



THRIVE 2030 Consultation Draft Submission by the Australian Geoscience Council Inc.

Geotourism ('Value-Add' Nature-Based Tourism)

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.

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', but it is **not a niche market**. It has links with adventure tourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, astro tourism, and agritourism, but is not synonymous with any of these forms of tourism, although in broad terms it embraces them all because it is essentially 'place-based'. Geotourism supersedes ecotourism, because the latter is practised in protected areas such as national parks whereas geotourism is undertaken in **all** areas, including places where primary industry activities are being undertaken, and in areas with Aboriginal land tenure.

Geotourism promotes tourism through visits to geological features (geosites), use of 'geotrails' and viewpoints, guided tours, geo-activities (such as geological time trails, fossil walks, rock gardens etc.), and patronage of visitor centres and museums. Geotourism attractions are now being developed around the world primarily as a sustainable development tool for the development of local and regional communities.

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 that geotourism is booming, whereas the development of geotourism in Australia lags many countries' approaches, notwithstanding the fact Australia has taken the initiatives in several areas in development of the concepts underpinning geotourism.

According to the National Geographic Society of the USA, geotourism is:

- Environmentally responsible - committed to conserving resources and maintaining biodiversity.
- Culturally responsible - committed to respecting local sensibilities and building on local heritage.
- Synergistic - bringing together all elements of geographical character to create a travel experience that is richer than the sum of its parts and appealing to visitors with diverse interests.

The 2003 Geotourism study, sponsored by National Geographic and conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America, found that 65 million American households are predisposed to support the principles of geotourism. As the global population of travellers increases and destinations become more globalised and homogenous, these principles are resonating with travellers across the globe.

Geoparks, World Heritage Sites and Indigenous Protected Areas

One outcome of a geotourism venture is a Geopark. Geoparks have been established worldwide to create enhanced opportunities for the people who live within their boundaries and foster economic benefits for them, usually through the development of sustainable geotourism. By attracting an increasing number of visitors, a geopark fosters local socio-economic development through the promotion of a quality label linked with the local natural and cultural heritage. A geopark encourages the creation of local, innovative enterprises and cottage industries involved in geotourism and geological inspired products.

Geoparks also focus on community engagement and ownership. In Australia, national parks focus only on biodiversity aspects of natural heritage, and often with insufficient attention given to geological heritage. Indigenous protected areas and world heritage areas have similar, specific remits. In contrast geoparks can span multiple land tenure boundaries and are both a regional development concept as well as a branding tool. They achieve these goals through geoconservation, education and geotourism. Unlike World Heritage Areas and other protected lands, geoparks can comprise both protected and non-protected areas and enable and celebrate sustainable development, including the provision of housing, resource extraction and forestry within parts of the geopark.

Geoparks can choose to evolve through a series of levels from 'aspiring', 'national', 'state', '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 (GGN) which is currently representing 169 members from 44 countries, most of which are in Europe, the UK and Ireland, and Canada. By April 2022, it is anticipated that this membership will increase to 177 from 46 countries. The original target of the GGN is establishing 500 geoparks around the world.

In China, there are three levels of geoparks: provincial, national, and global geoparks. They are all managed by local county or municipal governments under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Land and Resources. Currently, there are over 320 provincial geoparks (originally labelled as 'scenic areas') in China, among which 200 have already gained national status. With 41 of these now designated as global geoparks (including Hong Kong Geopark) having acquired this status, China manages by far the largest number of global geoparks in the world. Of particular significance (based on some recent visitor surveys taken in geoparks in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) is the recognition that the largest visiting demographic comprises the 18–24-year-old age grouping.

In the Asia Pacific region, geoparks are also located in Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, with India and New Zealand, both committed to future UNESCO Global Geopark development.

Whilst the USA (no longer a member of UNESCO) is not embarking on developing UNESCO Global Geoparks, the National Park Service, an agency of the USA Government, manages all national parks, most national monuments, and other natural, historical, and recreational properties with various title designations, sharing many of the attributes of geoparks, as has been perceived by Americans as exemplars of geotourism.

In short, all these economies contain substantive travelling populations who understand the benefits of geotourism and are seeking similar experiences (including geoparks) when they are looking to travel overseas to destinations such as Australia.

By comparison, Australia lacks the presence of a UNESCO Global Geopark, although there are three regions with aspirations to achieve this status (i.e., Ku-ring-gai and Glen Innes-Severn GeoRegions in NSW and Murchison GeoRegion in Western Australia).

There are outstanding geological and palaeontological forms within the Flinders Ranges of South Australia that have recently qualified it as a nomination site for a World Heritage Listing, of which there are 20 major sites in Australia <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/au> , noting that 14 of these are major, geotourism (i.e. nature-based) destinations located on Mainland Australia and on Lord Howe Island.

It needs to be appreciated that both UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Global Geoparks are major attractions for overseas travellers with a 'bucket list' seeking world class geotourism experiences.

Geotrails

Apart from geoparks, geotrails can also deliver geotourism experiences through a journey underpinned by an area's geology and landscape and where several geotourism sites can be connected into a single journey linking accommodation destination. Geotrails have universal appeal with safe access, are easy to establish, and represent a very cost-effective means of enhancing regional development. Geotrails can comprise roads, walking and biking trails, and disused railway easements known as 'Rail Trails'.

