

IN AUSTRALIA, WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GEOTOURISM?

National Geotourism Strategy Steering Committee
Australian Geoscience Council Inc, April 2023

Geotourism is an established concept in many places around the world, especially Europe, North America, and China. Geotourism is defined by the US National Geographic Society (and updated by the [Arouca declaration in 2011](#), as ‘*tourism that sustains or enhances the distinctive **geographical character of a place**—its geology, environment, heritage, aesthetics, culture, and the well-being of its residents*’. Importantly, geotourism is heavily endorsed by UNESCO and supports a range of [UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals](#). The Geological Society of Australia has defined geotourism as ‘*sustainable tourism which focuses on an area’s geology and landscape as the basis for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment.*’

At the foundation of geotourism is the physical landscape, which shapes the geosystem services provided to the biota and human societies that live in the place. Geotourism is therefore integrated – it sees geology and landscape as the foundation bedrock around which society, culture, and ecosystems interact. As such, UNESCO recognises that geotourism can be practised in wild and protected places such as World Heritage Areas (e.g., Blue Mountains, Great Barrier Reef, Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area), but also in areas with significant modification, and in UNESCO Geoparks.



The Blue Mountains is a rugged region west of Sydney in Australia’s New South Wales. Known for dramatic scenery, it encompasses steep cliffs, eucalyptus forests, waterfalls and villages dotted with guesthouses, galleries, and gardens (Photo by Calvin Kurlekar).

Because ‘the Earth’ is the focal point for geotouristic sites and experiences, most are situated in areas of aesthetically pleasing, culturally significant or notable landscapes or landform elements. Mountains, caves, rivers, reefs, sand dunes, even novel soils that produce heritage grape varieties are often focal points around which geotourism sites and experiences are situated. Tourists who engage in these experiences often do not realise that they are taking part in a geotouristic experience or a place of high geotourism value, but when we are encouraged to think about all of the big Australian touristic experiences through the lens of geotourism – we can see just how many there are located here in Australia!



The Great Barrier Reef is the world's largest coral reef system, composed of over 2,900 individual reefs and 900 islands stretching for over 2,300 kilometres over an area of approximately 344,400 square kilometres (Photo by Manny Moreno).

In Australia, we have embraced the inclusive nature of the geotourism concept and have understood the inter-relationship between natural and cultural heritage elements. By focusing on the **geology and geomorphology** (i.e., physical geography) as well as the **ecology and culture arising from these geological characteristics**, it is believed in Australia that geotourism **adds considerable content value to traditional nature-based tourism** as well as to cultural tourism, inclusive of Aboriginal tourism, thus completing the holistic embrace of 'A' (abiotic – climate, sky, landscape, and geology) plus 'B' (biotic – flora and fauna) plus 'C' (culture) aspects.

Geotourism has links with adventure tourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, wildlife tourism, astrotourism, 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 is undertaken in all areas, including places utilised by people (**cultural tourism**) and where primary industry activities (i.e., **agriculture/agritourism, mining, and forestry**) are prevalent, and in areas with **Aboriginal land tenure** or are subject of cultural interest. It is therefore about **the place**, regardless of its condition.



Drone over quarry in Barossa Valley, SA, Australia (Photo by Dion Beetson).

The recently released [THRIVE 2030 Visitor Economy Strategy \(Action 7.5\)](#) of the Australian Government states ‘Grow and develop high-quality products and experiences around unique Australian locations and themes, including approaches which integrate sustainable nature tourism with economic opportunities for Traditional Owners, and capitalising on emerging tourism trends such as **geotourism**.’

