regional communities (especially past and present mining communities) not covered by significant conservation legislative protections, but which are still worthy of recognition and promotion. It unites a cross-section of representatives from mining groups, Aboriginal heritage and tourism groups, conservation, tourism, and academia to explore tourism potential in places containing geodiversity that:

1. Has been exposed or modified by human activities (especially mining & quarrying).
2. Has significant additional value to people, through cultural history, recreational use, or educational opportunity.

Aboriginal cultural elements and landscapes cut across widely accepted, post-settlement landforms and landmarks, and have values specific to various groups and individuals. Therefore, there is potential to incorporate and/or communicate (with permission or via collaboration) creation stories and narratives of landscapes and features through geotourism. In this context, there is an opportunity to see a greater emphasis put on the connection across geotourism, geoheritage and the cultural heritage of Aboriginal people and the potential for future collaborations. Implicit in this approach is the need to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of Aboriginal people, and in particular a recognition of the potential need to adhere to legislation designed to protect the environment, biodiversity, and cultural heritage of Australia.

Innovation: digital and new products

- How can technology and digital assets improve the visitor experience?
- What are the barriers to the adoption of digital technologies for visitor economy providers?
- How can small businesses, including those in regional and remote Australia, be supported to take advantage of technological advancements and become digitally capable?
- What digital skills and capabilities are required in the visitor economy to support growth and innovation?

In developing a National Geotourism Strategy for Australia through **the implementation of Goal 1**, the AGC has recognised that state-based geotourism maps, supplemented by publications, may well be eventually replaced by digital technologies (e.g., 3D visualisation, augmented reality, virtual reality, holograms, and live streaming using smartphones and drones) and GIS technologies as a cost-effective means of accessing and better communicating geological content for tourists throughout regional Australia.

There exists a major challenge to structure digital frameworks which capture and interpret key elements of natural and cultural heritage sourced from a wide range of directories, and which define the holistic nature of geotourism, having regard to the process of digital transformation which is impacting on all industries. The imperative driving this goal will be meeting consumer needs, particularly from international visitors, now increasingly accustomed to the use of digital devices to underpin all aspects of their tourism experience.

Moreover, it is recognised that these technologies provide a means of interpreting geosites (including sites of cultural significance) where measures need to be put in place to protect geological heritage or have regard to indigenous cultural sensitivities.

More information about what Goal 1 sets out to achieve relating to virtual and augmented reality experiences are explained in the following two video presentations to the AESC 2021 conference.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzhjHq4XQ7Q&t=5s>
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqC_r7esrj0

The application of digital tools in recent geotrail development is outlined in the following two video presentations.

- Warrumbungle National Park Geotrails https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_V1oZeqdUg0
- NSW Geological Survey <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fkdbez3Meh8>

Resilience, sustainability and social license

- What practical measures can industry participants take to strengthen social sustainability for the visitor economy and a strong social licence from their communities?

The Goal 5 working group has produced a reference document which identifies a set of unifying terminology to describe the various elements and activities that could be included in geotourism experiences, the agencies and stakeholders required to collaborate to achieve the initiatives in this strategy, and examples of Australian and International geotourism activities that are like what is desired to be achieved through this goal. Mining heritage, for example, has been already recognised at both international and national level in heritage protection and is worth conserving and presenting as a significant contribution to regional economic development and adaptive re-use of landscape in other countries.

An example of developing/emerging experiences that illustrate this goal includes a proposed 'national mining park' considered for the Hunter Valley, celebrating the significant role that mining has played for Australia's development, first undertaken by Aboriginal people (on a small scale) prior to European arrival, and then by 'pioneers' in the 1790s, commencing near Nobbys Head in Newcastle. This iconic 'park' could embrace the region including mining and mining purposes lands from the Port of Newcastle and the Lower Hunter, to Cessnock, and through to the Upper Hunter, and be nurtured within a regional, collaborative, multi-land use strategy that will provide for specified development within rehabilitated mined areas, with geotourism as one of the key drivers.

Other future opportunities that could be investigated by members of the Goal 5 working group include: Murchison Region (WA), historic Burra, Blinman, and the Copper Triangle (SA), Kalgoorlie-Boulder (WA), Mt Isa and the Central Highlands (Queensland), Lightning Ridge, Cobar, Broken Hill, and the Hunter Valley (NSW), Madame Berry Deep Lead Landscape at Creswick and Beechworth (Victoria), Queenstown and Derby

(Tasmania), and Pine Creek Region and Tennant Creek (NT). A number of these areas could be selected to explore the geotourism opportunities regarding their consequential and beneficial impact on local mining communities, as well as the potential of incorporation into more comprehensive packaged, tourism industry products; not forgetting also the significance of several ancient sites, potentially older than 40,000 years, of the Wilgie Mia Aboriginal Ochre mine in the Weld Range (Western Australia) and the Koonalda Cave Aboriginal Flint mine in the Nullabor (South Australia).

Goal 5 seeks to identify geotourism opportunities that bring together cross sections of the community, representation from a range of stakeholder groups, and incorporate the 'ABC' of Australian geotourism. Given that geological surveys have limited human resources as well as having other priorities, it is proposed that the Heritage Committee and the Social and Environment Society of The AusIMM take a significant role in advancing the aspirations of Goal 5, as it relates to the opportunity for engagement by mining industry professionals.

- How can Australia successfully position itself as an environmentally sustainable?
- destination to domestic and international visitors?
- What is required to build an understanding of the different aspects of sustainability across all providers in the visitor economy?

Sustainable development is a core element of geotourism (which incorporates ecotourism) and through any future establishment of UNESCO Global Geoparks in Australia, it is understood that these approved geographical areas are sites and landscapes of international geological significance which are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development. Their bottom-up approach of combining conservation with sustainable development while involving local communities is becoming increasingly recognised as a core characteristic of global tourism.

Your office can contact me at 0418 488 340 for any further assistance in relation to this submission.

Yours sincerely



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