
Potential Geotourists: An Australian Case Study

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Abstract: *Geotourism is a new discipline and relatively little has been written about either its supply or demand sides. This research note presents the findings of a sample of potential Australian geotourists, all members of the Geological Society of Australia. The purpose of the study was to explore a potential market of geoscientists to test their interest in participating in commercial geotourism products as a means of developing niche geotourism opportunities in Australia. The findings show that potential geotourists prefer to undertake geotours independently rather than on organised tours. The majority of respondents wish to increase their knowledge of geological sites and landforms, which is encouraging as an indicator for the development of geotourism in Australia.*

Keywords: geotourism, geotourists, potential markets, Australia

Introduction

Geotourism is sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing the earth's geological features in a way that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation, and is locally beneficial (Dowling & Newsome, 2006). Geotourism is also about creating a place in which both locals and tourists are free to enjoy the area's local geological landscapes. It generates an experience which brings together the

local landscape, the local community and its visitors all of whom have different interests in the earth's formations (Dowling & Newsome, 2008). Allied to the development of geotourism is the evolution of geoparks. A geopark is an area with a geological heritage of significance, with a coherent and strong management structure and where a sustainable economic development strategy is in place (UNESCO, 2006). Geoparks have been established to create enhanced employment opportunities for the people who live there and foster economic benefits for them, usually through the development of sustainable tourism. These earth heritage sites are part of an integrated concept of protection, education and sustainable development.

Whilst there is a growing amount of research and understanding on the supply side of geotourism and geoparks (Dowling, 2008), there is relatively little known about the demand for these products (Robinson & Roots, 2008). Thus the aim of this research was to understand the extent of interest that Australian geoscientists have in participating in geotours either in Australia or overseas.

The Study

A mail survey was used to collect data for this research by distributing a questionnaire to members of the Geological Society of Australia (GSA) in late 2008. The self-reported survey questionnaire was designed by Edith Cowan University and Leisure Solutions[®]. It comprised three sections, the first seeking information about respondents' demographic details, the second investigating their reasons for travel generally, and the third assessing their interests in geotourism. The questionnaire used a combined measurement method including both direct and open-ended questions.

Findings

154 respondents were collected from the survey representing 7% of the GSA membership. The respondents were 84% male and 16% female, the largest age group being 55-64 year olds. The level of education of the group varied from undergraduates to those with a second degree education. Half of the respondents were employed on a full-time basis, with 29% being either semi or fully retired. Approximately one third of respondents work in consulting businesses (30%), a quarter are government employees (25%), a similar number work in

industry (24%), with the remainder being academics (21%). Members of the sample group are well paid with the largest income group among the respondents having a weekly income in excess of AUD\$2000 per week (45%). The majority of respondents are at the life-stage of being ‘empty nest - still working’ or ‘empty nest - retired’ (57%).

Travel Purpose

The most important travel purposes amongst the respondents were to increase their knowledge of geological sites and landforms, satisfy their curiosity, have memorable experiences, obtain intellectual stimulation, and visit destinations offering a unique bundle of features and attractions (Table 1, Figure 1).

Table 1 - Important travel purposes

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Increasing knowledge of geological sites and landforms	158	1.00	5.00	4.1582	.88528
To satisfy my curiosity	157	1.00	5.00	4.1401	.85828
To have a memorable experience	156	1.00	5.00	4.1026	.91707
To obtain intellectual stimulation	157	1.00	5.00	4.0955	.89000
Visiting destinations offering a unique bundle of features and attractions (i.e. ecology, geology, culture and history)	158	1.00	5.00	4.0316	.98019
Valid N (listwise)	156				

The three least important travel purposes amongst the respondents were being able to share travel experiences after returning home, visiting destinations offering a wide variety of cultural/art events and attractions, and meeting new people as part of a group tour.

Thus respondent’s priorities were principally to increase their knowledge of geological sites and landforms, a finding which is significant for the development of geotourism destinations in Australia (Figure 2). As the respondents are mostly mature, well-educated, and comparatively well-established, they are more likely looking for inspiration and to satisfy

their curiosity through geotourism activities instead of just looking for ‘socialising’ opportunities.

A number of additional suggestions were provided by respondents through the open-ended questions. They shared their views about accommodations, accessibility of attraction sites, information on sites, sites facilities, and experiences. All ideas are useful for the development of geotourism in Australia. Specific information provided on accommodation design and development should be taken into consideration because the different demographic groups all identified different types of accommodation requirements. For instance, younger people stated that they do not mind simpler accommodations such as tents or huts but those who are older, or have families, prefer better facilities and are more demanding of accommodation standards. The survey also identified a significant number of respondents who prefer to travel independently rather than taking group tours to geotourism sites.

Accessibility of visited sites was an important issue/concern for the respondents over 55 years (59%). Facilities which can make the sites easier to access such as wheelchair access for disabled people may have to be provided with the addition of ready access to medical facilities. Having good tour guides and detailed information on the geological icons onsite together with sound road access (to minimize damages to vehicles), was also suggested by respondents.

A key finding was that respondents prefer to travel independently in Australia or overseas rather than participating in group tours. Results indicated that respondents were unlikely to join a tour to visit a geotourism site in Australia (46%) or overseas (45%). Conversely respondents said they were more likely to travel independently to geotourism sites either in Australia (77%, Table 2) or overseas (53%, Table 3). These results indicate that geotourism destinations have not yet been fully developed for organized tour groups and also that the members of the GSA surveyed are well-travelled and knowledgeable enough to travel independently to geotourism sites.

