

‘Country at the Centre: How GeoRegions Can Support Indigenous Leadership, Story, and Sustainable Futures’



Angus M Robinson, Coordinator

Geotourism Australia - an entity of the Australian Geoscience Council Inc
Developing Northern Australia Conference, 7 August 2026

Today's Agenda

- Introducing the concept of Cultural Landscapes as GeoRegions with geotrails
- Geodiversity and Geoheritage
- UNESCO Global Geoparks
- Geotourism
- National Geotourism Strategy
- Take-Aways and 'Closing the Gap'

Cultural Landscapes as 'GeoRegions'

- In Australia, GeoRegions can be single, unified geographical areas of appropriate size 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.
- A GeoRegion can highlight outstanding geoheritage features within which geotrail and geopark projects can be developed for approval by governments.

Geotrails, Journeys, and Songlines

- Meld the geological heritage features of a region with a cohesive story, linking geosites.
- Incorporates and packages up the natural and cultural heritage.
- Can follow or replicate **songlines**.
- Cost-effective means of enhancing regional development.
- Geotrails should form logical journeys linking accommodation destinations where appropriate.

Geodiversity and Geoheritage

- **Geodiversity** is the natural variety of the Earth's features such as rocks, minerals, fossils, landforms, and soils and the processes that shape them over time. It tells the story of how our planet has formed and how life has evolved. **Geodiversity is also an essential element of Aboriginal culture, with landscape respected as an ancestor.**
 - **Geoheritage** refers to the **most valuable parts of geodiversity**—those features and processes that are important for science, education, culture, beauty, or ecosystems and that should be protected and preserved.
- 
- A stylized, dark teal silhouette of a mountain range is positioned in the bottom right corner of the slide, partially overlapping the text area.

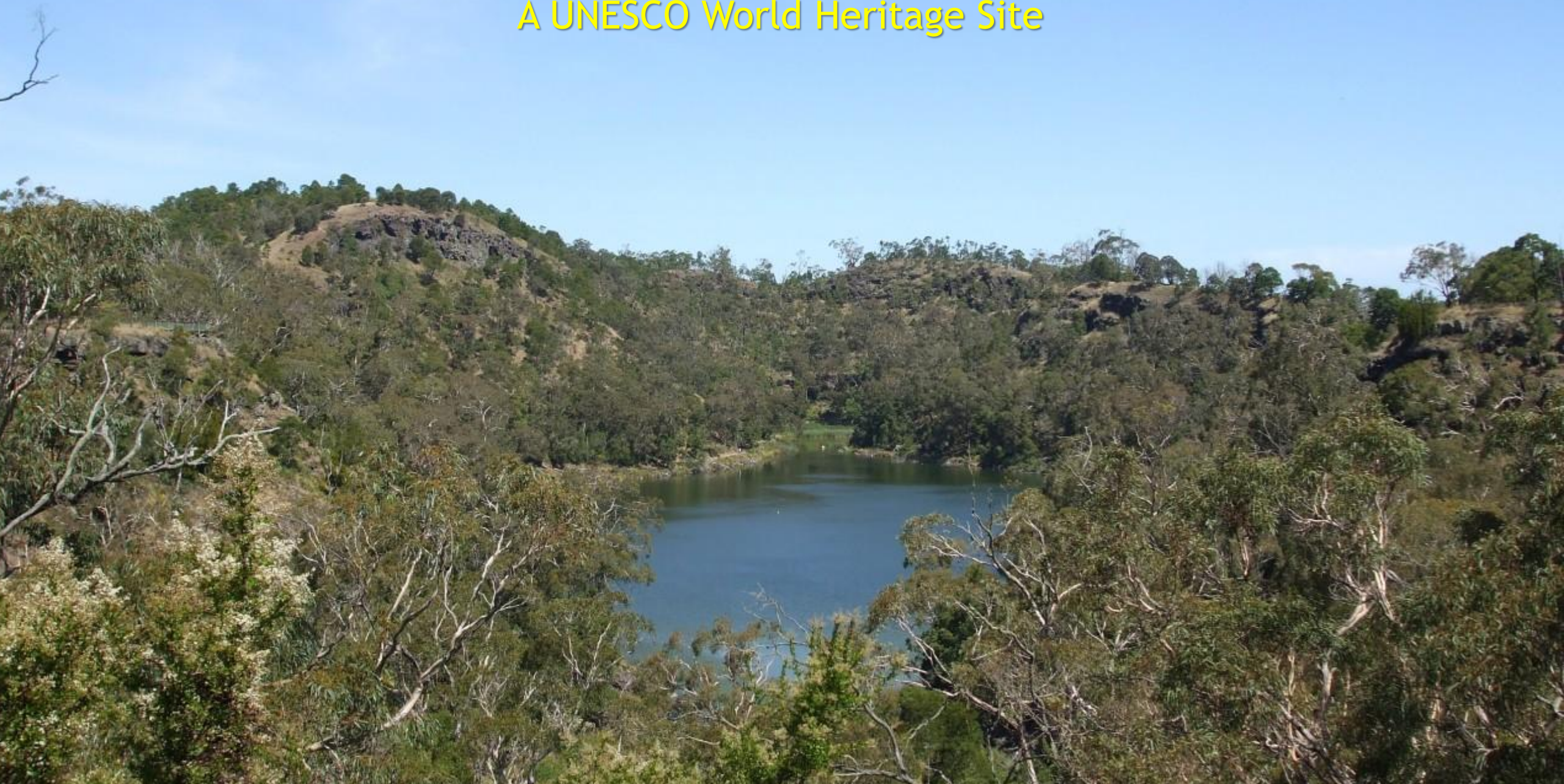
Aboriginal Land Managers can Harness Geodiversity in their Country-Based Planning

