FORUM

Why Earth Scientists should NOT climb Uluru

In the March 2018 *TAG*, Marc Hendrickx mounts a case for geologists to oppose the closing of Uluru to climbers. He makes the case as some sort of attack on science. In the process, he misses a bigger threat to the Earth Sciences posed by high-handed dismissal of local communities and land holders. Many geologists need access to rocks, requiring the permission of land owners to reach outcrops. Long experience shows that offending land holders, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, will only further restrict the ability of future generations to explore the Earth.

Uluru is an iconic feature. Mounting a campaign to override the wishes of the traditional owners (and Freehold Title holders) would have to demonstrate some major scientific or economic benefits to be worth the ill-will it will generate with Indigenous communities across the country, many of whom control access to important areas for future Earth Science research. Given it would also require overriding Freehold Title rights, it would also enrage many non-Indigenous landholders.

What are the reasons he cites for campaigning against the closure? Unfortunately, none of them have much to do with science. They are as follows:

The climb is an exhilarating, extremely satisfying physical and mental experience — So it was fun. I am at a loss to see why the emotional response of occasional visitors should be given greater importance than the people who live and work there. This is a tourism-based argument, not science-based.

It is scientifically enlightening — ***"the view from the summit is key to providing a means to interpret the surrounding landscape, geology, geomorphology and vegetation"***. So what science is lost if you can't climb Uluru? Let me ask two questions:

1. How many scientific publications rely on information that could only be acquired by climbing Uluru?
2. What reasonable research proposal (ARC for example) could be devised that could only be achieved using observations from the top of Uluru?

If you cannot produce a research proposal requiring access to the top of Uluru, we are not talking about science but about tourism.

There are many enlightening things to be seen around the base of Uluru. With a little effort you can get a copy of the geological guide written by Ian Crick, Alister Stewart and Ian Sweet of the Bureau of Mineral Resource/Geoscience Australia. These excellent geologists can open inexperienced eyes to the landscape and geological history from the multiple vantage points that will remain accessible, including from the air and on the ground.

It is a source of scientific inspiration — The author lists a series of geological features in Victoria as his inspiration. Most of them are still there (I am not sure about gold mine access and some of the Twelve Apostles are still there). Uluru is still there. You can walk up to it, around it, touch it and you can see it from a distance. It looks pretty inspiring to me.

Why is climbing essential? Climbing the Twelve Apostles has never been seen as essential for scientific inspiration.

It's an Australian cultural tradition — ***"Closing the climb is a great slight on our culture and traditions, and unfairly discriminates against us"***. — This is an exaggeration worthy of a three-year-old who can't have someone else's toy. Of all the attacks on western civilisation and science in particular, where, on a scale of ten, does the closure of Uluru to climbing rank? I suggest that, if it not zero, it is vanishingly small. Anyone worried about western civilisation should look at the much greater threats appearing in the media every day. As for unfair discrimination, the Indigenous people of the area were banned from these landmarks in 1958, only returning in 1972. They know a lot about unfair discrimination.

Were the expeditions of Gosse and Giles really a 'Golden Age of scientific exploration' in Central Australia as stated in the 'Climb for Science' logo? These early explorers were looking for pasture and telegraph routes: hardly cutting-edge science, even for the 19th century. I believe geologists should promote the real science that took place later. I would nominate the systematic geological mapping and research in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s as a true golden age of Earth Sciences in the region, none of which required climbing Uluru. Personally, I also think cultural traditions with their roots in the Pleistocene are far more interesting than the actions of colonists wandering around looking for grass and water.

It is safe to climb — ***"I can only find evidence for 11 deaths on the rock"***. — This section should have been entitled 'The casualty rate is acceptable'. Eleven deaths may seem acceptable to someone sitting far away, at a safe distance. Only those who have to recover the bodies and rescue the sick and injured should decide what is acceptable.

Don't misunderstand where I am coming from. I have worked in dangerous places (underground mines, remote Australia, Southern Ocean, Antarctica) and have lost friends and colleagues in field accidents. Dangerous activities should be allowed — provided they are conducted carefully and have important outcomes. I cannot see important outcomes from climbing Uluru. I give greater weight to the opinion of those who have to deal with consequences when things go wrong.

The rock is there to be shared — ***"Virtually every church tower in Europe is open for visitors to climb"***. — The writer nominates a range of religious buildings as being available for climbing. This is true, but he fails to mention that each one has restrictions on what you can and cannot do. Try climbing the main pulpit or high altar in St Peters, or sitting on Michelangelo's Pieta. Dress codes are also enforced.

