

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

Newsletter 23-05, dated 8 December 2023

PURPOSE

To provide intermittent periodic updates of activities and achievements of the National Geotourism Strategy (NGS) Working Groups and links to useful items. Please note that working group issues and people commonly overlap between groups. The following categorisations may relate to more than one group. The most recent quarterly meeting of the NGS Steering Committee was held on 28th November.

CURRENT STATUS

Working Group 1 relates to the development of new digital technologies to highlight and interpret natural and cultural heritage for geotourism.

WG1 is seeking to develop guidelines for aligning geotourism customer personas with suitable digital tools. This effort will build upon the digital tool technology example repository that WG1 established in 2021. The report will delve into the complexities, costs, and user characteristics of various digital tools in geotourism. The primary outcome will be a recommendation of digital tools for each customer persona, considering the customer lifecycle. The initial digital tool developed using these guidelines will be the NGS digital Australian Geotourism Discovery Portal.

Over the next few months, efforts will focus on NSW or a select few GeoRegions, potentially starting with the Ku-ring-gai GeoRegion. He suggested that this concentrated approach will allow the team to compile a demonstrative dataset showcasing the capabilities of the NGS digital platform. It is planned to present this 'beta' platform to Geoscience Australia and other members of the GWG (Chief Government Geologists of Government Geological Surveys), with the request that government geoscience agencies might consider hosting the platform.

Working Group 2 has the goal of defining an approval pathway for major geotourism projects.

- Following the recent determination by the GWG that GeoRegions establishment in Australia has been approved, the GWG has now subsequently approved the release of a document setting out guidelines for the establishment and administration of GeoRegions (**refer attachment**).
- Following discussions over the past few months with senior officials of the National Heritage Branch of the Heritage Division of the Australian Government Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water and Geoscience Australia, advice has been

received from the responsible Minister that the concept of a geopark should be demonstrated for consideration by State Governments, and it is believed that this objective can be achieved within the framework of the development of GeoRegions as approved by the GWG. The fact that the GWG has now accepted a document that sets out guidelines for the development of GeoRegions, these advisings are particularly timely having regard to a very recent briefing of NSW Parliamentary Secretary of the Environment who has indicated that she would be advising the NSW Environment Minister to consider further advancement of the Ku-ring-gai GeoRegion project in the first instance, and when appropriate, the Glen Innes Highlands GeoRegion located in northwest NSW.

- Having regard to the above advisings from the two key levels of government, AGC has no doubt that geoscience merit will be a key consideration in the potential for geoparks to emerge in Australia having passed through the GeoRegional assessment process. We are also pleased to report that representatives of the NGS Steering Committee have recently met with UNESCO officials in Paris who understand and support the government assessment processes underpinning the establishment of GeoRegions in Australia as an exploratory measure for geopark development.
- Discussions with Lithgow City Council - a most helpful meeting was held recently to discuss AGC's submission relating to the potential for geotourism to form the basis of a tourism destination management plan for the Seven Valleys area located west of the Blue Mountains. The potential of establishing a GeoRegion (also to include the Gardens of Stone area) was discussed in recognition of the mining heritage values (e.g., coal, coal shale) of these areas.
- The AGC has been made aware of a '*New framework and toolkit to drive sustainable tourism*', launched on 24th November 2023 by Australian State and Territory Tourism Ministers with a commitment to collaborate on making the Australian visitor economy more sustainable. Along with the Framework, Ministers also launched a new Sustainability Toolkit to give tourism businesses clear and practical information on how to become more sustainable. The free toolkit provides a range of supportive guides to help tourism businesses implement sustainable practices and communicate their sustainability stories to visitors. This was the third formal meeting of state and territory tourism ministers and was an important milestone in the Australian Government's commitment to delivering THRIVE 2030. A key action under THRIVE 2030 - Australia's national strategy for the long-term sustainable growth of the visitor economy - is the development of this Sustainability Framework, and the Australian Government has worked closely with state and territory colleagues to make this happen. The Ministers consider sustainability as being essential for the future success and competitiveness of Australia's visitor economy. Information about the National Sustainability Framework for the Visitor Economy and Sustainable Tourism Toolkit can be sourced at <https://bit.ly/483ICRv>
- In recent LinkedIn articles e.g., <https://bit.ly/3Glg4qD> the point has been made that a key characteristic of geotourism is sustainable tourism i.e. 'Geotourism promotes environmentally responsible travel and sustainable practices that minimise the negative impacts of tourism on the natural and cultural resources of an area.' To this extent, it is intended that geotourism is featured in the summit being organised by Ecotourism Australia in June 2024.