Table 2 - Travel independently to an Australian geotourism site

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	6	3.5	3.8	3.8
	Unlikely	10	5.9	6.4	10.2
	Neutral	20	11.8	12.7	22.9
	Likely	70	41.2	44.6	67.5
	Very Likely	51	30.0	32.5	100.0
	Total	157	92.4	100.0	
Missing	99.00	2	1.2		
	System	11	6.5		
	Total	13	7.6		
Total		170	100.0		

Table 3 - Travel independently to an Overseas geotourism site

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Unlikely	16	9.4	10.2	10.2
	Unlikely	30	17.6	19.1	29.3
	Neutral	28	16.5	17.8	47.1
	Likely	49	28.8	31.2	78.3
	Very Likely	34	20.0	21.7	100.0
	Total	157	92.4	100.0	
Missing	99.00	2	1.2		
	System	11	6.5		
	Total	13	7.6		
Total		170	100.0		

A significant association was found between age of respondents and independent travel to a future Australian geotourism site. All the age groups expressed that they are likely to travel independently to an Australian geotourism site. Compared to the rest of the age groups, respondents aged 15-24 are more dichotomic in their interest. Two thirds of them were ‘very likely’ to travel to an Australian geotourism destination independently whereas the interest of other age groups was more evenly distributed.

The independent variables such as education level, employment status, employment sector and family income do not show significant associations with dependent interests of travel to an Australian and overseas geotourism site within a tour or independently.

Cross-tabulation analyses were also conducted to examine the relationships between the demographic characteristics of respondents and their travel purposes. A significant association was found between gender and the travel purpose 'experiencing a different life style'. The majority of male respondents were indifferent (41%) or believed that it was unimportant (34%) to experience a different lifestyle in a geotour, whereas the majority of female respondents thought it was not as important (60%). A moderate association was found between gender and 'enjoying fine food and wines'. Males and females have different perspectives in relations to enjoying wine and food during their travel to geotourism sites. More than a third of female respondent found it 'very important' where as only 8% of male respondents considered it 'very important'. The result implies that fine-dining options would be crucial to attract female travelers but not necessarily to male travellers.

Respondents also suggested that 'visiting destinations offering a unique bundle of features and attractions (ie. ecology, geology, history and culture)' is important. Therefore, organized geotours should offer a diversity of 'ABC' attractions including **A**biotic (non-living features such as geological attractions), **b**iotic features (including fauna and flora) and **C**ultural (including built attractions).

Conclusions

Research on geotourism and geotourists is in its infancy and this research represents a small-scale preliminary investigation into the demand for geotourism products by potential Australian geotourists. The findings indicate that there is a strong interest in - visiting geotourism sites, increasing knowledge in history and geology, meeting people from different cultures, enjoying outdoor activities, and staying in simple accommodations. Respondents prefer to travel to Australian and overseas geosites independently rather than participate in organized tours, maybe because such tours do not exist at present, or if they do, they do not satisfy the respondent's needs and wants.

Following on from the findings, a number of recommendations are made in relation to the future development of geological destinations in Australia. They include:

- Future geotourism development should focus on the ‘older generation/retired/empty nest’ market. These people have more time and money to spend on geological trips. They also have more interest in geotourism so will be more enthusiastic about the potential travel opportunities
- Most respondents expressed the desire to travel by themselves instead of as part of an organised tour. This is because they prefer an authentic experience away from groups.
- While this research focused on professionals involved or interested in geological matters, it is suggested that further research is undertaken on other professions such as teachers, medical professionals and engineers, etc who are not members of a geological society
- Destination development should include the five A’s (that is, Access, Accommodations, Activities, Attractions, Amenities) for different travellers (independent travellers and tour groups), and particularly for people with disabilities (Figure 3)
- As geotourism destinations sometimes occur in relatively remote places, it is important to emphasize safe practices and consider ready access to medical facilities especially for elderly people in case of injuries
- Geotour transport must comply with high levels of safety as travellers attach a high importance to this
- Comprehensive information about the site should be provided to tourists before their visit by way of websites, in brochures or information at visitor centres
- Accurate, quality information is considered important across a range of levels including road signage, exhibit boards, maps and by tour guides etc (Figures 4 & 5)
- While geotourism development is sought, this should not be at the expense of conservation of sites. Thus developers and land managers should be encouraged to seek a balance between the conservation and development of geotourism sites.

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Figure 1: A Key Australian Geosite - the Bungle Bungles, Purnululu World Heritage Region, north Western Australia

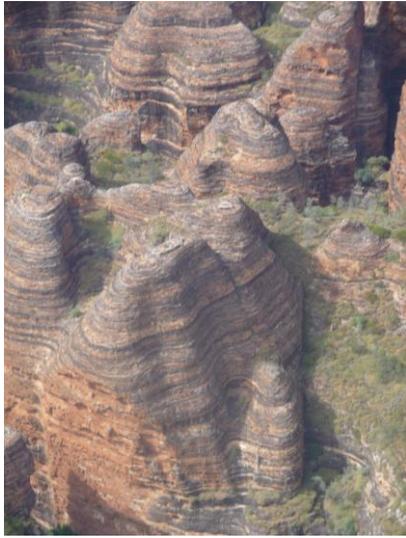


Figure 2: Information Panel - Purnululu World Heritage Region



Figure 3: Tented Accommodation - Purnululu World Heritage Region



Figure 4: Geotour Guide - Purnululu World Heritage Region



Figure 5: Park Website - Purnululu World Heritage Region

www.dec.wa.gov.au/hotproperty/property/national-parks/purnululu-national-park-bungle-bungle.html

