



## **Australia's South West Tourism Destination Management Plan National Geotourism Strategy**

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 fields including geology, geophysics, geochemistry, mineral and petroleum exploration, environmental geoscience, geotourism, hydrogeology, geomorphology, and geological hazards.

A National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) was launched by the AGC on 7th April 2021 following a period of strategic policy development by an appointed Reference Group.

### **Proposal**

It is understood that Australia's South West's objective is to build this region into one of the top performing destinations in Australia for the leisure market by engaging people through domestic and international marketing strategies and campaigns that focus on the diverse offerings in the region: food and wine, nature-based experiences, and amazing scenery.

It is therefore recommended that the South West Tourism Destination Management Plan consider embracing the concept of geotourism through engagement with the National Geotourism Strategy. Geotourism provides the framework to leverage more elements of nature-based tourism whilst enabling the region's communities to diversify their local economies, leverage their abundant natural resources, increase international and domestic visitation, and become a driver of regional and local socio-economic prosperity.

### **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 travelers increases and destinations become more globalised and homogenous, these principles are resonating with travelers across the globe. Geoparks, World Heritage Sites and Indigenous Protected Areas.

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, one of which was the 'Great South West Edge' i.e., essentially the Great Southern Sub-Region of Australia's South West <https://bit.ly/3lo9sqW> and featured recently in an international journal GEOExPro.

Reference <https://bit.ly/3BVb4WQ>

Many of these landscapes and other regions offer the opportunity for younger FITs (increasingly '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 in April 2021 by the AGC, the National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) is being implemented to support the orderly development of major geotourism projects and activities in line with overseas trends and domestic regional development imperatives. Further details about the NGS and its seven strategic goals can be referenced at <https://www.agc.org.au/geoscience-in-australia/geotourism/>

Of relevance to the tourism destination management planning process, **Goal 5** focuses on geotourism opportunities in regional areas that occur outside parks and reserves, but which may contain interesting features and narratives including geological, biological, and cultural elements. These include the development of geotourism in mining communities with potential geoheritage and cultural heritage sites. The goal is being designed to unite through collaboration representatives from mining groups, Aboriginal heritage, and tourism groups, to explore new geotourism opportunities.

This goal recognises that there are a range of landscapes in Australia that contain either Aboriginal 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 the mining heritage throughout much of the South West region <https://bit.ly/3t9nPsO>

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. In this regard, discussions have already commenced with the CRC TiME to identify areas in which collaboration can take place.

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 peoples and the potential for future collaborations. In this context, Goal 5 seeks to embed the Aboriginal experience into the overall visitor economy, thus improving business capability and awareness.

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 in key regional places that is required to meet Australia's needs for highly qualified geoscience graduates and researchers into the future.

### **Geotourism as a Driver of Place-based Regional Economic Development**

Geotourism is increasingly seen globally as an instrument of regional economic development. Geotourism in its holistic framework is also 'place-based' in the following ways:

1. As stated previously, 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.
2. Celebrates geoheritage and promotes awareness of and better understanding of the geosciences, noting that a revised global framework for the application of criterion (viii) of the World Heritage Convention as it applies to World Geological Heritage has recently been released by the IUCN <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2021-025-En.pdf>.
3. Contributes to regional development imperatives in areas experiencing social and economic difficulties through increased tourist visitation, particularly from overseas – of increasing interest to local government agencies and state based, regional development commissions and agencies.
4. Provides a means of highlighting and promoting public interest in mining heritage including gemstone and gold fossicking as well as the emerging interest in rare earth minerals.
5. Provides the means of increasing public access to geological information through a range of new interactive digital applications on smartphones that enable advanced and innovative ways of experiencing nature, for example, augmented reality, Soundtrails and 3D visualisations. **Goal 1** of the NGS is assessing and promoting new digital technologies to highlight and interpret natural and cultural heritage, highlighting geology and landscape.
6. Engenders an increasing awareness of the importance in geology as a fundamental science that has had and will continue to have major impacts on civilisations.
7. 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, rail trails, skywalks etc.), and patronage of local visitor centres and museums.
8. Encourages attractions to be developed as a sustainable tool for the growth of local and regional communities.
9. Offers the potential for new industries and employment opportunities through the development of major projects within Australia.