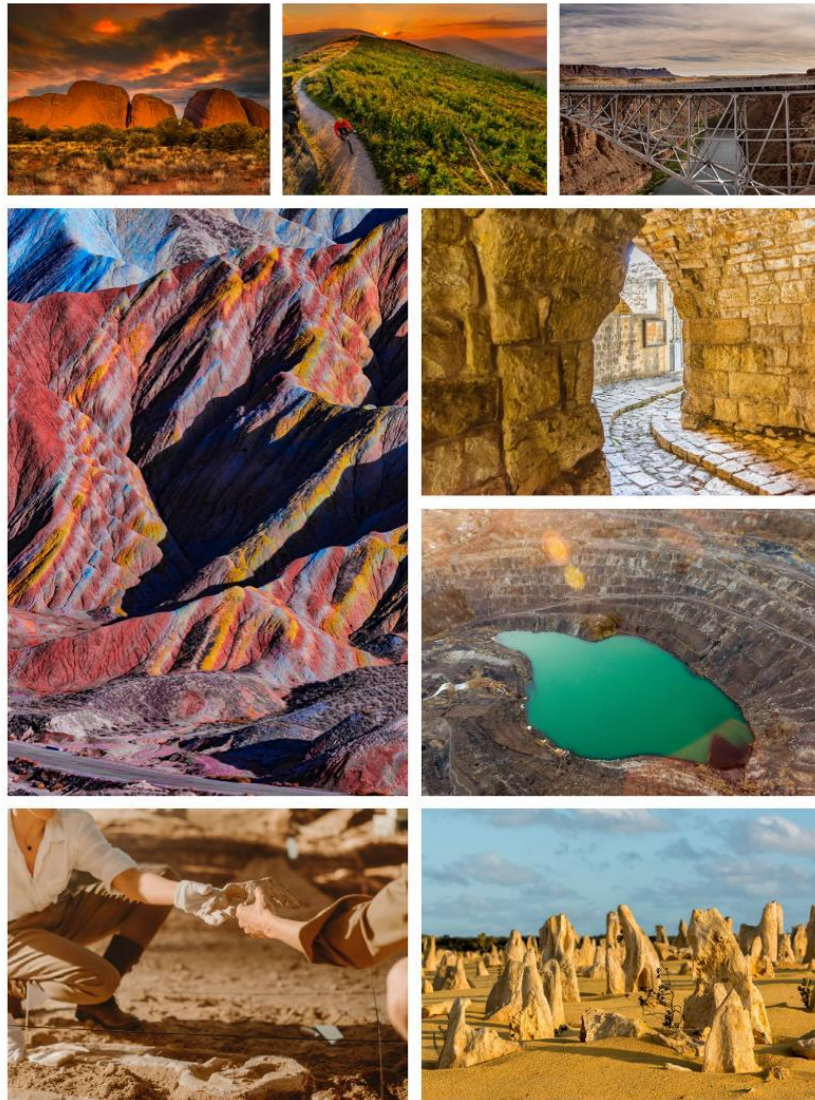
In Australia, geotourism development is now being guided by the [National Geotourism Strategy \(NGS\)](#) of the [Australian Geoscience Council](#). The Strategy has seven goals, which are being realised by multi-disciplinary work groups comprised of members of local, State/Territory and Australian government agencies, tourism and heritage professionals, NGOs, universities, industry groups, consultancy professionals, and resources industry organisations. These goals align with UNESCO’s SDGs in many ways **and** are promoting and are seeking government approval for geotourism ventures, sites, experiences, and concepts (Goal 2) via **digital platforms** (Goal 1), **geotrails** (Goal 3), **protected areas and national parks experiences** (Goal 4) and in areas with **mining and cultural heritage** (Goal 5). These areas can be better interpreted to enable interested operators and tour guides to communicate **geotourism concepts** (Goal 7), and **how quality Australian geotourism experiences can be showcased internationally** (Goal 6).



Left to right: Aboriginal tours; Port Arthur – Tasmanian cultural and heritage tourism; Kakadu Cultural Tours, Kakadu, Northern Territory © Tourism Australia.

In Australia, for the geoscience community, geotourism promotes tourism through visits to geological features (geosites) in both protected and non-protected areas including those characterised by mining heritage, 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. It therefore brings in a new type of visitor/tourist through those who are interested in geology and geography; also of interest to visitors not familiar with these geotourism concepts. Further highlighting the link between geotourism, ecotourism, and wildlife tourism in Australia, a [2008 study of geoscientists](#) (some of which were retirees) showed that many of them thoroughly enjoy natural environment tourism and leisure

activities of all kinds, and appreciate learning about the relationships between earth's history, biota and culture!



