

2016/06: Should tourists be permitted to climb Uluru?

What they said...

'We ask you to respect our law by not climbing Uluru'

Part of a sign erected at Uluru indicating the attitude of the traditional owners, the Anangu

'That would see a great opportunity for local Anangu to participate in a lucrative business and create much-needed local jobs on that culturally significant site'

Northern Territory Chief Minister, Adam Giles, commenting in April, 2016, on the advantages of encouraging the climbing of Uluru

The issue at a glance

On April 12, 2016, a spokesperson for the federal Environment Minister, Greg Hunt, stated that the government had 'no plans to change current arrangements' under which tourists are able to climb Uluru, despite this appearing to violate the wishes of the traditional owners.

Traditional owner Vince Forrester has been reported stating that he was 'very disappointed' the government would continue to allow tourists to climb Uluru, which he described as 'the soul of the country'.

The position appears less than clear, as the Northern Territory's Chief Minister, Adam Giles, stated on April 19, 2016, 'It appears that the federal government is yet again considering placing a total and permanent ban on climbing Uluru. The first point to make about this ludicrous suggestion is that this should be a decision for Territorians, not for bureaucrats in Canberra.'

Mr Giles further stated, 'I believe we should explore the idea of creating a climb with stringent safety conditions and rules enforcing spiritual respect, that will be endorsed, supported and even managed by the local Aboriginal community.' He also suggested, 'Allowing the Uluru climb will help visitors better understand the unique indigenous culture and the significance for the Anangu.'

Mr Giles's proposal does not appear to have met with the support of Anangu representatives.

Background

(The information below has been abbreviated from the Wikipedia entry titled 'Uluru'. The full entry can be accessed at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uluru>)

Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock and officially gazetted as Uluru / Ayers Rock, is a large sandstone rock formation in the southern part of the Northern Territory in central Australia. It lies 335 km south west of the nearest large town, Alice Springs, 450 km by road.

Kata Tjuta and Uluru are the two major features of the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Uluru is sacred to the Anangu, the Aboriginal people of the area. The area around the formation is home to an abundance of springs, waterholes, rock caves, and ancient paintings. Uluru is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The local Anangu, the Pitjantjatjara people, call the landmark Uluru. This word is a proper noun, with no further particular meaning in the Pitjantjatjara dialect, although it is used as a local family name by the senior traditional owners of Uluru.

On 19 July 1873, the surveyor William Gosse sighted the landmark and named it Ayers Rock in honour of the then Chief Secretary of South Australia, Sir Henry Ayers. Since then, both names have been used.

In 1993, a dual naming policy was adopted that allowed official names that consist of both the traditional Aboriginal name and the English name. On 15 December 1993, it was renamed "Ayers Rock / Uluru" and became the first official dual-named feature in the Northern Territory. The order of the dual names was officially reversed to "Uluru / Ayers Rock" on 6 November 2002 following a request from the Regional Tourism Association in Alice Springs.

Description

Uluru is one of Australia's most recognisable natural landmarks. The sandstone formation stands 348 m high, rising 863 m above sea level with most of its bulk lying underground, and has a total circumference of 9.4 km. Both Uluru and the nearby Kata Tjuta formation have great cultural significance for the Anangu people, the traditional inhabitants of the area, who lead walking tours to inform visitors about the local flora and fauna, bush foods and the Aboriginal dreamtime stories of the area.

Uluru is notable for appearing to change colour at different times of the day and year, most notably when it glows red at dawn and sunset.

Kata Tjuta, also called Mount Olga or The Olgas, lies 25 km west of Uluru. Special viewing areas with road access and parking have been constructed to give tourists the best views of both sites at dawn and dusk.

Flora and fauna

Historically, 46 species of native mammals are known to have been living near Uluru; according to recent surveys there are currently 21. Anangu acknowledge that a decrease in the number has implications for the condition and health of the landscape. Moves are supported for the reintroduction of locally extinct animals such as malleefowl, common brush tail

possum, rufous hare-wallaby or mala, bilby, burrowing bettong and the black-flanked rock-wallaby.

