Australia's National Pathway to UNESCO Global Geoparks:

Policy Framework and Assessment Process

From a Decade of Stalled Progress to Government-Endorsed Pathway

Geotourism Australia
Australian Geoscience Council
December 2025

GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

Governance Context: Why Australia Needed a Different Pathway

Challenge	Australian Context	GeoRegion Response
Federal System	States control land use, not Commonwealth	State/Territory-led assessment
No Federal UNESCO Engagement	No ministerial approval for geoparks	State government approval sufficient for nomination
Mining Dominance	Powerful extractive industry interests	GeoRegion builds community consensus first
Land Tenure Complexity	Crown land, Native Title, pastoral leases	Comprehensive consultation framework
Sparse Population	Small, dispersed rural communities	Geotrails connect sites, build critical mass

Key Insight: The GeoRegion model adapts UNESCO principles to Australian geopolitical reality, creating a viable pathway where federal engagement is absent.

Understanding the Institutional Barrier

The Challenge

The Blockage

Australia possesses world-class geoheritage , yet for over a decade, no government-endorsed pathway existed through the federal system to nominate geoparks to UNESCO.

The problem wasn't geological—it was institutional: who approves? Who nominates to UNESCO?

The Strategic Shift

1. **2018–2021**
   Formal engagement with government geoscience agencies commenced
2. Started designing credible, government-aligned assessment process
3. Launched National Geotourism Strategy (2021)

The Realization

Australia has exceptional geological heritage , but federal complexity created institutional barriers.

Process clarity was missing, not geological merit.

Key Innovation

The GeoRegion Concept

A non-statutory, exploratory first step that reduces political risk and builds community capacity before formal UNESCO commitment.

Testing Viability Before Commitment

The GeoRegion Innovation

1 Murchison (281,205 sq km)
Western Australia

- Ancient landscapes
- Mining heritage

2 Ku-ring-gai (440 sq km)
New South Wales

- Urban–nature interface
- Metropolitan accessibility

3 Glen Innes (5,487 sq km)
Highlands, New South Wales

- Granite & volcanic formations
- Strong community & cultural values heritage

The Concept

Non-statutory, exploratory first step that allows communities and governments to explore and identify specific areas for geopark potential **without pre-committing** to UNESCO nomination.

Core Purpose

Prove viability first, then seek formal designation

Strategic Benefits

1. **Reduces political risk** for governments
2. **Builds community capacity** gradually
3. **Tests feasibility** before major commitment

> **Breakthrough insight:** GeoRegions demonstrate that proving viability at the local level builds the trust and capacity needed for eventual national and international recognition.

Achieving Institutional Alignment

Governance Breakthrough

AGC
Australian Geoscience Council

Role
Geoscience profession 'buy in' and lobbying

NGS
National Geotourism Strategy

Role
Process design and development through *Geotourism Australia* management

GWG
Geoscience Working Group (government)

Role
Critical gatekeeper for credibility

Geoscience Working Group Composition

- **All State and Territory Geological Surveys**
  Comprehensive representation across Australia
- **Plus Geoscience Australia**
  National scientific authority

★ The GWG became the essential institutional mechanism for achieving government credibility

1 MILESTONE
November 2023

GWG approved guidelines for more GeoRegions

2 ACHIEVEMENT
December 2025

Geoparks Assessment Process endorsed by GWG & Australian Government heritage agency – National Geotourism Strategy Goal Two achieved

A Clear Pathway Forward

The Three-Step Assessment Process

1 Proponent Consultation

Key Activities

- ✓ Consult government agencies
- ✓ Engage local communities
- ✓ Build Aboriginal partnerships

★ **Mandatory Aboriginal engagement from the outset**

2 Independent Review

Review Body

National Geoparks Reference Committee

Assessment Criteria

- ✓ Technical merit assessment
- ✓ Scientific credibility review
- ✓ Independent evaluation

3 Government Approval

Approval Level

State Premier / Territory Chief Minister & Cabinet

Requirements

- ✓ Highest government level
- ✓ Cross-government endorsement
- ✓ Political commitment secured

Pathway to UNESCO

GeoRegion → Assessment → UNESCO Nomination

Only then, at federal minister discretion, can Australia progress to UNESCO nomination

This is rigorous, but defined. No more ambiguity.

3

National Geoparks Reference Committee: The Critical Gateway

Committee Composition

State/Territory Government determined

- **State/Territory Geological Survey** — Technical geological expertise
- **Geoscience Australia** — Global geoheritage perspective
- **State/Territory Cultural Heritage Dept** — Cultural values assessment
- **ICOMOS Australia** — National heritage NGO perspective
- **Environmental Department** — Biodiversity & First Nations heritage
- **Australian Government Agency** — UNESCO World Heritage interface
- **Tourism Australia** — Nature-based tourism expertise

Committee Functions

1. **Review Scope:** Assess proposal comprehensiveness

2. **Determine Suitability:**
   - → UNESCO Global Geopark nomination
   - → National/State Geopark designation
   - → Major connected geotrail network
   - → Remain as GeoRegion (more development)