## Key benefits of Geotourism Development

The benefits of geotourism development in Australia are many including:

1. **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).
2. **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 indigenous 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;
  - Management roles in geoparks and mining parks, regional development, and local government agencies supporting the visitor economy.
  - Direct employment opportunities in tour operations resulting from increased tourism visitation.
  - Opportunities for pastoralists to value-add and diversify by developing 'farm stay' and 'station stay' tourism experiences.
  - Creating indirect multiplier effects across other industries to service the additional visitation.
3. **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 Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) 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 in their region and strengthens their identification with the area.
  - The NGS acknowledges the need to protect the scientific and cultural sensitivity of some geoheritage and geosites, and to ensure protection from geotourism where appropriate.
  - Education opportunities and early employment experience for school-age children who are more sensitive to protecting and nurturing our environment.

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

## **Delivering Geotourism Products and Experiences**

Geotourism can be readily delivered through the development of both geotrails and geoparks within identified 'GeoRegions'. In Australia, a 'GeoRegion' can be considered a defined area of natural and cultural heritage which highlights outstanding geoheritage features within which geotrail and geopark projects can be developed. Adopting this initial approach offers the opportunity for proponents using the language of 'GeoRegions' to explore various alternative options for geotourism development, including a strong focus on the establishment of geotrails between sites of geological merit as interpretive sites, including robust geoheritage sites, some of which may already have been established as geological 'monuments' or recognised in state or national geoheritage registers. As a first step, a full audit of natural and cultural heritage attributes in the region as well as early discussions with state/territory based Geological Surveys, Planning and Environment agencies, and any other state/territory government agencies responsible for land and resource management is recommended.

## **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. **Goal 3** of the NGS is Establish a framework for creating high quality, sustainable geotrails.

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 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. Western Australia already features the John Forrest National Park Railway Reserve Heritage <https://bit.ly/3LVWymo> and Meckering Geotrails.

In addition, 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. The MWDC believes that the ancient Murchison geology and mining heritage 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. The Strategy identified geotourism in the Murchison 'GeoRegion' as a potential 'game changing' tourism initiative, with capacity to help this 'GeoRegion' realise its potential as a major tourism destination.

The AGC has recently communicated with WA State Government Ministers regarding announcement late last year in which it was announced that more than \$20 million was being invested in the Great Southern region towards trails and national park amenities alone through WA Recovery Plan funding. The AGC has advised the Government that relevant NGS working groups would welcome the opportunity to engage and collaborate with your department by sharing knowledge and experience in the development of the geotrail concept. The AGC also indicated that it has the capacity to facilitate connections with professional geoscientists who can provide suitable interpretive geology of points or routes of interest.

## Geoparks

On the world stage, '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. Their bottom-up approach of combining conservation with sustainable development while involving local communities is becoming increasingly popular.' 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 on biodiversity and often with insufficient attention given to geological heritage. Whilst World Heritage Areas and national parks are created in perpetuity, the status of global geoparks are reviewed by UNESCO every four years.

Whereas 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 Australia, the approval of State/Territory Government Geological Surveys for individual projects is essential. The development of the NGS through **Goal 2** is being structured to provide a pathway for State and Territory governments to evaluate and approve major geotourism project proposals.

## **The Proposed Glen Innes Highlands ‘GeoRegion’ of New South Wales and the Development of a Tourism Destination Management Plan**

Within the framework of the NGS and as a significant first for Australia, the Glen Innes Severn Council has recently approved a comprehensive Tourism Destination Management Plan that has embraced 'geotourism as a holistic approach to featuring natural and cultural heritage into the relevant customer experiences.' The Plan also proposes the development of various trails including the funded New England Rail Trail Stage 1 from Glen Innes to Ben Lomond, the funded Glen Innes Highlands Skywalk, mining geotrails and 'geotales' that tell the story of the formation of the east coast of Australia and the Gondwana continent. This Plan can be sighted at <https://lnkd.in/g5yk5aNu>

In addition, the Council has decided to investigate the potential of the Glen Innes Highlands being developed as an outstanding 'GeoRegion' and to review the NGS, with the intention of approaching the AGC to conduct an audit of this proposition, with early input anticipated from the GSNSW and from other geoscientists with local knowledge and experience.

The Council also sees the medium-term potential of this proposed 'GeoRegion' being considered as a potential Aspiring UNESCO Global Geopark nomination, given the diversity of the New England North West Region's substantive cultural attributes including its rich mining heritage.

Significantly, Austrade has advised the AGC that it will be highlighting the Glen Innes Highlands as a case study of geotourism in their final report to Government, National visitor economy strategy: 'THRIVE 2030', a national strategy for Australia's visitor economy recovery and return to sustainable growth – 2022-2030'.

Angus M Robinson FAusIMM (CP)  
Coordinator, National Geotourism Strategy  
Australian Geoscience Council Inc  
E: [angus@leisuresolutions.com.au](mailto:angus@leisuresolutions.com.au)

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