The mulgara, the only mammal listed as vulnerable, is mostly restricted to the transitional sand plain area, a narrow band of country that stretches from the vicinity of Uluru to the northern boundary of the park and into Ayers Rock Resort. This area also contains the marsupial mole, woma python and great desert skink.

Of the 27 mammal species found in the park, six are introduced: the house mouse, camel, fox, cat, dog, and rabbit.

These species are distributed throughout the park but their densities are greatest near the rich water run-off areas of Uluru and Kata Tjuta.

Uluru-Kata Tjuta, a National Park flora, represents a large portion of plants found in Central Australia. A number of these species are considered rare and restricted in the park or the immediate region. There are many rare and endemic plants in the park.

The growth and reproduction of plant communities rely on irregular rainfall. Some plants are able to survive fire and some are dependent on it to reproduce. Plants are an important part of Tjukurpa, and there are ceremonies for each of the major plant foods. Many plants are associated with ancestral beings.

Trees such as the mulga and centralian bloodwood are used to make tools such as spearheads, boomerangs and bowls. The red sap of the bloodwood is used as a disinfectant and an inhalant for coughs and colds.

There are several rare and endangered species in the park. Most of them, like adder's tongue ferns, are restricted to the moist areas at the base of the formation, which are areas of high visitor use and subject to erosion.

Since the first Europeans arrived, 34 exotic plant species have been recorded in the park, representing about 6.4% of the total park flora. Some, such as perennial buffel grass, were introduced to rehabilitate areas damaged by erosion. It is the most threatening weed in the park and has spread to invade water- and nutrient-rich drainage lines. A few others, such as burgrass, were brought in accidentally, carried on cars and people.

Tourism

The development of tourism infrastructure adjacent to the base of Uluru that began in the 1950s soon produced adverse environmental impacts. It was decided in the early 1970s to remove all accommodation-related tourist facilities and re-establish them outside the park. In 1975, a reservation of 104 square kilometres of land beyond the park's northern boundary, 15 kilometres from Uluru, was approved for the development of a tourist facility and an associated airport, to be known as Yulara. The camp ground within the park was closed in 1983 and the motels closed in late 1984, coinciding with the opening of the Yulara resort. In 1992, the majority interest in the Yulara resort held by the Northern Territory Government was sold and the resort was renamed Ayers Rock Resort.

Since the park was listed as a World Heritage Site, annual visitor numbers rose to over 400,000 visitors by the year 2000. Increased tourism provides regional and national economic benefits. It also presents an ongoing challenge to balance conservation of cultural values and visitor needs.

Climbing

The local Anangu do not climb Uluru because of its great spiritual significance. They request that visitors do not climb the rock, partly due to the path crossing a sacred traditional Dreamtime track, and also due to a sense of responsibility for the safety of visitors. The visitors guide says 'the climb is not prohibited, but we prefer that, as a guest on Anangu land, you will choose to respect our law and culture by not climbing.'

Despite being discouraged by its traditional owners, some visitors still climb Uluru. A chain handhold added in 1964 and extended in 1976 makes the hour-long climb easier, but it is still a steep, 800 m hike to the top, where it can be quite windy. It is recommended individuals drink plenty of water while climbing, and those who are unfit, suffer from vertigo or medical conditions restricting exercise, do not attempt it. Climbing Uluru is generally closed to the public when high winds are present at the top. There have been at least 35 deaths relating to recreational climbing since such incidents began being recorded.

On 11 December 1983, the Prime Minister of Australia, Bob Hawke, promised to hand back the land title to the Anangu traditional custodians and caretakers and agreed to the community's 10-point plan which included forbidding the climbing of Uluru. The government, however, set access to climb Uluru and a 99-year lease, instead of the previously agreed upon 50-year lease, as conditions before the title was officially given back to the Anangu.

The Aboriginal traditional owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park (Ngaritjja) and the Federal Government's National Parks share decision-making on the management of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Under their joint Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Management Plan 2010-20, issued by the Director of National Parks under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999, clause 6.3.3 provides that the Director and the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Board of Management work towards closure of the climb and, additionally, provides that it will close upon any of three conditions being met: there are 'adequate new visitor experiences', less than 20 per cent of visitors make the climb or the 'critical factors' in decisions to visit are 'cultural and natural experiences'. Despite cogent evidence the second condition was met by July 2013, the climb remains open.