This is the critical gateway — Committee approval is essential for progression to stage of State/Territory approval and the final stage of federal consideration

Place-Based Development Rooted in Deep Time

Spotlight: Glen Innes Highlands

Australian Standing Stones

Cultural monument celebrating Celtic heritage and connection to landscape

5,500	Granite
km² Area	& Volcanic

Leadership

Mayor Margot Davis

Glen Innes Severn Council

Innovation: The Skywalk

Above Australian Standing Stones

Physical infrastructure providing immersive elevated experience connecting visitors with geological and cultural heritage

Immersive Sound Trails

Multi-voice storytelling

Features voices of geologists, historians, and Traditional Owners creating layered narrative experience

Geologists | Historians | Traditional Owners

Translation

Complex geoscience → Meaningful public experience

Repositioning geological heritage as an economic catalyst for sustainable development

> “This isn't just tourism; it's place-based development rooted in deep time.”

Urban-Nature Interface Model

Spotlight: Ku-ring-gai GeoRegion

Hornsby Plateau Landscape

Highlighted by the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park (registered on Natural Heritage List in 2006) and supported by 3 metropolitan councils

Led by the 'Friends of Ku-ring-gai Enviornment' community group

Geological Significance

- **Best exposed geological section** of early to mid-Triassic period (240 million years ago) sedimentary rocks in the Sydney Basin
- **Eight volcanic diatremes** (pipes) and associated dykes — Hornsby diatreme has perhaps the best exposed geological section in the world

Natural Heritage

1,000+
Native plant species

Many threatened & rare species, non-marine & marine wildlife

Aboriginal Heritage

1,400+ Aboriginal heritage sites recorded

Rock engravings | Cave art | Middens

Conservation-Led Framework

Provides **practical, conservation-aligned framework** for managing visitor activity while enhancing distinct identity.

Aligns with NSW Government Visitor Economy Strategy 2035

GeoRegion approach: Guides visitors through curated landscape-based experiences connecting geology, biodiversity, Aboriginal heritage, and local history into coherent journeys.

What Makes This Different

Transformation Analysis

Dimension	Before	After
Authority	No designated agency responsible	**Designated State/Territory Agency** Clear institutional responsibility
Review Process	Inconsistent evaluation processes	**National Reference Committee** Standardized independent review
Indigenous Engagement	Inconsistent Aboriginal involvement	**Mandatory from Step 1** Aboriginal engagement required
Approval Level	No clear decision-making pathway	**Premier/Cabinet Level** Highest government approval
Federal Pathway	No route to UNESCO nomination	**Conditional but Defined** Clear pathway to UNESCO

Core Principle

Not advocacy alone, but pathways governments can trust

Australia's Unique Position and Opportunity

Global Context

Worldwide Status

241
UNESCO Global Geoparks

51
Countries

Australia
Zero UNESCO Global Geopark

Australia's Unique Position

Urban & Rural Diversity
Multiple GeoRegion types

Global Best Practice
Learning from 20+ years

The Opportunity

1. **Catch Up Rapidly**
   Leverage 20+ years of global experience
2. **Distinctive Australian Model**
   Indigenous engagement, federal adaptation
3. **First Nominations**
   Late 2020s / early 2030s

Timeline

First Nominations Expected

2028–2032

Depending on GeoRegion readiness and assessment timing

> With this new process, Australia can develop a distinctive model that emphasizes mandatory Aboriginal engagement from the outset and adapts to federal structures.

Requirements for Progression

Critical Success Factors

Clear Governance

Structure with legal existence and operational capacity

✓ Legal entity established

Management Plan

Comprehensive UNESCO-standard management plan

✓ Meets international standards

Aboriginal Partnership

Meaningful partnership — not tokenism

✓ Genuine collaboration

Scientific Endorsement

State/Territory Geological Survey endorsement

✓ Credibility established

Community Benefit

Demonstrated community benefit and local support

✓ Tangible outcomes shown

Political Commitment

Long-term commitment beyond electoral cycles

✓ Sustained support

Success Isn't Automatic

This is rigorous precisely because it needs to be credible. GeoRegions must demonstrate readiness across all dimensions before progressing to assessment and potential UNESCO nomination.

Next Steps and Call to Action

The Road Ahead

Achieved

- ✓ Government-endorsed pathway through GeoRegions
- ✓ Three active pilot GeoRegions
- ✓ Assessment process approved by GWG

Next Steps

1. **Additional GeoRegions**
   Expand pilot program
2. **First assessments**
   Under three-step process
3. **Potential nominations**
   Late 2020s / early 2030s

To-do-list for Communities

Engage
Participate actively

Contribute
Share expertise

Support
Aboriginal partnerships

Document
Share learnings

Pathway Forward

GeoRegion → Assessment → Potential UNESCO Nomination

> “Not through advocacy alone, but by building a pathway governments can trust.”

Thank You

Australia's first UNESCO Global Geopark is no longer a distant dream — it's a defined process waiting for the right community, the right geology, and the right preparation.

"Not through advocacy alone, but by building a pathway governments can trust."

Geotourism Australia, Australian Geoscience Council

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