Working Group 3 has the goal of establishing a framework for creating high quality, sustainable geotrails.

As an outcome of a WG3 meeting held on 27 November, this working group chaired by Dave Robson has been facing some difficulties attributed to the sole focus of contributing (loading of shaped data for geotrails) to the Digital Platform, a technical task which has proven to be beyond the technical capability of most of the members, acknowledging however the valued input of Dr Stephen White (GSWA) and Guy Fleming (GSNSW) and the offer by UTAS to assign a dedicated specialist to assist in the data collection and integration work. The commitment to this task so far has been at the expense of the Working Group not having the capacity to continue the work of identifying further geotrails beyond what had already been recorded.

However, Dave Robson has published throughout the year several articles in GSA's 'The Australian Geologist' highlighting geotrail development in Australia, viz.

<https://bit.ly/3uFaOvw> (Wynyard Geotrail, Tasmania), <https://bit.ly/415EXQM> (Qld Dinosaur Geotrail), <https://bit.ly/3rmSSV9> (Glen Innes Highlands Geotrails), and <https://bit.ly/47HwEwY> (South Australian Geotrails).

Working Group 4 has the task of establishing national criteria for geoheritage listings suitable for geotourism.

The report compiled by Chair Jason Bradbury and detailing WG4 deliberations and which presented a proposed framework for the listing of geosites suitable for promotion as geotourism sites, has been approved by the NGS Steering Committee and can now be accessed at <https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NGS-WG4-Geoheritage-Report.pdf>

Working Group 5 is developing geotourism in regional mining communities with potential geoheritage and cultural heritage sites.

Chair Dr Melinda McHenry has reported to the Steering Committee that issues currently under assessment include the following.

1. Framework for engagement with and promotion of geotourism enterprises particularly related to mining heritage interests.
2. Refinement of the 'First contact' document that provides guidance on how to contact First Nations groups.
3. Promotion of major projects, including application in May 2024 for a major Australian Government heritage grant for a project containing declared heritage values with the potential to also highlight cultural landscapes including mining heritage.
4. Criteria for cultural landscapes digital platform.
5. Lodgement of mining heritage sites on the Australian Geotourism Discovery Portal.

The AusIMM has continued to coordinate (through their secretarial services based in Brisbane), the engagement of the three Communities of Interest (Heritage Committee, Geoscience and Social & Environment societies) to support the work of WG5.

The WG 5 working group also plans to provide support to the Glen Innes GeoRegion in the delineation and interpretation of various areas containing significant mining heritage, and to

interface with the Qld Government funded Enviromets (Qld) organisation <https://enviromets.net.au/> . EnviroMETS (Qld) Limited has been established to find innovative ESG solutions and sustainable ways to make mining impacted land valuable to its future custodians. Their mission recognises the diverse range of challenges that can be overcome by adopting a collaborative approach to technical innovation, fresh thinking about repurposed land use and new land remediation methods. Geotourism is being seen as one potential solution.

The Coordinator delivered a presentation 'Implementing Mining Cultural Landscapes Post Mine Closure through the National Geotourism Strategy' to a SEGRA Summit in late July <https://bit.ly/3QhniWM>

Working Group 6 is working on strengthening Australia's international geoscience standing through geotourism excellence.

- As an early initiative of the MOU between the AGC and the Indonesian Geopark Network, the GEOFEST 2024 Sydney Workshop is being organised as an overseas workshop to form part of the major GeoFestival and International Geotourism Conference of Indonesia.