Of the approximately 310,000 visitors to the Red Centre in 2008, most - about 170,000 - were foreign visitors and only a minority actually climbed the rock.

Several controversial incidents on top of Uluru in 2010, including a striptease, golfing and nudity, led to renewed calls for banning the climb. However, most Australians appear to be against a ban - political correctness gone mad, say some.

Australian travel agent Totaltravel.com has sampled 1500 travellers in a recent online poll and says 60 per cent are against the ban.

Internet information

On May 12, 2016, The Conversation published a comment by Marianne Riphagen, Visiting Fellow at the Australian National University. The article is titled 'Why is it still possible to climb Uluru?'

Between 2013 and 2015, Riphagen conducted 20 weeks of research at Uluru as part of a study undertaken by the Australian National University, in association with Macquarie University, examining how the Anangu use their cultural heritage to earn a living.

The article contends that more needs to be done to make it possible for the Anangu to economically exploit their cultural heritage without having to adopt practices which violate their beliefs.

The full text of this article can be found at <https://theconversation.com/why-is-it-still-possible-to-climb-ulu-u-r-u-u-58729>

On May 8, 2016, the tourist information site, Traveller, posted a comment by Ben Groundwater titled 'Climbing Uluru: how is this still a thing?' The opinion piece contrasts the disrespect shown Indigenous Australian culture through the continued climbing of Uluru with the respect generally shown the sacred sites of other cultures.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.traveller.com.au/uluru-ignoramus-why-choose-to-walk-over-anothers-sacred-site-gogwmu>

On April 25, 2016, The Daily Telegraph published an opinion piece by Maria Billias titled 'Could tourists climbing Uluru help Indigenous Australians?'

The comment argues that encouraging tourists to climb Uluru could be to the advantage of the Indigenous population.

The full text of this article can be found at <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/rendezview/could-tourists-climbing-uluru-help-indigenous-australians/news-story/f734f4c4d10d89885a8b6af08e20e30b>

On April 21, 2016, SBS News ran a report on the Northern Territory Chief Minister, Adam Giles, supporting tourists being able to climb Uluru.

The full transcript can be accessed at <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/04/21/nt-minister-sparks-controversy-over-uluru-climb-call>

On April 21, 2016, Crikey republished an opinion piece first written by former Northern Territory tour guide, Chris Watson, in 2006. The piece is titled 'Stop climbing Uluru. Just stop' and opposes the climbing of the rock.

It can be accessed at <http://www.crikey.com.au/2016/04/21/stop-climbing-uluru-just-stop/>

On April 20, 2016, SBS News ran a report canvassing the range of opinions on whether Uluru should be able to be climbed.

A full transcript can be accessed at <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2016/04/20/uluru-climb-plan-sparks-national-debate>

On April 20, 2016, SBS Comedy published a comment by Ben McLeay titled 'Given you can climb Uluru you should also be able to do sick ollies off the Anzac Memorial'. The piece gives a list of behaviours which would be considered inappropriate and yet are no more culturally disrespectful than climbing Uluru.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://www.sbs.com.au/comedy/article/2016/04/20/given-you-can-climb-uluru-you-should-also-be-able-to-do-sick-ollies-anzac-memorial>

On April 18, 2016, The New Matilda published a comment by Harry Hobbs titled 'Not Content with Wrecking the Environment, Greg Hunt Is Now Desecrating Sacred Sites'

The opinion piece opposes the government's decision not to prohibit the climbing of Uluru and places it in the context of what it claims is the general failure of policy re Indigenous Australians.

The full text can be accessed at <https://newmatilda.com/2016/04/18/not-content-with-wrecking-the-environment-greg-hunt-is-now-desecrating-sacred-sites/>

On July 10, 2015, the ABC's Radio National broadcast a segment titled 'Climbing the rock: why do tourists still climb Uluru?'

The treatment gives the views of the traditional owners, the park managers and a number of tourists. The full text can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/offtrack/climbing-the-rock-why-do-tourists-still-climb-uluru/6603640>

On January 27, 2015, The Alice Spring's News Online published a comment by Erwin Chlanda titled 'The Rock: To climb or not to climb?'

