

IN AUSTRALIA, HOW DO WE ADVANCE GEOTOURISM, GEOREGIONS, AND GEOPARKS THROUGH THE NATIONAL GEOTOURISM STRATEGY?

GEOTOURISM

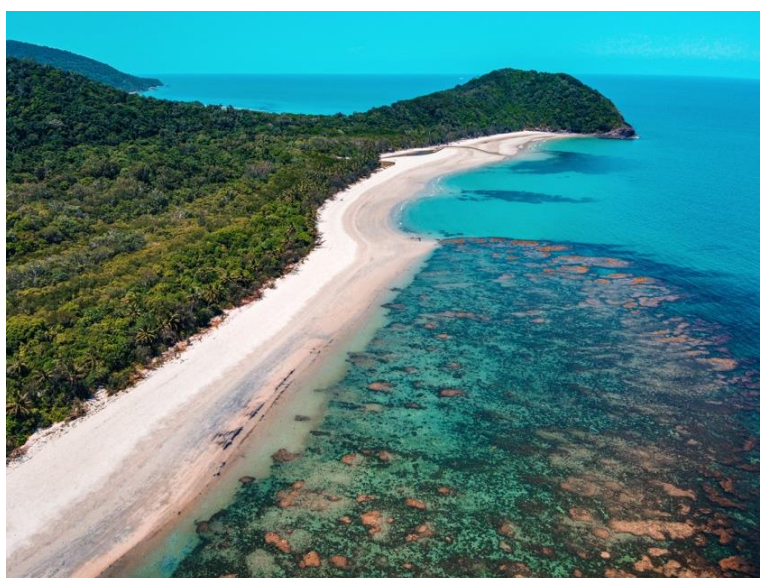
Geotourism is an established concept in many places around the world, especially Europe, North America, and China. Geotourism is defined by the US National Geographic Society (and updated by the [Arouca declaration in 2011](#), as ‘*tourism that sustains or enhances the distinctive **geographical character 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 kms over an area of approximately 344,400 sq kms (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.

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!

NATIONAL GEOTOURISM STRATEGY

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.

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**.’* The aspirations of Action 7.5 can be realised through the implementation of Goal 5 of the NGS.

‘GEOTOURISM INDUSTRY’, GEOREGIONS, 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’.*

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.



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.

In Australia, as a first step, as a response to Goal 2 of the NGS and as supported by Australian government geoscience agencies, **geopark proponents are now required to identify and seek support for the establishment of a ‘GeoRegion’** as a mechanism for exploring, assessing, and seeking both government approval and community support for any future geopark development.

GEPARKS Q&A

1. Is the concept of a GeoRegion recognised by UNESCO?

UNESCO appreciates that each Nation State can develop its own procedures for assessing geopark proposals. In the case of Australia, the concept of establishing a GeoRegion as a strategy is only a first step for geopark proponents to use and is of local relevance only and would fall away if a GeoRegion project supported by the relevant State/Territory Government is morphed into a Geopark nomination. UNESCO is comfortable with what is being developed in Australia in this respect as it is understood that this concept is only a domestic construct. The concept of GeoRegions underpinning an initial exploratory step is also now accepted by the Australian government geoscience agencies.

2. Why are Australian Governments so concerned about geopark development?

In November 2009, Environment and Heritage Ministers of all States and Territories and the Australian Government (the then EPHC) decided, 'after consultation with Resource Management Ministers (sic, advised by Geological Surveys), that whilst Australian governments support geological heritage, they have significant concerns with the application of the UNESCO Geoparks concept in Australia, especially without government endorsement. Existing mechanisms are considered sufficient to protect geoheritage. The EPHC also requested the Australian Government ask UNESCO to take no further action to recognise any future proposals for Australian members of the Global Geoparks Network, or to further progress geoparks initiatives within Australia, including that for the Kanawinka Geopark, unless the formal agreement of the Australian Government had first been provided.'

As result of discussions with the Geological Surveys since November 2009, the AGC has recognised that the EPHC decision has represented the only formal policy decision of all Australian Governments relating to geoparks. Australian Government Geoscience agencies have recently advised the AGC that while they support in principle the establishment of GeoRegions and geotrails, they are not in a position to endorse the UNESCO Global Geoparks at this time. Moreover, in Western Australia, the State's Geological Survey has an approval role (under ministerial delegation) for any land tenure change across the State, and in this context does not support Geoparks. The AGC will continue to work through the agreed process of GeoRegion establishment, particularly in other Australian States and Territories to gain government support for future geopark nominations.