The theme of the workshop is 'The Volcano as a World Class Sustainable Geotourism Destination', and the aim of the project is to heighten awareness of the opportunity for geoscientists to be engaged in geotourism development in both countries.

The workshop will be hosted by AGC together with the School of Geosciences of The University of Sydney. It will be a two-day workshop with presentations and discussion on the first day, followed by field trips on the second day. The confirmed date and venue are 18 and 19 July 2024 at the campus of the University. Refer <https://bit.ly/40Xw5wF> and www.geofest.com.au

An executive organising committee chaired by Dr Young Ng (also WG6 Chair) comprising representatives of both the IGN and AGC interest groups, has been formed with two meetings held during November; this committee is supported by additional members comprising a broader representative Advisory Group which next meets on 19 December. For further information, Young can also be contacted at E: oz.geotourism@gmail.com

A grant funding application has been made by the AGC to DFAT for funding of \$50k to be committed \$20k each to the Indonesian Side and the AGC workshop, and \$5k each for scoping a research project and supporting travel expenses for Indonesian visitors to the Sydney workshop.

- An Australia-China Geotourism Accelerator project, supported by the Australia China Friendship Exchange Association (ACFEA) - a non-profit making, non-governmental organisation which has the primary objective of promoting friendship between Australia and China, has been initiated. The establishment of a platform is proposed to promote and develop Australia's geotourism with China by capitalising the available platform set up by the MOU signed between the GSA and the Geological Society of China (GSC) in 2016. Both Shaoguan City Government of Guangdong Province, China and its Danxiashan UNESCO Global Geopark, have expressed great interest in establishing such relationship. Discussions with Lithgow City Council about this proposal were recently held; it is also subject of briefings to the office of the NSW Tourism Minister and the NSW Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment (also the State Government member for the Blue Mountains).

Working Group 7 is developing and enhancing the geoscience interpretation and communication skills of everyone actively involved in the presentation of geosites, enabling the provision of accurate and thematic information in an accessible manner.

The publication of a booklet is currently being scheduled for completion with the generous support of the Geological Survey of WA.

Other news items

Report on NGS awareness building

- LinkedIn – The *Australian Geotourism Development* discussion group has 814 registered members to date.
- Recently the Coordinator authored a Special Report in *The Australian Geologist*, ‘Understanding Geotourism and GeoRegions – An ‘AI’ perspective’ <https://bit.ly/3NcsS6H>
- On 28th October, the Coordinator delivered a webinar to the Tasmanian Branch of The AusIMM <https://bit.ly/3rmSSV9>
- On 16 November, the Coordinator delivered a webinar to the Savannah Guide network, on the topic of “Understanding Geotourism – Discover how holistic natural and cultural tourism adds value to the visitor experience” <https://bit.ly/478TwFj>
- Support is being afforded to a Sustainable Tourism conference being held by Ecotourism Australia in June 2024 <https://bit.ly/4a0YtC1>



GUIDELINES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF GEOREGIONS

As an outcome of the National Geotourism Strategy, the Australian Geoscience Council Inc has recommended that groups wishing to establish potential geoparks should explore various alternative options for geotourism development, such as by first establishing GeoRegions.

In Australia, GeoRegions can be single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of geological significance are linked together around a central natural or cultural value. Their intended 'bottom-up' approach of combining conservation with sustainable development aims to involve local communities. The establishment of GeoRegions as a first exploratory step has now been accepted by the State/Territory Geological Surveys, through the auspices of the Geoscience Working Group.

It is also strongly recommended that the development of GeoRegions should include the establishment of geotrails between sites of important geodiversity, such as robust geoheritage sites, geological 'monuments' and landforms, or features recognised in state or national heritage registers.

The GeoRegion mechanism provides a framework to undertake comprehensive consultation with the full range of interested or impacted community groups (including Aboriginal communities) and to resolve any identified land-tenure conflict issues that may arise. The following provides a guide to establishing a geotourism project using this mechanism.