The opinion piece argues that there is no clear consensus among traditional owners that Uluru should not be climbed.

The full text of the article can be accessed at <http://www.alicespringsnews.com.au/2015/01/27/the-rock-to-climb-or-not-to-climb/>

On June 12, 2013, Traveller published an article by Ben Groundwater in which he claims there is no consensus among traditional owners as to whether Uluru should be climbed.

The full article can be found at <http://www.traveller.com.au/climbing-uluru-its-more-complicated-than-you-think-2o2xq>

The Parks Australia site has a section given over to Uluru and explains the Anangu's objections to the rock being climbed.

The section can be accessed at <http://www.parksaustralia.gov.au/uluru/do/we-dont-climb.html>

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) has a section of its Internet site given over to the beliefs of the traditional owners of Uluru, the Anangu. The site includes an outline of the importance of Uluru within their belief system.

This information can be found at <http://aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/tjukurpa>

The Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Knowledge for Tour Guides Handbook outlines the measures taken to manage tourism in the region to ensure visitor safety and minimise the cultural and environmental damage done.

The Handbook stresses that climbing Uluru is seriously discouraged.

The full text of the Handbook can be accessed at http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/tourism/uluru/downloads/readings/reading19_minimal_impact.pdf

Arguments in favour of allowing tourists to climb Uluru

1. Some of Uluru's traditional owners are not opposed to tourists climbing it

Critics of tourists being deterred from climbing Uluru argue that there is no clear consensus among the traditional owners prohibiting or discouraging the climb.

An article written by Erwin Chlanda and published in the Alice Springs News Online on January 27, 2015, argues that the claims made about Indigenous opposition to climbing the rock do not clearly identify which group or groups are opposed. Chlanda contends that Parks Australia is opposed to the climb because of the difficulties and expense involved in managing it and attempting to ensure climber safety. He further argues that when he questioned Charles Darwin University which conducts the training course for Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park guides he could get no detail regarding which Indigenous spokespeople had indicated that the rock should not be climbed.

Chlanda observes, 'In its management plan 2010 to 2020, Parks quotes the names of just two traditional owners on the subject of climbing: Kunmanara Nguraritja ("This is the proper way: no climbing") and Tony Tjamiwa ("Climbing is not a proper tradition for this place").' He suggests that this is too narrow a basis on which to establish a policy of no climbing. He cites his own 1974 interview with Paddy Uluru who was the custodian of the rock at that time. Chlanda paraphrases Mr Uluru as saying, 'if tourists are stupid enough to climb the Rock, they're welcome to it.'

Chlanda further notes, 'For him there was nothing of practical value up there such as water, game nor edible plants. He made it clear that knowledge of certain elements of the Rock's dreaming must remain secret, to be known only by a strictly defined circle of people. That knowledge would be passed on to outsiders at the pain of serious punishment and perhaps death. But the physical act of climbing was of no cultural interest...'

In an article published on Traveller in June 2013 John Sweeney, a guide at Uluru was quoted as saying, 'There are plans in place to close the climb completely. Then some Anangu would like to develop the climbing route, increase the safety standards to something similar to the Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb, and reopen it to those willing to pay for the experience.'

The author of the article, Ben Groundwater has stated, 'Some Anangu want the climb closed entirely. Others want it developed as a tourist attraction. And most of us will never be told one of the reasons behind all of this because it's private knowledge.'

2. Banning the climbing of Uluru would damage the tourist industry

It is claimed that climbing Uluru is a major tourist attraction. Numerous tourist sites stress the appeal of climbing the rock either for those who have done so or for those who intend to visit the area.

On April 20, 2016, one of the posters on Patrol 4X4.com - Nissan Patrol Forum noted, 'Money can't buy the sense of wonder and appreciation of Australia's natural beauty that you can instil in your kids with this kind of opportunity, and banning the climb should be fought tooth and nail. I'd be very disappointed to be a grumpy old grandad telling stories of when you used to be allowed to climb the rock.'

On the same site the following day another poster commented, 'The view from the top is spectacular, and well worth the climb. It's an unforgettable experience. I've been fortunate enough to climb it twice, and would like to do it again.'

