

**Newsletter of the Australian Geoscience Council Inc
Update on activities within working groups
of the National Geotourism Strategy**

Newsletter 23-02, dated 13 April 2023

PURPOSE

To provide intermittent periodic updates of activities and achievements of the National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) Working Groups and links to useful items, and on this occasion a report about the release of decision by Australian Government geoscience agencies relating to the current status of geopark development in Australia.

Geopark Projects and the National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) – Outcome of GWG Deliberations

Back in November 2009, Environment and Heritage Ministers (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 represented the only formal policy decision of all Australian Governments relating to geoparks. Hence in framing Goal Two of the National Geotourism Strategy (NGS), the AGC obtained the support of the Geological Surveys and Geoscience Australia, through the auspices of the grouping of Chief Geologists (GWG), to define an approval pathway for major geotourism projects which could possibly lead to geopark nomination at state and national levels and, as approved by governments, at a UNESCO Global Geopark level.

As an interim measure until the NGS had been finalised and approved by governments, the AGC recommended that any geopark proponent should, in the initial stages of geopark assessment, adopt a nomenclature which removes reference to the word 'geopark' and focus instead on communicating the concept of a 'GeoRegion.' This approach offered 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 was recommended. Two GeoRegion (Murchison and Ku-ring-gai) have been developed as pilots under the auspices of the NGS, with a third (Glen Innes Highlands) being recommended as a potential GeoRegion.

Over the past year, following the completion of process developed by the NGS Working Group 2 (and approved by the AGC), the GWG has been giving consideration to details of administrative arrangements that could enable this 'georegional' assessment to lead to the potential nomination of aspiring geoparks approved by Australian governments.

Just this week, the Chair of the NGS Steering Committee, Dr Jon Hronsky OAM received the following advice from the Executive Director of the Geological Survey and Resource Strategy Division of the Department of Mines, Industry Regulation and Safety

'Thank you for your letter and enthusiasm for geotourism and Australia's geology more broadly. The GWG has discussed the GeoRegion Assessment Process provided to us and we support in principle the establishment of GeoRegions and GeoTrails. As you mention some States are already involved in various geotourism activities, including the development of GeoRegions. Importantly, assessment and input into these will be the responsibility of individual States / territories. As you are aware, the legislation and tenure arrangements for land access are very different in each State and Territory, for example in Western Australia, GSWA has an approval role (under ministerial delegation) for any land tenure change across the State and in this context does not support GeoParks. Due to the varying legislative regimes, the collective GWG are not in a position to endorse the UNESCO Global Geoparks part of the proposal.'

The AGC is pleased to see the continued support of GeoRegions and geotrails and notes the quite specific decision regarding any form of geopark development in Western Australia. The AGC will be continuing discussions with other Australian jurisdictions to evaluate the opportunity for future geopark nominations arising from GeoRegion development and the possibility that these may be approved in future years.

12th April 2023