

## Australia's National Geotourism Strategy

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In August 2017, in the report *Unlocking Our Great Outdoors*, the Australian based, Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF) advised that international visitors to Australia are increasingly engaging in nature-based tourism. In 2016, 5.2 million international visitors, or over two-thirds of all the international visitors to Australia, engaged in some form of nature-based tourism (sic, geotourism). 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 had accelerated in more recent years, prior of course to the current onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TTF has rightly pointed out that Australia 'has one of the most unique and pristine environments in the world. As an island continent with a low population density, we are well-placed to preserve our natural heritage. Australia's collection of protected areas gives our nation a network of highly diverse conservation areas that span the tropics, alpine, desert and coast. These natural assets are strong drawcards for tourists from around the world and across Australia.'

Globally, it has been demonstrated that geotourism adds considerable content value to traditional nature-based tourism 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. In essence, in Australia, 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'.

In a submission in 2021 to an Australian Government inquiry titled, 'Reimagining the Visitor Economy', the Australian Geoscience Council (AGC), the peak council of geoscientists in Australia representing eight major Australian societies with a combined membership of over 8,000, referred to its National Geotourism Strategy launched earlier in the year. The AGC sees the articulation of this strategy with a staged and incremental approach as being essential to ultimately gain government endorsement at all levels.

This National Geotourism Strategy is being designed to support the orderly development of major geotourism projects such as geoparks and other activities in line with overseas trends and domestic regional development imperatives. 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 the development of geotourism in Australia that lags many countries' approach, notwithstanding the fact Australia has taken the initiatives in several areas in development of the concepts underpinning geotourism, such as various geotrails, particularly in the State of New South Wales.

The AGC is of the view that 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, that is required to meet Australia's needs for highly qualified geoscience graduates and researchers into the future.

The NGS will be based on a number of strategic goals based on the following themes.

1. Consideration of new digital technologies (e.g., delivered through smartphones and in visitor interpretation centres – 3D visualisation, AR & VR) as a cost-effective means of accessing and better communicating and interpreting content for travellers.
2. Consideration of establishing a national set of administrative procedures for 'georegional' assessment to provide for potential geopark nomination at state and national levels, and as approved by governments, at a UNESCO Global Geopark level.
3. Compilation from existing sources, including the various state-based geoheritage inventories, of a national register of geosites that are suitable for promotion as geotourism sites.
4. New geotrail development – local, regional and national engagement to open up dialogue with existing walking, biking and rail trail interest groups and operators to highlight the availability of quality natural heritage data.
5. Mechanisms for developing mechanisms for collaboration with providers of other areas of natural (bioregion) and cultural heritage content, inclusive of mining and resource industry heritage (e.g., mining companies, geological and mining museums, historical societies, as well as specialist groups with interests in flora and fauna etc. has been identified as an opportunity for the Australian mining

industry.

6. Strengthening Australia's international geoscience standing through geotourism excellence.
7. Professional development opportunities for geoscientists wishing to develop content interpretation and tour guiding skills for enhanced interaction with the public, and engagement with the Savannah Guides and the professional group Interpretation Australia.

After several unsuccessful attempts in past years to establish UNESCO Global Geoparks, Australian geopark development in several locations is now proceeding on the basis that in the early stages of assessment, a nomenclature is now being employed which communicates the concept of a 'GeoRegion' rather than the use of the term 'geoparks', within which geotrails can be established. Once government and community support is

obtained for specific areal proposals that meet the aspirations of the National Geotourism Strategy, then it is hoped that potential Aspiring Global Geoparks may be able to be nominated for assessment and approval by UNESCO.

Geotourism is not a niche market. 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, and these of course include from the core and emerging markets critical to the future of Australian nature-based tourism as exemplified by geotourism.

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