We should be free to climb Ayers Rock and enjoy the outlook from the top. We're sacrificing too many of our freedoms for political correctness and that is a pity.'

Those who argue for the economic importance of tourists being able to climb Uluru contend that claims tourists are no longer interested in doing so are inaccurate.

The numbers of tourists attempting to climb Uluru in recent years has declined; however, supporters of the climb argue that care has to be taken in interpreting such figures.

Maria Billias, writing an opinion piece for The Daily Telegraph published on April 25, 2016, notes, 'Keep in mind however that would-be climbers don't always have a "choice" given the climb is frequently closed due to weather conditions or [for] cultural reasons.'

Billias also observes, 'Also blurring these not so watertight statistics is tourist numbers to Uluru have dropped significantly in recent years so it's hard to measure the impact that any discouraged climb could be having on potential holiday-makers to Central Australia.'

Billias's implication here is that the number of visitors to Uluru may have declined precisely because climbing the rock is being discouraged.

A similar point was made by a poster on Patrol 4X4.com - Nissan Patrol Forum on April 21, 2016. He observed, 'When I was there approx two years ago we were speaking to a few employees at the resort who said they don't want to stop climbing yet because less people will visit. The resort needs more visitors.'

When banning the climb was proposed in 2009, the then federal Opposition environment spokesperson, Greg Hunt, stated, 'Big Brother is coming to Uluru to slam the gate closed on an Australian tourism icon.'

3. Tourists climbing Uluru contribute to the economic wellbeing of the traditional owners

Supporters of climbing Uluru argue that the traditional owners should give their consent, take an active part in the management of tours and receive much of the income that would derive from them. They argue that this is particularly important given the relative impoverishment of Indigenous people living in this area and the low living standards they endure.

Maria Billias, writing an opinion piece for The Daily Telegraph published on April 25, 2016, noted, 'a [recent] report by the Lowitja Institute ... found the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to be comparable to the life expectancy gap in Kenya. Or Cameroon...

Indigenous children are sicker, receive poorer educational outcomes, are more likely to live in poverty and be victims of child abuse and neglect, have fewer job prospects ... the list goes on.'

Billias concluded that for the Indigenous population in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park area part of the solution to their economic, social and health disadvantage would be more fully exploiting the tourism potential of Uluru.

Billias argues, 'Why should we not be encouraging our Indigenous Australians to take control of their destiny and harness any economic opportunity that comes their way to help "close the gap"?'

Economic prospects in remote areas are few and far between and bringing Indigenous people on board, in turn creating fulfilling jobs and injecting potentially millions in revenue back into where it's needed most, can only be positive.'

In April, 2016, the Northern Territory's Chief Minister, Adam Giles, indicated that he supports tourists climbing Uluru, and that if it was better regulated it might become a money-maker for the local people.

Mr Giles stated, 'That would see a great opportunity for local Anangu to participate in a lucrative business and create much-needed local jobs on that culturally significant site.'

Then federal Opposition environment spokesperson, Greg Hunt, stated, 'Big Brother is coming to Uluru to slam the gate closed on an Australian tourism icon.'

Supporters have compared better organised climbs of Uluru with the Ayres Rock Resort which supplies employment for hundreds of Indigenous people.

4. Measures can be taken to reduce the risk to tourists

Those who support the climbing of Uluru argue that more can be done to ensure that the potential risk to tourists is reduced.

Maria Billias, writing an opinion piece for The Daily Telegraph published on April 25, 2016, noted, 'The Anangu have a deep spiritual attachment to Uluru and are genuinely pained when visitors lose their lives attempting the arduous climb... But if safety issues were addressed and more guides were employed to make sure tourists oblige by strict cultural protocols - even if it means keeping the climb closed on certain days or even during entire seasons - then I can only see a potential profitable business opportunity that should be explored.'

In April, 2016, the Northern Territory's Chief Minister, Adam Giles, told the Territory parliament, 'I believe that we should explore the idea of creating a climb with stringent safety conditions and rules enforcing spiritual respect that will be endorsed, supported and even managed by the local Aboriginal community.'