So, none of the arguments advanced are really about actual science, but about the ability of visitors to do what they want on someone else's property for a touristic indulgence. For geology to flourish as a field-based science, geologists of the future will need access to outcrops on other peoples' property. Mounting a public campaign to override the wishes of landowners in an internationally renowned area like Uluru–Kata Tjuta will only increase the levels of suspicion and lack of trust among Indigenous and non-Indigenous landowners who we will need to interact with in future.

Uluru is still there to be visited and appreciated. You don't have to believe what the local community believes; you just have to show some manners and respect the owners' wishes. They may or may not change their minds one day, but if they are like most people, a political and media campaign will probably harden their position. Remember, it is their land and they have rights protected by Australian law.

As for the title 'Climb for Science', I ask the question "What Science?"

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The GSA also received the following article on the same topic.

RE: Climb for Science

I was disappointed to read the vitriolic article 'Climb for Science' in the March issue of *TAG*. To call the closure of the climb a "travesty" is either deeply insensitive to the Anangu people or incredibly ignorant of Aboriginal spirituality in general. Climbing Uluru is by no means a "must do", and closure of the climb should not in any way diminish the experience of visiting this national icon.

I would argue that the exhilarating, enlightening and inspiring nature of Uluru can be experienced in its entirety from the ground. I visited Uluru on a rainy day in 2010 and walked around the base. Throughout the walk I was in awe – of the rock art, the geology, the incredible shapes carved into the cliffs by wind and water, and the beautiful waterfalls cascading down into pools at the base. It was clear to me why such a place would be special to the local people, even with only a basic understanding of its importance to their spirituality. To say that an experience such as mine "isn't worth it" because I did not climb Uluru is inherently wrong – it was absolutely worth the 8-hour bus trip, and a memory I will treasure forever.

Uluru is a natural wonder and an icon of the Australian landscape, inspiring all who visit it. If there are shortcomings in the communication of the geological and geomorphological significance of Uluru, then that certainly does not make it unique in Australian tourism. Rather than insisting on climbing, the onus should be on us, as Australian geologists, to approach the park managers and/or the Anangu people with an aim to share our knowledge and enrich the scientific experience. The author compares climbing Uluru to visiting other national geological icons (eg, Hanging Rock, Organ Pipes, old gold mines, 12 Apostles). As far as I'm aware, most past, present, and future geologists who visit these icons gain plenty of inspiration from admiring said formations from the ground – with minimal geology-oriented signage and no climbing necessary. Why should Uluru be any different?

The author also compares climbing Uluru to climbing other places of religious significance, such as a church, and to the natural wonders in Utah, the Atlas Mountains, and Mount Everest. Incontrast to the many flavours of Christianity or Islam, a large part of Aboriginal spirituality involves a strong connection to physical aspects of the landscape. There are several culturally sensitive sites at Uluru, one of which is crossed by the path taken by climbers. A more apt comparison would be climbing onto the altar or tabernacle inside a church – areas that visitors are denied access to due to their religious significance (and you never hear anyone up in arms about not being allowed to climb up onto the altar in a church!). I do not see why Uluru should be denied the same level of respect from visitors.

I very much enjoyed my visit to Uluru in 2010 and I recommend that everyone visits it, if given the opportunity. There is no denying the awe-inspiring nature of this iconic Australian landmark, which has been enjoyed by the many visitors over the years. However, it should (and can) be enjoyed in a respectful way.

If you want to experience an Australian cultural tradition, visit the Cultural Centre and learn something about Australia's original culture. If you're thrill-seeking or want to admire the surrounding landscape from height, book a helicopter flight. But if you want to climb a spiritually significant landmark against the express wishes of the traditional owners of the land, may I strongly suggest you stay at home instead.

CAIT STUART

(*I do not identify as an Aboriginal person, but I do identify as an empathetic human being who recognises Aboriginal peoples and their culture. Apologies for any factual errors.*)

Books for review

Please contact the Geological Society of Australia Business Office (**info@gsa.org.au**) if you would like to review any of the following publications.

New

Darwin's Fossils: Discoveries that Shaped the Theory of Evolution
Adrian Lister, CSIRO Publishing

Practical Handbook of Earth Science
Jane H Hodgkinson and Frank D Stacey, CRC Press, Taylor and Francis Group

Mandarins & Mavericks: Remembering Western Mining 1933–2005
Martin Summons, Hardie Grant Books

Re-advertised

Eating Anthropocene: Curd rice, bienenstich and a pinch of phosphorus
Reinhold Leinfelder, Alexandra Hamann, Jens Kirstein, Marc Schleunitz, Springer

From the Geological Society London

The publishing details for the following titles are all published by the Geological Society of London www.geolsoc.org.uk/bookshop or enquiries@geolsoc.org.uk.

Re-advertised

SP382 Isotopic Studies in Cretaceous Research
M Coltori, H Downes, M Gregorie and SY O'Reilly