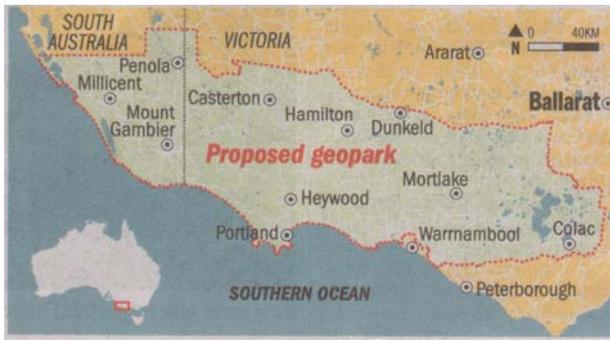


WESTERN VICTORIA COULD SOON BE HOME TO THE COUNTRY'S FIRST GEOPARK



Looking out from the ash-layered rim surrounding Tower Hill's dormant crater, John Collyer spots a mob of eastern grey kangaroos lounging in the late afternoon light.

'Where else in the world can you be standing in a volcano watching Australian wildlife and learning about indigenous history?' asks the head of the Worn Gundidj community development group, which runs tours around the reserve.

Tower Hill, ten kilometres west of Warrnambool, was formed from a major eruption some 32,000 years ago and about forty others that followed. It is home to emus, koalas, kangaroos, and is the traditional land of the Koroiitch Gundidj people.

Later this month, they will host a welcome ceremony to greet two German inspectors from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Over ten days — from June 17 to 26 — the pair will inspect geological sites in an area covering 27,000 square kilometres, from Colac in Victoria's western district to South Australia's south-west coast. It is one of the final steps in a community-led bid to have the area declared Australia's first UNESCO global geopark. For two years, locals from nine shires have united to have their neighbourhood, rich in volcanic features, recognised internationally.

Derrinallum local Joanne McKnight, who is coordinating the bid, said the lava plains of western Victorian, leading into South Australia, were unique for their vastness and their age.

'There are 374 eruption points across the area, and it's so diverse,' she said. 'It's such a large area to have volcanic activity and it's very new. Most dormant volcanos are two million years old or at least 100,000 years old. Some of these only erupted 5000 years ago.'

Since 2004, when UNESCO began establishing a worldwide network of geoparks to help foster sustainable economic development and tourism for local communities, fifty areas have been granted global geopark status, including thirty in Europe and eighteen in China. By definition, a geopark is a large area of land of geological significance.

However, applicants must also prove the area's archaeological, ecological, historical and cultural value. Hence the support of indigenous communities has been vital in the bid, lodged with UNESCO headquarters in December.

Mr Collyer believes geopark status will give locals greater appreciation for the landscape, while boosting tourist numbers and allowing his people an opportunity to share their story with the world.

UNESCO's Australasia-Pacific geopark representative, Sue Turner, believes the 'magic of the UNESCO name' will instill renewed pride in communities and governments and motivate them to care for the wonder in their backyards. The geologist, who approached locals in 2005 asking them to consider applying for recognition, has little doubt the bid will be approved.

In China, where the geoparks concept has been embraced, the geopark has reportedly created up to 10,000 jobs, mainly for minority groups, and attracted up to one million visitors each year. Dr Turner said that while the numbers would not be as great in Australia, the possibilities would be endless. The Gunditjmarra people of south-western Victoria have also backed the bid. If approved, the geopark will cover the Tyrendarra indigenous protected area, north-east of Portland, which is managed by the Winda Mara Aboriginal Corporation on behalf of the Gunditjmarra.

Visitors to the 284 hectare property see fish traps used to catch eels and fish thousands of years ago and remnants of ancient stone huts — evidence of traditional Aboriginal aquaculture and permanent settlement. Similar discoveries were instrumental in the group's land rights win earlier this year, claiming 140,000 hectares in the Portland Region. Further a field is what Damien Bell, chairman of the Gunditjmarra's representative body, calls Lake Gorrie, a 470 hectare property recently acquired from a sheep farmer with support from the Indigenous Land Corporation.

Pioneering farmers in the mid 1880s painstakingly built animal yards and sheep washes with basalt rocks, not unlike the dry stone walls that traverse the Western District landscape. The structures have long remained hidden on private property, but the indigenous community is exploring plans to open it to the public.

'A lot of people are gobsmacked. It's amazing what the locals don't know is here in their own backyards,' Mr Bell said. 'When the members of the Dry Stone Walls Association came to the site only a couple of months ago they dropped to the ground, also crying with amazement.'

