

GEPARK ASSESSMENT PROCESS – EXPLANATORY GUIDE FOR PROPONENTS

Purpose

To explain how the Australian Geoscience Council's recently approved **Geoparks Assessment Process** can provide the means for geopark proponents, including the existing WA based designated 'Local Geoparks', to participate and benefit from the agreed mechanisms for geopark approval in Australia.

Preamble

Australia's pursuit of UNESCO Global Geoparks has long been hindered by the absence of a government-endorsed assessment pathway, despite its globally significant geological heritage. A strategic shift began in 2018 when the Australian Geoscience Council redirected efforts toward creating a nationally aligned, government-supported process. This led to the 2021 National Geotourism Strategy and the introduction of 'GeoRegions', flexible, non-statutory frameworks enabling communities to explore and assess geoheritage potential without immediate commitment to UNESCO nomination.

Momentum built with the 2023 endorsement of national GeoRegion guidelines by a Geoscience Working Group representing the heads of State and Territory Geological Surveys and the Australian Government's Geoscience Australia and culminated in December 2025 with approval of a formal Geoparks Assessment Process. This structured pathway, grounded in consultation, independent review, and government oversight, now provides Australia with a clear, credible route from GeoRegion development to potential UNESCO Global Geopark recognition.

In parallel, geopark advocacy groups, the Australian Geoparks Network (AGN) and GeoparksWA worked with a number of geopark pilots that led to the creation of community-backed geopark projects which led to the formation of designated 'Local Geoparks.'

Building on this, the AGC and government partners developed a formal **Geoparks Assessment Process**, approved in December 2025. https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Geopark-Assessment-Process_final.pdf

The assessment process involves four key steps.

- Early consultation with government agencies, Aboriginal stakeholders, and communities.
- Identification of, and engagement with, an appropriate level State/Territory Government Agency to champion and provide oversight of the development process. Examples of such an agency might include for example, a regional development agency.
- Independent technical review by a National Geoparks Reference Committee established by the designated oversight State/Territory Government Agency. It is envisaged that such a committee will be formed by the relevant oversight agency when a geopark nomination has been formulated.
- Submission by the relevant oversight State or Territory Government Agency for Ministerial consideration by Premier/Chief Minister and Cabinet as appropriate.

Only after this can a nomination proceed at the discretion of the Australian Government to UNESCO. With this framework now in place, Australia has achieved a long-sought goal: a trusted, government-backed pathway from GeoRegion to potential Global Geopark recognition.

Definitions

UNESCO Global Geoparks

The 'highest order' of sustainable geotourism can be accommodated through the establishment of geoparks, in the same way that World Heritage Areas and national parks might be seen as the highest order of protection and enjoyment for biodiversity, culture, and geodiversity. Therefore, whilst the establishment of geoparks highlight one form of geotourism, they most definitely provide opportunities to celebrate and explore the Earth's natural features whilst also incorporating culture, protections where appropriate, and sustainability in a way that is true to the core values of all nature-based tourism in Australia.

On the world stage 'UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education, and sustainable development. Their bottom-up approach of combining conservation with sustainable development while involving local communities is becoming increasingly popular.

Geoparks have been established to create enhanced opportunities for the people who live within their boundaries and foster economic benefits for them, usually through the development of sustainable tourism. Geoparks stimulate economic activity and sustainable development through geotourism (holistic, nature-based, and cultural tourism that focuses on an area's geology and landscape as the platform for providing visitor engagement, learning and enjoyment). By attracting an increasing number of visitors, a geopark fosters local socio-economic development through the promotion of a quality label linked with the local natural and cultural heritage. It encourages the creation of local, innovative enterprises and cottage industries involved in geotourism and geologically inspired products.

Geoparks seek to conserve significant geological features and explore and demonstrate methods for excellence in conservation and geoscientific knowledge. This is accomplished through protected and interpreted geosites, museums, information centres, trails, mine sites, guided tours, school class excursions, popular literature, maps, educational materials and displays, and seminars. Geoparks are capable of being community driven. The geopark concept is an iconic one, applicable across all continents.

Whilst UNESCO Global Geopark must demonstrate geological heritage of international significance, the purpose of a geopark (at all levels including national and local) is to explore, develop and celebrate the links between that geological heritage and all other aspects of the area's natural, cultural, and intangible heritages. A geopark uses its geological heritage, in connection with all other aspects of the area's natural and cultural heritage, to enhance

awareness and understanding of key issues facing society, such as using our earth's resources sustainably, mitigating the effects of climate change and reducing natural disasters and related risks. Geoparks give local people a sense of pride in their region and strengthen their identification with the area.

In advance of any application made to UNESCO a proposed Global Geopark's key designated geological sites must already have legal protection (national, regional, or local) before an application is submitted, ensuring ongoing conservation; specifically, the defining geological features must be secured where appropriate under existing laws (e.g., state/territory acts for national parks, Indigenous land agreements, local zoning etc). Such protection is afforded if geosites are within existing conservation areas such as national parks or geoheritage reserves. It is recognised that a Geopark itself isn't a new legislative protected area category, but a management framework leveraging any existing laws for sustainable development and heritage preservation, with a legally recognised incorporated management body in place.