As a first step, a full audit of natural and cultural heritage attributes in the region is strongly recommended, as well as preliminary discussions with state-or territory-based Geological Surveys, Planning and Environment agencies, and any other designated state/territory government agencies. This early planning will help focus the work to a defined area and reduce effort by identifying localities unlikely to be suitable for geotourism purposes, having regard to land and resource management considerations.

The GeoRegion Assessment Process can be commenced by a proponent, which might include a local Council, a grouping of Councils or a Regional Development Authority, or alternatively a community or special interest group interested in geotourism development. Having completed basic scoping works, preferably including an approved tourism Destination Management Plan (DMP), the proponent now needs to seek agreement from State/Territory Government agencies to select a defined area — i.e., a GeoRegion — to be recognised as an area of special natural and cultural heritage highlighting outstanding geoheritage features within which proposed geotrails and other attractions can be developed in support of geotourism.

Stage 1: GeoRegion Assessment

The aim of this phase is to seek endorsement by way of a letter from the relevant State/Territory Geological Survey simply confirming that there is nationally or internationally significant geology in the GeoRegion. Based on this endorsement, in principle approval should then be sought from appropriate land managers and Councils, as a way to confirm and formalise this designation.

This process should consist of early consultation with the following groups:

- relevant state/territory agencies that have land and resource management responsibilities (e.g., stock route administration, Crown Lands administration), and/or planning and environment responsibilities within the proposed GeoRegion, including the relevant Geological Survey;
- Local Councils with jurisdictional responsibilities;
- any private landowners or pastoral leaseholders to determine approval of access arrangements;
- any and all Native Title holders or applicants within the chosen area to discuss potential access and heritage concerns;
- other potential government stakeholders (e.g., those cited in any Tourism Destination Management Plan (DMP);
- other stakeholders, such as interested environmental / cultural heritage groups, mining and other primary industries, and Aboriginal community groups; and
- professional societies with expertise in elements of natural and cultural heritage.

Consultation with the local, regional, and state/territory tourism organisations should also be undertaken by any special interest group that has not already been involved in the preparation of a DMP.

Stage 2: Geotrail establishment

This phase consists of developing attractions within the GeoRegion. Potential attractions will have already been identified during the initial region audit, or through consultation with various stakeholders during GeoRegion establishment.

The works in this phase include:

- Development of geotrail concepts, geosites, and heritage sites etc., in association with affected LGA protected area and crown land management authorities. Objectives include obtaining approval for proposed routes and works, identifying any specific requirements relating to public safety and access, determining funding sources, developing geotrail maintenance arrangements, and finalising geotrail nomenclature requirements.
- Continued consultation with community groups including Aboriginal Land Councils, Native Title holders and communities, and environmental and heritage groups.
- Continued consultation with other interested environmental/heritage and Aboriginal community groups, and professional societies that have expertise in elements of natural and cultural heritage, to help develop content to meet interpretation needs.
- Consultation with local school groups with an interest in using geotrails for outdoor educational purposes, as a method to support curricular requirements.
- Continuation of consultation with land-use managers to obtain final approval for implementation of the agreed works. This will need to include an assessment of the location of any identified geological hazards.
- Consultation with the designated state/territory manager for uploading of site/geotrail location and descriptive information in the online *Australian Geotourism Discovery Portal*.

Stage 3: Next Steps

Assessment and input into the further development of established GeoRegions are the responsibility of individual States / Territories, as legislation and tenure arrangements for land access are quite different in each jurisdiction. Any group wishing to establish a geopark from within an established GeoRegion will need to make representations to the designated State/Territory government agencies to determine how a proposal can be assessed, and the types of works to be undertaken within a GeoRegion before it can be processed for approval.

Dr Jon Hronsky OAM
Chair, National Geotourism Strategy Steering Committee
Australian Geoscience Council Inc

8 December 2023

NOTE: Guidelines approved by a meeting of the Geoscience Working Group of Australian government geoscience agencies on 27th November 2023