

Global Geotourism Perspectives

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Australia's Geological Heritage:

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Australia's Geological Heritage: raising awareness at a national level

Phil Creaser

Australia has many iconic sites and places that have significant geological and palaeontological values. While the recognition and protection of some of these sites began in the 19th century, e.g. cave and karst areas at Jenolan and Wellington in New South Wales, Lake Callabonna in South Australia, the systematic process of recording, listing and protection of these sites did not really begin until the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was part of an increased awareness of Australia's heritage, both natural and cultural. This process has formed the basis for much of our appreciation of our geological heritage and has raised awareness of the values of these sites, particularly at a national level. Some of these sites are now on the World Heritage List, others on the new National Heritage List and many are on the Register of the National Estate or State Heritage registers.

The focus of this chapter is the role of governments, particularly the national (Commonwealth) Government, in the whole process from the early 1970s through to the present day. To a lesser degree it records the roles of organisations and individuals who have also contributed to these processes. It also notes the diversification from purely site-based lists to broader subjects such as geodiversity, geoconservation, geoparks and geotourism. These recently developed concepts are all positive and help the community appreciate the significance of our geological heritage in understanding how Australia has evolved through time.

However, these broader subjects need to be carefully explained to governments at all levels as well as a biologically biased scientific community and the community generally. At present there is only a very limited awareness of the significance and implications of these new concepts. While there is much in common between many of the new developments in these fields, there is no single body or structure that coordinates the range of initiatives. By having a focus for organisations and individuals, there is more chance of achieving successful outcomes compared to individual efforts. It is proposed that some formal (or even informal) body or committee be established to coordinate and promote these initiatives.

Geological heritage documentation and listing

Geological heritage studies in Australia go back to the 1960s to the first work by local Geological Society of Australia (GSA) groups in Queensland and South Australia. Local divisions of the Society organised Subcommittees of interested geologists and began a programme of seeking out and promoting individual sites and by the 1970s each division had an active subcommittee, with work being carried out in all states and territories within Australia. While approaches to heritage studies of these sites varied, the end results were impressive with a range of documents detailing the geological values of the sites studied.

At the Commonwealth Government level the National Estate Grants Program was started in 1973 for heritage studies and conservation works following a review of Australia's National Estate. Included in the programme were grants to these GSA Subcommittees totalling more than AU\$320,000 over the subsequent 20 years for programmes of identifying, documenting, evaluating and recommending management of geological and geomorphological sites across Australia. (Joyce and Bröhl, 2008)

The Australian Heritage Commission (AHC) was set up by the Commonwealth Government in 1975 and its functions included the compilation of a Register of the National Estate (RNE). This was to include places of natural, historic and Aboriginal heritage which should be kept for present and future generations. It was originally established under the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975*. Under that Act, the AHC entered more than 13,000 places in the Register. It is important to note that the AHC actively encouraged the nomination of geological and geomorphological sites for inclusion in the RNE. The GSA subcommittees were regarded by the AHC as expert nominators to the RNE and while some subcommittees made many nominations to the Register, others have made few. A total of 691 geological sites are currently on the Register.

In 2004, the AHC was abolished and responsibility for maintaining the RNE shifted to the Australian Heritage Council, under the *Australian Heritage Council Act 2003*. Following amendments to this Act, the RNE was frozen on 19 February 2007, which means that no new places can be added, or removed.

The RNE will continue as a statutory register until February 2012. During this period the Federal Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts is required to continue considering the RNE when making some decisions under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). This transition period also allows state and territory governments, local government and the Commonwealth Government to complete the task of transferring places to appropriate heritage registers where necessary and to amend legislation that refers to the RNE as a statutory list. From February 2012 all references to the RNE will be removed from the EPBC Act and the *Australian Heritage Council Act 2003*. The RNE will be maintained after this time on a non-statutory basis as a publicly available archive.

Chapter extract

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