'State' based National Geoparks

As an option, State/Territory governments are already empowered to approve the designation of identified areas as 'National' Geoparks under their existing statutory framework, because the proposed creation of a 'National' Geopark does not require any protective measures other than those already in existence to provide for both protected and unprotected areas, as appropriate. Moreover, the recently approved Geopark Assessment Process provides for the assessment of any National Geopark proposal that emerges from within an approved GeoRegion. As would apply for any proposed UNESCO Global Park, any designated 'National' Geopark would need to be managed by an incorporated entity established under state government legislation.

National Geoparks Reference Committee

To meet the requirements of UNESCO, any nomination for a UNESCO Global Geopark must be first approved by a National Geoparks Reference Committee. The Geoparks Assessment Process has determined that a National Geoparks Reference Committee will be established by the State/Territory Government Agency overseeing the development of the GeoRegion in which a geopark nomination is being proposed. Its composition will be determined by that government agency and may include a selection of specialists as prescribed in the Geopark Assessment Process document.

'Local Geopark' designation in Western Australia

Local Geoparks are defined and assessed by GeoparksWA to meet many of the UNESCO guidelines for development as a geoparks, that is 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 has been agreed that the proponent of an existing Local Geopark is able to seek endorsement by the Geological Survey of Western Australia for the establishment for administrative purposes of a GeoRegion embracing at least the area of the Local Geopark to

enable any emerging nomination for a UNESCO Global Geopark to be assessed under the provisions of the Geopark Assessment Process.

GeoRegions

UNESCO appreciates that each Nation State can develop its own procedures for assessing geopark proposals. In the case of Australia, the concept of establishing a GeoRegion as a strategy is only a first step for geopark proponents (e.g., regional development authorities, local government agencies, community groups, natural or cultural heritage interest groups, and, as appropriate, primary industry interest groups) to use, and is of local Australian domestic relevance only, and would fall away if a GeoRegion project supported by the relevant State/Territory Government evolves into a geopark nomination. Australian government geoscience agencies now accept the concept of GeoRegions as an essential exploratory step for proposed geopark development with approved guidelines for their establishment https://www.agc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/GUIDELINES-FOR-THE-DEVELOPMENT-OF-GEOREGIONS_finalrelease.pdf

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.

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 Geopark Assessment Process assumes that a GeoRegion designation has been approved in principle by appropriate land managers and LGAs based on the endorsement received from the relevant State/Territory Geological Surveys and has, or is developing an approved governance structure (e.g. if it encompasses an LGA, then LGA governance arrangements can apply; if a multi-stakeholder or a community group is involved, then a relevant governance structure and trading identity may need to be established).

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

Geotrails

Geotrails are journeys that offer the advantages of

- relating directly to the tourism experience linking destinations or locally of geosites particularly of geological or geographical interest;
- having universal appeal, and do not compete with or impact on land access issues;
- being easy to establish and representing a cost-effective means of enhancing regional development;
- forming logical journeys linking accommodation destinations where available; melding the geological heritage features of a region with a cohesive story; and

- incorporating the biodiversity and cultural components (including mining heritage) of the region through which the geotrail traverses.

Geotrails not only link natural landscapes, wilderness, and protected areas, but also include human modified environments like quarries, road sections, and urban settings. Geotourism argues that to fully understand and appreciate the environment, visitors firstly, learn about the Abiotic (non-living) elements of climate, landscape, geology, and soils, as these determine the distribution of Biotic (living) elements of animals and plants. Both components influence the cultural landscape of how people inhabited the area in the past, as well as how they live there today. These become the key ABC (Abiotic, Biotic, Cultural) elements of geotourism/geotrails, which provides a cohesive approach to interpreting natural areas.

Geotrails can also comprise roads (and stock routes), walking and biking trails, and disused railway easements known as 'Rail Trails.'

Geosites

To be suitable for geotourism a potential geosite must

- readily display a natural geodiversity value at the human scale, so that it can be appreciated without requiring either a microscope or satellite imagery; and
- present a story of Earth history, process or nature that can be interpreted in plain language.

To be suitable for geotourism a potential site must not.

- Be overly sensitive to direct human impacts such as trampling, collection or vandalism;
- be hazardous, although acceptable hazards may vary with accessibility rating, for example, a hazard regarded unacceptable for a site classed as 'family friendly' might be acceptable at another site classed as 'remote / extreme';
- be on private or otherwise restricted land unless it is part of an existing tourism operation; and
- be culturally sensitive unless the traditional custodians agree to its promotion as a geotourism site.

Following recent discussions with the AGN and GeoparksWA, it has been agreed that the next logical step must enable a mechanism that enables the WA 'Local Geoparks' to be included within the Geoparks Assessment process.

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

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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 which includes identification of, and engagement with, an appropriate level State/Territory Government Agency to champion and provide oversight of the development process, followed by that agency setting up a National Geoparks Reference Committee (as defined above) and, assuming a successful review, a subsequent submission by the overseeing State/Territory Government agency to Premier/Chief Minister and Cabinet as appropriate.

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

Summary for WA Geopark Proponents

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

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 an identified State Government agency.

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