3. Why are Geological Surveys involved in issues relating to geopark development?

UNESCO has advised that geoparks are **not all about geology**. While a UNESCO Global Geopark must demonstrate geological heritage of international significance, the purpose of a UNESCO Global 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.'

But a geopark without geology is not a geopark. Apart from sustainable development, geopark needs to achieve its important goals of protecting geoheritage and promoting geoscience. On this basis, Australian Governments (based on the 2009 EPHC determination) have determined that government geoscience agencies are best placed to manage this role and to make recommendations to their respective executive governments. Australian Government Geoscience agencies have recently advised the AGC that while they support in principle the establishment of GeoRegions and geotrails, they are not in a position to endorse the UNESCO Global Geoparks at this time.

Without Geological Survey support, it can be assumed that any GeoRegion or other adopted approach outside of this framework is highly unlikely to gain support by or approval from a State or Territory Government in Australia. Accordingly, it is recommended that the Geological Survey for the State or Territory, in which any major geotourism project is proposed, be consulted to determine any requirements applicable to that jurisdiction.

4. What is the role of the National Geotourism Strategy in regard to geopark development and geotourism generally?

Since 2016, the Geotourism Standing Committee of the Geological Society of Australia, and in recent years, the Australian Geoscience Council has been in dialogue with the then Chief Government Geologists Committee (now known as the Geoscience Working Group - GWG), a body representing all the state and territory geological surveys as well as the national Geoscience Australia agency.

In July 2017, the GWG advised various operating trends in Australia relevant to geotourism development which included the following.

- The considerable interest in promoting geoheritage for public information and increased tourism revenue in regional Australia.
- The significant efforts by individual State/Territory Geological Surveys and Geoscience Australia in promoting geoheritage by publishing books, pamphlets, GIS-based apps, erecting explanatory signage etc. describing sites and geotrails.
- Collaboration between State/Territory Geological Surveys, 'parks and wildlife' agencies, member-based geoscience organisations, tourism bodies, and LGAs or regional authorities in their jurisdictions to increase awareness of geo-and mining heritage generally and geoheritage sites, geotrails, and areas.
- Many geoheritage sites are contained within and protected by conservation reserves and some State/Territory Geological Surveys have established small geoheritage reserves to further protect important sites.

As a response to the lessons learnt from two attempts in 2017/2018 to gain support for geopark development (i.e., the Pre-Aspiring Warrumbungle and Etheridge UNESCO Global Geopark projects), the Geotourism Standing Committee commenced discussions with Geoscience Australia to consider a new process for assessing and seeking community and government support for UNESCO Global Geoparks development in Australia.

In November 2018, the AGC established a coordinating role with the objective of developing a National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) to accommodate the orderly development of major geotourism projects and activities in line with overseas trends and domestic regional development imperatives. The AGC saw the development of a national strategy, **to be developed as a staged, incremental approach**, as being essential to gain government endorsement at all levels.

Through the auspices of Goal 2 of the NGS, the AGC maintains a close working relationship with the GWG to the extent that the AGC is recognised by Australian governments as being the primary source of advice relating to geotourism development and all other issues relating to geopark development in Australia.

Members of two geopark advocacy groups (the Australian Geoparks Network and GeoparksWA) have been provided with the opportunity to participate in the NGS working groups, but their views about geopark development in Australia are inconsistent with the views of the AGC and the Australian government geoscience agencies.

5. How important is Community Engagement in Geopark development?

UNESCO Global Geoparks empower local communities and give them the opportunity to develop cohesive partnerships with the common goal of promoting the area's significant geological processes, features, periods of time, historical themes linked to geology, or outstanding geological beauty. UNESCO Global Geoparks are established through a bottom-up process involving all relevant local and regional stakeholders and authorities in the area (e.g., landowners, other land users, community groups, tourism providers, indigenous people, and local organisations). This process requires firm commitment by the local communities, a strong local multiple partnership with long-term public and political support, and the development of a comprehensive strategy that will meet all of the communities' goals while showcasing and protecting the area's geological heritage. The same approach applies in the development of GeoRegions.

6. What is the Australian Geoscience Council (AGC)?

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. <https://www.agc.org.au/geoscience-in-australia/geotourism/>

Further Information

Angus M Robinson

Coordinator, National Geotourism Strategy

E: angus@leisuresolutions.com.au

7th June 2023