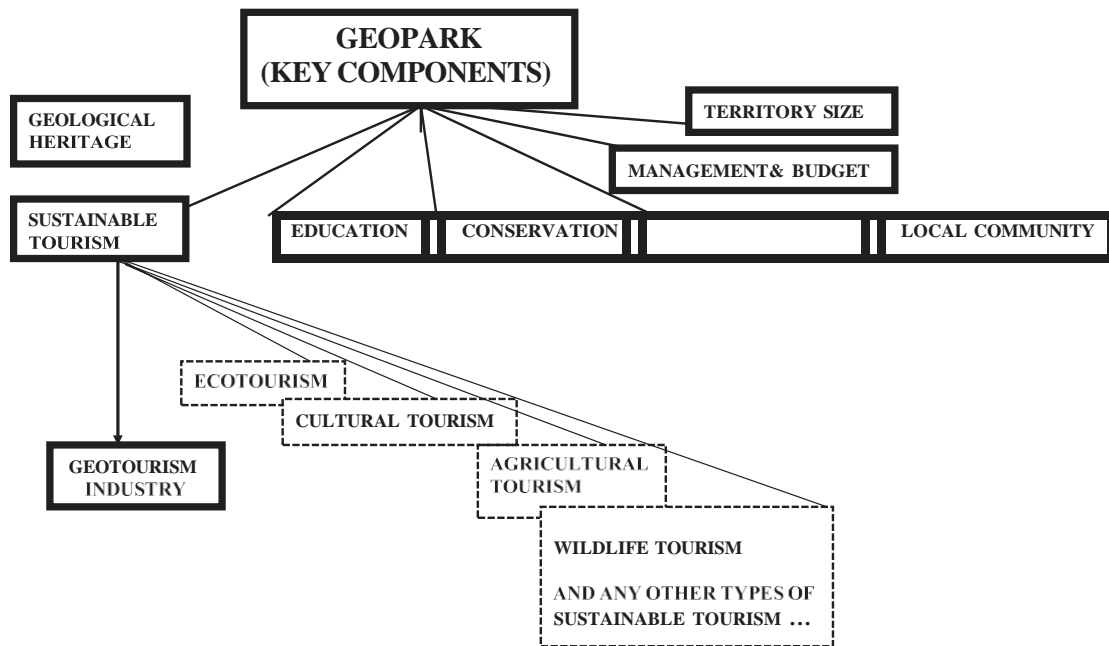
Clockwise, from top left - GeoRegions; Geotrails; Mining history and State Geoparks; Stone History; Mining tourism; IUCN Protected Areas (e.g. national parks and wilderness areas); Fossicking; UNESCO Geoparks.

'Geotourism Industry' and Geoparks

Supported by the UNESCO Global Geopark program, geotourism attractions are now being developed around the world primarily as a sustainable development tool for the development of local and regional communities, i.e., **at the core of the 'geotourism industry.'** Globally, geoparks are being established to enhance awareness, appreciation, and protection of **geoheritage** - protected geological and geomorphological features and phenomenon promoted in geoparks as the centerpiece of *'single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development'*. In Australia, as a first step, as a response to Goal 2 of the NGS, geopark proponents are being encouraged to identify a **'GeoRegion'** as a mechanism for exploring, assessing, and seeking both government approval and community support for geopark development.

Geoparks can be regarded as accommodating the ‘highest order’ of geotourism and geoconservation, in the same way that World Heritage Areas and national parks might be seen as the highest order of protection and enjoyment for biodiversity, culture, and geodiversity. Therefore, whilst the establishment of geoparks highlight one form of geotourism, they most definitely provide opportunities to celebrate and explore the Earth’s natural features whilst also incorporating culture, protections, and sustainability in a way that is true to the core values of all nature-based tourism in Australia.

Relationship Between Sustainable Tourism and Geoparks as defined internationally



Note: Core elements and key components of a geopark. *Source:* Materials adapted from UNESCO, 1999, 2000 and GGN Guidelines, 2010.

Reference: Sadry B, 2020. The Geotourism Industry in the 21st Century. The Origin, Principles, and Futuristic Approach.

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.1201/9780429292798/geotourism-industry-21st-century-bahram-nekouie-sadry>

Further Information

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