

# Celebrating Planet Earth – UNESCO-assisted Geoparks in the Australasian-Pacific region

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## SUMMARY

Geotourism is part of a worldwide growth industry supported by people seeking a wider understanding of their environment. The new Global Geopark Network is concentrating effort for protecting and promoting geological sites and at the same time, fostering education, entertainment, fun, health and well-being for its visitors.

Already there is a viable European Geoparks Network with 17 member countries that is disseminating information on geological heritage by encouraging education and tourism linked to UNESCO; similarly the Chinese Government through the Ministry of Land & Resources has identified a network of 85 National Geoparks, twelve of which have been accepted by UNESCO. Such a Geoparks Network in our region would be eligible for UNESCO Assistance to Geoparks. Several sites and regions, such as the Western Plains of Victoria and Mt Gambier region are actively pursuing the Geoparks model as a way to provide jobs and sustain development as well as protect their geoheritage.

**Key words:** Geoheritage, geotourism, Australasia, Pacific, Geoparks.

## INTRODUCTION

The last decades have seen an increasing role for the geosciences in many other fields. Today, this role is becoming increasingly important as issues relating to sustainability, climate change and life on earth are debated. One particular area where Australia has been a global leader is in the broad fields of geodiversity and geoheritage, and particularly in identification, protection and interpretation of sites of geological significance. Over the past decades each state has created lists of key geoheritage sites in Australia and the Pacific and some of these are already fostering typical Geopark activities. Through this new enterprise to promote geological sites for geotourism, education and research, we are exploring new ways to promote geological heritage sites of significance in our region and the role they will play in sustainable development strategies.

A key factor influencing our efforts is the recent initiative by UNESCO to establish a worldwide Network of Global Geoparks. The aims are to encourage understanding of earth science, its influence on human culture and the uses

of knowledge gained through programmes such as UNESCO's International Geoscience Programme (IGCP) and IUGS geoheritage such as GEOSITES and GEOSEE to make them widely available "to enhance the sustainable management of the environment, mineral and groundwater resources; the implementation through cooperative capacity building projects and training courses, and by promoting respect for geological heritage through education and popularization activities" with "emphasis on public awareness and strengthening of knowledge-building". The Geopark model most likely to be effective in Australia is a "grass-roots" approach where local communities in conjunction with different levels of government take responsibility for their own region. Comparison with some of the European Geoparks Network provides useful examples.

## METHODS AND PROCESS

We will explore the ramifications for the Australasia-Asia-Pacific Region where recommendations for a Geopark Network have been made. Already the Global Geopark Network encompasses 17 countries in Europe, with some 23 sites now designated as World Geoparks. China has designated 85 National Geoparks with 12 now accepted by UNESCO (of these one of us opened the Wudalianche Volcanoes & Lakes Geopark and assessed the Inner Mongolian Hexigten Geopark in mid 2004). The wider Asia-Pacific Network encompasses the Australasia-Pacific region across to the Middle East. One new application was made in 2005 for the first Iranian national Geopark on Qeshm in the Persian Gulf (also assessed for UNESCO by ST).

In Australia there is great potential as we have some of the most interesting geology in the world, some already listed as World Heritage e.g. Lord Howe Island, Macquarie Island, Great Barrier Reef, as well National and State parks. The geological component of many places has been neglected, however, and this is what the conference aims to address. Combining knowledge and expertise from existing stakeholders in geoscience education, universities, surveys, museums and science centres, the Geoparks Network will play a key role liaising with governmental bodies to set up Geoparks based on identified geological heritage. There is a strong economic component, as Geoparks will foster and boost employment both for geoscientists and especially for rural and indigenous people in tourism and heritage, in identifying key sites, in outlining policy for future directions and explaining the implications for local communities. These venues need to be made aware of the new UNESCO initiative and given assistance to raise their standards to those of the UNESCO

Operational Guidelines. This might include network conferences, training workshops for guides and publications.

## RESULTS

Since 2003 one of us (T) has been forging the Asia-Pacific and informal Oz Geopark Network. We already have indications of support from relevant Government authorities eg AusIndustry, relevant State Government departments eg SA tourism Commission, museums and academic perso as well as professional organisations such as the Geological Society of Australia.

Already, there motivated groups of people in two areas in South Australia and Victoria who are pursuing the Geoparks model for sustainable tourism and development of geological education in their sites. The Flinders Ranges and the eastern SA to Western Plains of Victoria Volcanoes Discovery Trail group held a series of meetings and community discussion in late 2005 and are looking at application to UNESCO.



Geoscience consultant Dr Susan Turner (left) and Volcanoes Discovery Trail Committee members Joane McKnight and Graham Arkinstall consider Geopark status for Leura Reserve. 2005.

**Figure 1. Information visit in mid December 2005 from UNESCO Advisory Group of Experts for Global Geoparks member Dr S. Turner to Mt Leura and Sugarloaf, an example of the many young volcanoes that might be included in the first Australian Geopark. Photo from/courtesy of the *Camperdown Chronicle*, 23 Dec. 2005.**

## CONCLUSIONS

An informal network of people interested in forming Geoparks in Australia and the South Pacific already exists. A formal application for a Global Geopark is in train encompassing the region known as the Volcanoes

Discovery trail extending across the South Australian and Vicotiran borders. The most important aspects of this and other Geoparks are the links between the geology and the people, their stories, culture and history that build into a sustainable source of geotourism, bring jobs to rural and indigenous people and in turn help protect sites of importance and promote geoheritage, complementing the work of the Geological Society of Australia and government bodies.

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