Uluru has been compared to other World Heritage sites such as the Grand Canyon which attracts nearly five million tourists annually. There are designated tracks; however, tourists are allowed to climb down to the valley floor and up again. Tours are carefully managed and regulated.

There have been over 600 deaths of people climbing in the Grand Canyon, though promoters of climbing argue that this is a small number relative to the number of tourists that visit the Canyon each year. Supporters of climbing argue that risks can be moderated and that some level of danger is acceptable given the excitement and challenge of the climbing experience.

5. Measures can be taken to reduce the impact of climbers on the environment

It has been claimed that there are techniques available that would vastly reduce the impact of tourists on the ecology of Uluru. These include an absolute prohibition on taking materials, including food, on the climb as nothing should be taken to the top of the rock which could be left behind as refuse that would degrade the environment.

The question of human waste management is a difficult one; however, there are techniques available that would reduce the impact of human waste on the rock's ecology. In some United States wilderness sites the regulations require packing out human waste.

There are waste pack-out kits available to make it very easy to carry out your waste. They have odour-fighting chemicals or natural ingredients with liquid-absorbing powder in double-bag containers. The New Zealand government also encourages tourists in remote, environmentally sensitive areas to 'Carry out human waste in a container such as poo tube, pot or re-sealable bags'.

Many of those who support continued climbing of Uluru claim that this can be done without significant environmental

degradation and that the damage that has so far occurred is the result of insufficiently rigorous management practices.

Arguments against tourists climbing Uluru

1. Uluru's traditional owners do not want the rock climbed

Uluru was returned to its traditional Anangu owners in 1985, and they subsequently leased it back to the federal government for 99 years. Today the park is jointly managed through a board of management composed of representatives from local Indigenous communities and Parks Australia.

Uluru is sacred and a place of great knowledge for the Anangu people. Traditional owners believe ancestral beings travelled across the lands in a process of formation and destruction that gave rise to the existing landscapes. The ancestral beings are in the form of people, plants and animals.

The Anangu believe these landscapes are still inhabited by the spirits of those ancestral beings, which they refer to as Tjukuritja or Waparitja. There are many creation stories associated with Uluru that are kept by the Anangu people. Under traditional law climbing Uluru is not permitted and the Anangu people request visitors respect their law and not climb. Instead the Anangu invite visitors to walk around the base of Uluru to discover an appreciation and deeper understanding of this unique place in the world.

At the base of the climb the Anangu have erected a sign which reads 'Our traditional law teaches us the proper way to behave. We ask you to respect our law by not climbing Uluru. What visitors call the climb is the traditional route taken by our traditional Mala men on their arrival at Uluru in the creation time. It has great spiritual significance.'

Another concern of the traditional owners is the safety risk to climbers. On the Parks Australia Internet there is the following statement from the traditional owners: 'The climb is not prohibited but we ask you to respect our law and culture by not climbing Uluru.'

We have a responsibility to teach and safeguard visitors to our land. The climb can be dangerous. Too many people have died while attempting to climb Uluru. Many others have been injured while climbing. We feel great sadness when a person dies or is hurt on our land. We worry about you and we worry about your family. Our traditional law teaches us the proper way to behave.'

2. Other cultures' sacred sites are respected

There are those who see the climbing of Uluru as a sign of disrespect for Aboriginal culture. They contrast this behaviour with the respect given the sacred sites of other cultures.

The tourist information site, Traveller, contains a comment posted by Ben Groundwater on May 8, 2016, and titled 'Climbing Uluru: how is this still a thing?' and subtitled 'Climbing Uluru is akin to trampling across an altar in the Vatican'. Groundwater observes, 'In pretty much every other country in the world, tourists will be asked to show some form of respect to a local culture or religion.'

They will be asked to dress in long, often hot clothing in some Middle Eastern countries. They will be asked to remove their hats when they enter a church in Europe. They will be asked to remain silent in tombs. They will be told that non-believers can't enter certain parts of a temple.

And the reaction to those requests, pretty much across the board, is to respect the local people's wishes.'

The conclusion Ben Groundwater draws from the continued climbing of Uluru, despite the traditional owners' objections, is 'Aboriginal culture and spirituality is not taken seriously. Worldwide. Still.'