- Underpinning traditional lands are globally important geological and landform values, often intertwined with cultural values in COUNTRY.
 - Weaving the geological story into country-based planning presents great tourism and protected area management opportunities for TOs.
 - UNESCO Global Geopark constructs can offer pathways to realise these benefits, but these are subject to international determination.
 - In Australia, a GeoRegion is a more flexible, community-driven identity used to promote geotourism and conservation, designed to serve as a preliminary and exploratory 'stepping stone' towards geopark nominations.
- 
- A stylized, layered mountain range graphic in shades of teal and blue, located at the bottom right of the slide.

Country At The Centre: Putting Indigenous Leadership First in GeoRegions and the Future of our Landscapes

- Across Australia, the emerging GeoRegions approach is opening new pathways to recognise landscapes as living places where culture, story and deep time come together. At its heart is a simple but important shift: valuing land not only through science, but through the knowledge, responsibility, and continuing custodianship of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
 - For First Nations communities, landforms are not just physical features. They are part of living cultural landscapes shaped by Ancestors, story, and ongoing relationships with Country. GeoRegions create space for these connections to be recognised alongside geological and ecological values, not added later, but embedded from the beginning.
- 
- A stylized, layered silhouette of a mountain range in shades of teal and blue, positioned at the bottom right of the slide.

Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, South West Victoria
A UNESCO World Heritage Site





Murujuga Cultural Landscape, Pilbara, Western Australia
UNESCO World Heritage Site



UNITED NATIONS

Founded in 1945 - 193 member states

UNESCO



World Heritage



Man and the Biosphere



UNESCO Global Geoparks

WHAT IS A UNESCO GLOBAL GEOPARK?

- UNESCO Global Geoparks are special places that tell the story of the Earth. They are recognised because their landscapes are important to science and people.
 - For First Nations communities **rocks and landforms are living parts of Country**—shaped by Ancestors, stories, and deep cultural connections.
 - A Geopark respects, includes and promotes these connections from the very beginning, alongside the science and the natural environment.
 - **A UNESCO Global Geopark is a place where TOs can promote their Country to learn about the land, the culture, and the history all together.**
 - Each Geopark is different. **Each one is special in their combination of landscape, culture and community**, and everyone working together to care for Country.
- 
- A stylized, layered mountain range graphic in shades of teal and blue, located at the bottom right of the slide.

Geopark Goals

- * Conservation

- * Education

- * Improving
Economic
Welfare

- TO's can control the process and everyone can have a voice, so decisions are shared.
- Responsibility is shared, so people feel ownership and take care of Country together, even in places where TO rights are limited.
- Planning can be TO led, bringing together science and local and cultural knowledge.
- Communities can be supported with skills and knowledge to take part and lead.
- Management can be flexible, so TOs can respond to changes in Country and care for it.

The Three Pillars of Global Geoparks



Protection

Conservation of geological heritage and **geodiversity** lies at the heart of every geopark. This includes safeguarding sites of international scientific importance from degradation, mining, and unsustainable development.

- Geoheritage site preservation
- Biodiversity conservation
- Environmental monitoring



Education

Raising awareness about Earth sciences and our planet's dynamic systems. Geoparks serve as outdoor classrooms, fostering understanding of geoprocesses, climate change, natural hazards, and sustainable resource use.

- School programs & field trips
- Public interpretation & exhibits
- Teacher training & resources



Sustainable Development

Supporting local economies through geotourism while preserving natural and cultural heritage. Geoparks create jobs, stimulate regional development, and empower communities to become stewards of their geological legacy.

- Geotourism & visitor experiences
- Local employment creation
- Community empowerment

 **Interconnected & Mutually Reinforcing:** These three pillars form an integrated approach where conservation enables education, education drives sustainable tourism, and tourism drives revenues..

Community Ownership & Indigenous Knowledge



Indigenous Knowledge Integration

Geoparks recognize that **geological heritage is inseparable from cultural heritage**. Indigenous communities have stewarded these landscapes for millennia, developing deep understanding encoded in stories, traditions, and practices.

