
Rock solid case to climb

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Would a trip to Paris be incomplete if you couldn't climb the Eiffel Tower? My guess would be hardly.

For the same reason I don't grasp why anyone would base their decision to visit Uluru on whether they were allowed to hike it.

Being able to stand before and absorb this majestic, sacred wonderment, to have the privilege of being in its presence – would surely be an exhilarating journey within itself.

Not climbing would not diminish my experience and I certainly have never had a desire to scale the rock in all my years of living in the Territory.

But this is my personal view and I appreciate that my idea of what constitutes a fulfilling cultural experience will not necessarily reflect others. Around about 55,000 others a year.

Earlier this week Chief Minister Adam Giles reignited an issue that seems to come around every couple of years.

That is, whether or not tourists be granted the traditional owners' 'blessing' as such to continue with the practise, permanently quashing any future notion the Commonwealth might have to ban climbers.

The Federal Government, which has a long-term lease arrangement with the Anangu to manage the park, says the practise will be legally stopped if at any time less than 20 per cent of visitors are not climbing Uluru.

As it stands this number has lingered around the 20 per cent mark for some years with the majority of visitors to the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park choosing not to partake in the climb.

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 cultural reasons.

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.

Which brings me back to the very issue at hand.

And that is should the practise of people climbing Uluru be endorsed by Traditional Owners as a means of supporting economic advancement in one of the most poorest regions in this country?

The Chief Minister believes so. And he is probably right.

Three days ago a report by the Lowitja Institute found its way onto my desk and it made for some pretty damn sombre reading.

To summarise, it found the gap in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians to be comparable to the life expectancy gap in Kenya. Or Cameroon.

Groundbreaking? Sadly, not at all. Therefore why are we, a developed nation, still battling to address indigenous disadvantage today? 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.

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.

The Anangu have a deep spiritual attachment to Uluru and are pained when visitors lose their lives attempting the arduous climb (35 people have died on Uluru since the 50s). Because of this traditional owners have been calling on the Federal Government to ban climbers for decades.

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.

Earlier this month former federal Labor environment minister Peter Garrett called on the federal government to ban walks on the rock. He called the Turnbull Government "shameful" for "bowing to redneck commentary".

Hmmm. Much like his then Labor colleagues bowed to east coast animal activists' commentary in the lead up to the live cattle ban in 2011?

If Giles is serious about formalising Uluru climbs with the support of the Anangu - and this wasn't just a cheap attempt to court easy publicity during a parliamentary sittings week - then he needs to be sitting at the table with indigenous leaders now and presenting his very valid points. Or we could all just forget about it and wait for the issue to resurface again next year.