A similar point was made by Harry Hobbs in an opinion piece published on April 18, 2016, in The New Matilda. Hobbes stated, 'The case of Uluru is simple. Just as non-Indigenous Australians would not countenance destruction of a Christian church in order to promote tourism, nor should we allow the desecration of a site sacred to the Anangu people, no matter what the apparent economic benefit.'

A comment made by former Northern Territory tour guide Chris Watson and republished by Crikey on April 21, 2016, also makes comparisons with the manner in which tourists treat other sacred sites.

Watson states, 'At mosques, synagogues and chapels around the world, there are entreaties and expectations regarding decorous behaviour, respectful reverence and various clothing prohibitions or stipulations...

Surely a reasonable person wouldn't kick a football around in a church or wear dirty shoes in a mosque, would they?'

In a comment published by SBS on April 20, 2016, Ben McLeay likened climbing Uluru to 'Skateboarding the ANZAC memorial'; 'Doing paintball in the National Gallery of Australia'; 'Hosting music festivals in cemeteries' and 'Being naked in Church'.

3. Uluru is unsafe to climb

Opponents of climbing Uluru, including the traditional owners of the area, have stressed the dangers that are associated with the climb.

Some 36 people have died climbing Uluru, the first in 1958, the latest in 2010. The 2010 fatality involved a 54-year-old Victorian man who died while climbing the rock. The man was nearly at the top when he started feeling ill and tried to get down. Police investigators claim he then collapsed 160 metres from the bottom and died despite efforts to revive him.

Parks Australia closed the climb for the rest of the day 'out of respect' for the man and again the following day 'because of high winds'. There is no simple health check that can be applied to ensure that only those fit to climb do so. The most recent fatality had no history of heart disease.

Climbing the rock is dangerous as, apart from high temperatures, there are sheer drops, strong winds and few guards.

Uluru is 348 metres high, which, Outback Australia Travel Guide notes, is the equivalent of a 95 storey building. The climbing path is about 1.6 km long and can be treacherous. Only the first part has a chain to hold on to. It is a strenuous

climb and takes about two hours to complete.

Most of the 36 reported deaths climbing Uluru have been due to heart attacks. The rock climb is often off limits because of heat, rain, wind or indigenous ceremonies. It was open for only 55 whole days in 2009 and 36 in 2008.

There have also been numerous injuries among tourist climbing Uluru, and rescues can be difficult to affect. The 2015 rescue of a 27-year-old tourist who fell 20 metres down a crevice and had to be left on the rock overnight involved rescue workers abseiling 200 metres down the rock and securing the tourist onto a stretcher which was then dragged back up to the helicopter. The man suffered a broken leg and facial injuries.

4. Climbing Uluru causes ecological damage

Critics of the climb being allowed have stressed the damaging environmental impact it is having on Uluru.

The entire Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is subject to environmental damage as a result of the impact of tourism. The Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Knowledge for Tour Guides Handbook states, 'Erosion along walking and vehicle tracks, the spreading of weeds, damage to vegetation, degradation of the area around visitor sites, uncontrolled bushfires, rubbish and toilet paper in the bush or in waterholes and the removal of artefacts - all these things impact on the natural environment of the park.'

The rock itself is particularly vulnerable to the impact of such behaviours. In 2013, Kerrie Bennison, then natural and cultural resources manager of the Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Park, told Guardian Australia that the climb was inflicting irreparable environmental damage on the site. Ms Bennison stated, 'The scar that it leaves, you can see from being here. The path is worn and it's a very obvious impact from having lots of feet up and down it each time.'

The Parks Australia Internet site treating Uluru states, 'The climb is damaging Uluru. You can see the climb has been worn smooth, eroded by the millions of footsteps climbers have taken since the 1950s. Each step a climber takes changes the face of Uluru.'

There are no toilets on top of Uluru and no soil to dig a hole. You can imagine what happens many times a day when the climb is open. When it rains, everything gets washed off the rock and into waterholes, polluting the water for the many plants and animals found in the park.'

The Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Knowledge for Tour Guides Handbook states, 'When it rains, everything gets washed off the rock and into the waterholes where precious animals such as reptiles, birds, and frogs live and depend on that water. A water quality study at Uluru has found significantly higher bacterial levels in the waterholes fed by runoff from the climb site, compared to those further away.'

5. The agreed conditions to end climbing Uluru have been met

In 2010, the Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Park board of management - which includes traditional owners from within the region and Parks Australia representatives (traditional owners make the majority of the board) - released an updated management plan. This included a commitment to close the Uluru climb once the number of climbers dropped below 20% of the total number of park visitors.

Although the numbers appear to have fallen below the 20% threshold, there is currently no plan in place to close the climb, as the hurdles for closure have been changed again since the plan's publication.

Chris Martin, manager of visitor and tourism services for the park, said climb counters had been installed on the top of the rock to measure the number of people partaking in the climb. Martin said, 'It's measuring less than 20% of people visiting the park.' That evidence is reinforced by two surveys of 636 people in total, undertaken by Parks Australia in 2012, which indicated around 17% of visitors had climbed or intended to climb.

Around three-quarters of visitors in 1990 climbed, falling to 52% in 1995, and 38% of visitors in 2006. Further research undertaken by Parks Australia over a three-year period concluded that 98% of visitors to the park would not be put off if the climb were closed.

Previously the management plan contained three triggers for closing the climb. It explicitly stated that only one of the three requirements needed to be met before climb closure should start. Now it appears that all three, with the other two being the installation of new visitor experiences and ensuring natural and cultural experiences were the key reasons for tourists visiting the park, need to be met before the climb will be closed. The management plan says 18 months' notice should be given to the tourism industry before closure.

Further implications

Although there has been some dispute over the actual attitude of the traditional owners of Uluru to continued climbing of the rock, the consensus view is that they oppose the practice.

There appears to be a growing acceptance among international tourists that it is inappropriate and disrespectful to climb Uluru. Attitudes are less clear-cut within Australia, where a number of informal polls have suggested that a majority of potential Australian tourists to the Northern Territory believe that climbing the rock should continue.

Thus, the dispute over climbing Uluru appears to be part of the continuing debate within Australia over how to reconcile the conflicting views of Australia's past and its significance held by Indigenous Australians and many Australians of European origin. It occupies a place alongside debates over a national apology, a treaty, recognition within the Constitution and whether Australia should be regarded as having been 'settled' or 'invaded' by European peoples.

Focusing purely on the issue of whether Uluru should be climbed, a compromise solution would appear to be to better develop alternative tourist experiences in the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. There have been attempts to do this over a number of years.

On May 12, 2016, The Conversation published a comment by Marianne Riphagen, Visiting Fellow at the Australian

National University. Between 2013 and 2015, Riphagen conducted 20 weeks of research at Uluru as part of a study undertaken by the Australian National University, in association with Macquarie University, examining how the Anangu use their cultural heritage to earn a living.

The article contends that more needs to be done to make it possible for the Anangu to economically exploit their cultural heritage without having to adopt practices which violate their beliefs.

Riphagen outlines a number of current impediments 'in the attempt to develop sustainable and culturally appropriate alternatives to climbing Uluru. One' she claims, 'is the tight operational budget for Australia's park agencies.

At Uluru, Parks Australia has faced some particularly challenging years, as a decline in tourists - from 349,172 in 2005 to 257,761 in 2012 - caused revenue from the sale of entry tickets to fall.

At the same time, lack of funding has meant that the Uluru Cultural Centre, where tourists are encouraged to begin their visit to the park and learn about Anangu culture, hasn't been maintained properly. It looks dilapidated, and anything but an alternative to climbing.'

Rather than attempt to boost the Red Centre tourist industry by promoting the climbing of Uluru against the wishes of the traditional owners, Riphagen suggests that Adam Giles 'should consider resolving the conflicting agendas, governance challenges and funding difficulties that characterise the Uluru economy.'

Riphagen maintains, 'Once tourists can enjoy various sustainable products based on Anangu culture, the destination will become truly unforgettable and benefit Anangu economically. Then, the Uluru climb can be closed.'

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

NOTE: newspaper items used were all from online news sources and are thus to be found in the Internet Information section above.