Cliffs of Fundy, Canada

Mi'kmaq stories explain geosites and preserve ancestral knowledge of the landscape

Napo Sumaco, Ecuador

Kichwa concepts of Pacha Mama (Mother Earth) connect geodiversity, biodiversity, and culture



Community-Led Initiatives



Local Guide Training

Residents trained to conduct geology tours, creating employment



Women's Cooperatives

Kanbula's Sangjie Thang-ga Art Academy empowers rural women



Cultural Gastronomy

Tungurahua's GeoAmigo Cafeteria celebrates volcanic-themed local cuisine



Participatory Management

Community involvement in tourism planning and conservation decisions

Economic Empowerment

Geoparks return tourism revenues to communities, funding **infrastructure improvements, environmental education, and sustainable livelihoods**.

Jeju Island, Korea

30% GDP

Tourism-related activities contribute significantly to regional economy

Azores, Portugal

12% GDP

Geoheritage tourism supports local businesses and employment

“ **Key Insight:** Research shows **strong positive correlation between community involvement and conservation outcomes**. When local citizens feel ownership, they actively engage in protecting geoheritage—demonstrating that conservation succeeds when communities benefit.

What is Geotourism?

“Geotourism is sustainable, place-based tourism that connects people with Earth’s landscapes, heritage, and communities, while protecting their natural and cultural values for future generations”

Geotourism - 'Place based and Holistic'

NOT
geological
tourism

Comprises the following features of both natural and cultural heritage:

- **Abiotic** - non-living aspects such as the sky, climate & geology, landscape and landforms, speleology, water, and soils: celebrating **GEODIVERSITY**.
- **Biotic** - the living parts e.g., **flora** (plants) and **fauna** (animals): celebrating **BIODIVERSITY**.
- **Cultural** - past & present, both **Aboriginal** and **post European settlement** (incl. **mining**), non-living and built.

Geotourism is undertaken in all areas, including places utilised by people (cultural tourism) and where primary industry activities (i.e., mining, agriculture, 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.



Cultural Heritage Benefits of Geotourism

- For Australia, an enhanced understanding of cultural elements of post European settlement.
- Extensive **mining cultural heritage**.
- Other primary industry and historic cultural elements e.g. early exploration and **road developments**.
- Holistic Aboriginal Culture elements linked to landscape and astral interpretation (**'sky country'**).

Traditional Astrotourism

Generally the same story across places at the same latitude

'Sky Country' Astrotourism

Story differs from 'place to place'

We also Needed
a Strategy for
Geotourism:

National
Geotourism
Strategy (NGS)

- Unique opportunity for **engaging the broader community** with geoscience.
- Australia already had a government supported Ecotourism Strategy (1994).
- **Major opportunity for rural and regional development**, focusing on both natural and cultural heritage, **both mining and Aboriginal**.
- To gain support of geotourism projects by governments at all levels.

Key Focus:

Defining a GeoRegion - the first step in evaluating its potential development as a geopark nomination

The proponent needs to seek agreement from the State/Territory Geological Survey to designate a defined area of particular natural and associated cultural heritage which highlights outstanding geoheritage features.

Benefits of Developing a GeoRegion for Holistic, Place- Based Geotourism

- By celebrating Country and the geoheritage of an identified GeoRegion in connection with all other aspects of the area's cultural and natural heritage, geotourism enhances awareness and understanding of key issues facing Aboriginal mobs.
- Geotourism gives local people a sense of pride and strengthens their identification with a GeoRegion embracing their Country.

NGS Interim Strategic Outcome for GeoRegion Establishment (2023)

- In 2023, Government Geological Surveys have approved the process for the establishment of GeoRegions.
- Three **approved** Pilot GeoRegion Projects now being developed, **all with UNESCO Global Geopark nomination aspirations**.
 - ❖ Ku-ring-gai, Sydney, NSW.
 - ❖ Glen Innes Highlands, NSW.
 - ❖ Murchson, Midwest, WA.

NGS Final Outcome for Geopark Assessment 2025

- With the endorsement of the Australian Government DCCEEW (subject to a caveat), a **Geoparks Assessment Process** was developed in association with the State/Territory Geological Surveys and which could be applied to assess any geopark proposals which emerged within approved GeoRegions
- This process was approved in December 2025.

THRIVE 2030 Visitor Economy Strategy ACTION 7.5

- 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**.

Take-Aways

- GeoRegions empower Mobs to shape their own futures through place-based, impact-positive geotourism. They create pathways for local jobs, sustainable development, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and most importantly enable communities to tell their stories in their own voices, on their own terms.
- This reflects cultural geomorphology: landforms hold not only scientific value, but deep cultural meaning, identity, and memory, inviting us to see landscapes as places of responsibility, not just scenery.

Closing the Gap

- Supporting GeoRegions and pathways to UNESCO Global Geoparks provides a practical mechanism for the Australian Government to advance “Closing the Gap”, aligning investment with Priority Reforms and key targets in employment, economic participation, land and water rights, and cultural strength.
- Leveraging existing funding streams, Indigenous land and sea management, regional development, and tourism support for Indigenous-led geotourism enterprises that create jobs, build capability, and sustain intergenerational knowledge, all within a place-based, on-Country framework under Indigenous leadership.

Contact Details

Angus M Robinson FAusIMM (CP)

angus@leisuresolutions.com.au

Tel: 0418 488 340

www.geotourismaustralia.org.au

Australian Geoscience Council Inc