



## Reconciliation Australia

*This Q & A factsheet is part of a series Reconciliation Australia is producing aimed at informing the community and stimulating conversations about the issues that affect us all.*

### **Climbing Uluru**

**The issue of banning tourists from climbing Uluru has come to the fore recently. Here are some straightforward answers to questions you might have about this issue.**

1. Why has the issue of preventing tourists from climbing Uluru come up again?
2. Who wants tourists to stop climbing Uluru?
3. Who are the Traditional Owners of Uluru?
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9. Doesn't Uluru belong to all Australians?
10. Isn't it bad for the Australian tourist industry to tell visitors they can't climb the rock?
11. If people can't climb the rock, what other options are there for them to experience this special place?
12. If the climb is banned, will there still be an entrance fee to the National Park?

#### **1. Why has the issue of preventing tourists from climbing Uluru come up again?**

The issue of whether or not tourists should climb Uluru has been the subject of debate for many years, especially since the 'rock' was handed back to the Traditional Owners in 1985 and they were given a voice in managing it. For many years the advice to visitors has been that the Traditional Owners would prefer people not to climb. The topic has come up again recently because the Director for National Parks has released a proposal to ban the Uluru climb for safety, as well as cultural and environmental reasons. The proposed ban is part of a ten year draft plan for the management of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. The Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Board has invited members of the public to comment on the draft plan until 4 September 2009.

#### **2. Who wants tourists to stop climbing Uluru?**

The Uluru-Kata Tjuta Park Management Board wants to ban the Uluru climb. This Board represents the view of the majority of Traditional Owners. Also, many tour operators and environmentalists want the climb banned. The Australian Tourism Export Council, a peak tourism industry body, believes that the climb should be closed in respect for the wishes of the traditional owners. APT Tours, one of the biggest tour operators in the National Park, also want the climb banned.

### **3. Who are the Traditional Owners of Uluru?**

The Traditional Owners of Uluru are the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Aboriginal people from the Western Desert region of Australia, who refer to themselves as Anangu. The Anangu have lived around Uluru for over 10 000 years. The traditional law of the Anangu people is called Tjukurrpa and it is the foundation of their culture. Like religions anywhere in the world, the Tjukurrpa provides answers to important questions, the rules for behaviour and for living together. Tjukurrpa explains how to care for country and society by doing the right things.

### **4. Why is Uluru so significant to the Traditional Owners?**

Uluru is a highly significant site in Tjukurrpa, where ancestral (or 'Dreamtime') beings, in the form of humans, plants and animals, travelled across the land creating the world as we know it today. These beings left their marks in the forms of hills, rivers and other geographical features. The activities and travels of the ancestral beings are told through stories, sacred sites and ceremonies, and they explain the rules for social life and living on Country. A number of important dreamtime journeys coming from the north, south, east and west meet at Uluru and explain its physical shape and form. Because Uluru features in many Tjukurrpa stories, it is very important to a number of central Australian Aboriginal peoples, not just the Traditional Owners of Uluru.

### **5. Why do the Traditional Owners want people to stop climbing the rock?**

There are various reasons why the Traditional Owners want people to stop climbing Uluru. The tourist 'climb' follows the traditional route taken by the ancestral *Mala* men when they arrived at Uluru. The Traditional Owners do not climb the rock out of respect for the great cultural and spiritual significance of the Mala story. Because of the importance of this story, the Traditional Owners ask that visitors do not climb the rock either. This request from the Traditional Owners is similar to priests asking people not to go behind the altar in a church or Muslims asking people not to wear shoes inside a mosque.

Under traditional law, the Anangu are obliged to protect and maintain their sacred sites and stories so that they may be passed down to future generations. The Anangu people are concerned that their traditions and culture will be lost through damage caused by the number of tourists climbing the rock. Another reason why the Traditional Owners want people to stop climbing is that under traditional law, the Anangu people also have a responsibility (duty of care) to look after visitors to their country. This makes it difficult for them when visitors are hurt, especially when they are in a sacred area.

### **6. Do all the Traditional Owners want people to stop climbing the rock?**

There are some Anangu Traditional Owners who may not mind tourists climbing the rock. However, as mentioned above, the majority of Traditional Owners wish to see the climb banned.

### **7. Is the climb dangerous?**

The climb up Uluru can be dangerous. At 346 metres, Uluru is as high as an 85-storey skyscraper. The climb is very steep and can be slippery. At any time of the year it can be hot and wind gusts can hit the summit or slopes. Park rangers regularly rescue tourists undertaking the climb. Some suffer heat exhaustion, dehydration or broken bones. Some people panic half way up the rock and need to be helped down.

### **8. Do the Traditional Owners still live in the area?**

The Traditional Owners of Uluru still live in the area and maintain a continued connection to the land and their culture. Today, there are about 4000 Anangu people living in small communities on their traditional lands. These communities include Ernabella, Docker River and Mutitjulu.

### **9. Doesn't Uluru belong to all Australians?**

Many people feel that Uluru is a national icon and that all Australians have a 'right' to climb it. However, the rock and surrounding lands are actually legally owned by the Anangu Traditional Owners. Currently, Uluru is jointly managed by the Anangu people and National Parks. For the Anangu people, sharing the beauty of Uluru with visitors and preserving their own cultures and traditions is a fine balance. Previously, the Anangu people allowed visitors to make their own decision to respect their culture by not climbing the rock. Now, the Traditional Owners and National Parks have decided – for environmental, safety and cultural reasons, that it is more appropriate for visitors to experience the rock in other ways.

### **10. Isn't it bad for the Australian tourist industry to tell visitors they can't climb the rock?**

A review conducted in 2007 by the Director of National Parks found that 98 per cent of people would not be put off visiting Uluru if they were not allowed to climb the rock. This is because most visitors to Uluru preferred activities such as visiting a museum or cultural centre, listening to an Aboriginal guide and experiencing Aboriginal art as compared to climbing the rock. Because so many people don't mind not having the chance to climb the rock, it is unlikely that the tourism industry would suffer from the proposed ban.

### **11. If people can't climb the rock, what other options are there for them to experience this special place?**

Apart from climbing the rock, there are many ways for tourists to experience the beautiful national park. A recent survey showed that the most popular activities undertaken by tourists at Uluru included watching sun rise and sun set, bike riding and walking along the tracks. Other popular activities for tourists at the national park include: star gazing

at the Observatory; camel tours; scenic flights; art and cultural tours; motorbike tours; fishing; boating; and camping.

**12. If the climb is banned, will there still be an entrance fee to the National Park?**

Visitors to Uluru- Kata Tjuta National Park will still be required to pay an entrance fee. Like most other national parks in Australia, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park uses the money to support the local community and keep the park well maintained. Entrance fees are used to fix roads, walking tracks and build tourist facilities.

**13. Although I respect Aboriginal culture, it's not my culture or religion. Why is it offensive for me to climb?**

Uluru is a national treasure and all tourists are welcomed by the Traditional Owners to share it. As the legal owners, they respectfully request that visitors no longer climb the rock. They do so because Uluru is a place of great spiritual importance and one which they are obliged to look after. As Traditional Owner Kunmanara says: *"That's a really important sacred thing that you are climbing... You shouldn't climb. It's not the real thing about this place. The real thing is listening to everything. And maybe that makes you a bit sad. But anyway that's what we have to say. We are obliged by Tjukurrpa to say. And all the tourists will brighten up and say, 'Oh I see. This is the right way. This is the thing that's right. This is the proper way: no climbing'."*