In addition, regional self-drive journeys such as the Great Ocean Road in Victoria, the Savannah Way stretching from Cairns to Broome, the West Coast Geotrail in Tasmania, the 'Dig The Tropic' Geotrail in Queensland, the Red Centre Way in the Northern Territory, and the Murchison Geotrail in Western Australia represent excellent examples of how the application of geotourism principles is transforming journeys that are already been promoted by the Australian tourism industry.

Geotrails meld the geological heritage features of a region with a cohesive story and serve to incorporate and package in the biodiversity and cultural components (including mining heritage) of the region through which the geotrail traverses. An 'Inventory of Geotrails for Australia' documenting a considerable listing of projects is now available.

According to the 2017 report ‘**Unlocking Our Great Outdoors’ of the Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF)** <https://bit.ly/2WgeNLb> , international visitors to Australia are increasingly engaging in nature-based tourism. In 2016, it was reported that 5.2 million international visitors, or over two-thirds of all the international visitors to Australia, engaged in some form of nature-based tourism. In addition, nature-based tourism attracted 20.1 million domestic overnight visitors in 2016 and 23.6 million domestic day trip visitors. After recording flat growth between 2005 and 2011, nature-based tourist numbers have accelerated in more recent years. This has occurred for all three main categories of tourists – international, overnight domestic and day trippers. This TTF report also highlighted the potential of 16 identified major landscapes developed by Tourism Australia and Parks Australia as the Australia’s National Landscapes program (i.e., 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.

Many of these landscapes and other regions offer the opportunity for younger FITs (predominantly ‘digital natives’) eager to combine a geotourism experience obtained through adventurous self-drive tours by accessing newly developed geotrails as envisaged in the National Geotourism Strategy.

The National Geotourism Strategy

Launched by the Australian Geoscience Council in April 2021, the National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) <https://www.agc.org.au/geoscience-in-australia/geotourism/> with its seven key strategic goals has been developed to support the orderly development of major geotourism projects and activities in line with overseas trends and domestic regional development imperatives.

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

It is recognised that this objective can be achieved if the NGS is structured to deliver and interpret for the traveller or visitor, quality natural heritage content, highlighting geology and landscape.

Goal 5 of the NGS seeks to develop geotourism in mining communities with potential geoheritage and cultural heritage sites.

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. It unites through collaboration representatives from mining groups, Indigenous heritage, and tourism groups, to explore new geotourism opportunities.

This goal recognises that there are a range of landscapes in Australia that contain either Indigenous and/or European settlement value, which do not fit into more 'traditional' narratives of geotourism in unmodified or protected areas. Mining landscapes, both past and present, possess important educational values and offer interesting aesthetics and experiences that could be of considerable interest to tourists, given the richness and extent of Australia's mining heritage.

Geotourism opportunities could also arise from the consequences of mine closure, much of which is currently oriented to environmental remediation. There is scope to include the preservation of mining heritage in situ with the geotourism or geoheritage potential being accepted as the rationale for conserving these assets as important cultural heritage assets for new geotourism product development.

Indigenous 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 and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the potential for future collaborations.

In this context, Goal 5 seeks to embed the Indigenous experience into the overall visitor economy, thus improving business capability and awareness.

A geotourism approach enables the development and highlighting of Australia's Indigenous cultural heritage, not separate to, but fully integrated into products featuring natural heritage elements.

Suggested Geotourism Case Study

The Red Centre, Northern Territory

Geotourism Exemplar: The Red Centre Way, commencing in Yulara and terminating in Alice Springs via the Meerenie Loop Tourist Drive, representing a single journey, qualifying for an **upgrade to the Red Centre Geotrail highlighting and integrating all the key natural and cultural elements of Australia's world-famous Red Centre.**

Natural Heritage Content:

Abiotic Elements:

- Astro tourism: Earth Sanctuary, Alice Springs
- Landforms and Geology: Uluru, Kata Tjuta, Kings Canyon, Ormiston Gorge and Standley Chasm - Angkerle Atwatye, Tjoritja West MacDonnell National Park, Mt Connor, Mereenie Loop Road, Larapinta Trail
- Natural history: Museum of Central Australia, Araluen Cultural Centre, Alice Springs

Biotic Elements:

- Standley Chasm - Angkerle Atwatye Flora and Fauna
- Kings Canyon Flora
- Alice Springs Desert Wildlife Park
- Olive Pink Botanic Gardens, Alice Springs
- Kangaroo Sanctuary, Alice Springs

Cultural Heritage Content:

Indigenous Elements:

- Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre, Kata Tjuta National Park
- Karrake Cultural Experience, Kings Canyon, Watarrka National Park
- Standley Chasm - Angkerle Atwatye
- Alice Springs Desert Park
- Telegraph Station, Alice Springs
- The Strehlow Research Centre and other Cultural exhibitions, Araluen Cultural Precinct, Alice Springs

Post European Settlement Cultural Content

- Royal Flying Doctor, Alice Springs
- Central Australian Aviation Museum, Alice Springs
- School of the Air, Alice Springs
- John Flynn's Grave Historical Reserve, Alice Springs
- Mereenie Oil and Gas Field, Mereenie Loop Road

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