

GEPARK ASSESSMENT PROCESS – EXPLANATORY GUIDE FOR PROPONENTS

Purpose

This document explains how the approved Australian **Geopark Assessment Process** (December 2025) provides a clear pathway for proponents, including existing Western Australian 'Local Geoparks' to participate in, and benefit from, nationally endorsed mechanisms for geopark recognition and potential UNESCO Global Geopark nomination. https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Geopark-Assessment-Process_final.pdf

Context and National Framework

Australia's progress toward UNESCO Global Geoparks was historically constrained by the absence of a government-endorsed assessment pathway. This changed following a strategic shift led by the Australian Geoscience Council (AGC) in 2018, culminating in the National Geotourism Strategy (2021) and the introduction and acceptance of GeoRegions as a nationally consistent, non-statutory framework.

In 2023, national GeoRegion guidelines were endorsed by a Geoscience Working Group representing State and Territory Geological Surveys and Geoscience Australia. This momentum led to the formal approval of the Geopark Assessment Process (December 2025), establishing a credible, government-supported pathway from early-stage regional development through to potential UNESCO Global Geopark nomination.

The assessment process involves three key steps.

- Early consultation by geopark proponents with government agencies, Aboriginal stakeholders, and communities.
- Independent technical review by a national geoparks reference committee.
- Submission by the relevant State or Territory Government for Ministerial consideration.

Progression to UNESCO nomination occurs only at the discretion of the Australian Government.

Integrating Western Australian 'Local Geoparks'

Prior to the establishment of the national framework, several Western Australian initiatives, supported by the Australian Geoparks Network (AGN) and GeoparksWA, developed as community-based 'Local Geoparks'. Local Geoparks are defined and assessed by GeoparksWA to meet many of the UNESCO guidelines for development as geoparks that have significant abiotic, biotic and cultural features, and have a legally incorporated community-based organisation with a locally based management board that aspires towards becoming a UNESCO Global Geopark.

It is now agreed that these existing projects can transition into the national system by the following measures.

- Seeking endorsement from the Geological Survey of Western Australia for the establishment of an administrative GeoRegion covering (at minimum) the local geopark area; and
- Progressing any future geopark proposal through the formal Geopark Assessment Process.

This approach ensures consistency with national policy while recognising the maturity and community support already achieved by WA initiatives.

Key Concepts

UNESCO Global Geoparks

UNESCO Global Geoparks are unified geographical areas with internationally significant geology, managed through a holistic approach to conservation, education, and sustainable development. They are community-driven and designed to deliver local socio-economic benefits, particularly through geotourism.

A geopark is not a new statutory land tenure. Rather, it is a management framework that integrates existing protections (e.g. national parks, Indigenous land agreements, planning controls) with interpretation, community engagement, and sustainable economic development.

Importantly, key designated geological sites (geosites) must already have appropriate legal protection prior to any UNESCO application.

GeoRegions (Australia's Foundational Step)

GeoRegions are Australia's nationally recognised precursor framework for geopark development. They:

- Define a coherent geographic area linked by geological, cultural, and landscape values.
- Enable structured consultation with communities, land managers, and Aboriginal stakeholders.
- Provide an early mechanism to resolve land tenure and governance issues.
- Support the development of governance arrangements and regional partnerships.

GeoRegions are an Australian domestic planning tool only and can fall away if a formal geopark nomination proceeds. https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/GUIDELINES-FOR-THE-DEVELOPMENT-OF-GEOREGIONS_finalrelease.pdf

The development of GeoRegions should include the establishment of **geotrails** between sites of important geodiversity, such as robust geoheritage sites (geosites), geological monuments, landscapes and landforms, or features recognised in state or national heritage registers.

State or 'National' Geoparks

State and Territory governments may choose to designate 'National' (state-based) geoparks within existing legislative frameworks. These do not require new statutory protection but must be supported by an appropriate governance entity (e.g. incorporated association, local government

body, or trust). They also need to align with the Geopark Assessment Process if progressing toward UNESCO recognition.

Geotrails: Building the Visitor Experience

Geotrails are a central delivery mechanism within GeoRegions and geoparks. They are characterised by the following features.

- Link **geosites** into coherent visitor journeys.
- Integrate Abiotic, Biotic, and Cultural (ABC) narratives.
- Support regional tourism by connecting landscapes, towns, and accommodation nodes.
- Are cost-effective, scalable, and compatible with existing land uses.

Geotrails may include roads, stock routes, walking tracks, cycling routes, and rail trails, and can incorporate both natural and human-modified environments.

Geosites: Selection Principles

Suitable geosites for geotourism are characterised by the following features.

- Clearly demonstrate geological features at a human scale.
- Tell an interpretable story of Earth history or process.
- Be safe and accessible (appropriate to their classification).
- Respect land tenure and cultural sensitivities.

Sites should not be promoted where they are highly vulnerable, hazardous (beyond intended use), inaccessible, or culturally restricted without appropriate consent.

Summary for Proponents

For existing Western Australian 'Local Geoparks', the pathway forward is now clear:

1. For administrative purposes, establish (or align with) a formally recognised GeoRegion.
2. Ensure appropriate governance, stakeholder engagement, and site protection.
3. Progress through the Geopark Assessment Process in partnership with State/Territory Governments.

This integrated approach provides, for the first time, a nationally consistent and government-endorsed pathway from community-led initiatives to potential UNESCO Global Geopark recognition.

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