Sustainable tourism and public opinion: examining the language surrounding the closure of Uluru to climbers

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Abstract

The decision to cease the climbing of one of Australia's major tourist attractions, the UNESCO World Heritage site Uluru, on 26th October 2019, has attracted much controversy, debate and worldwide attention.

This case study explores traditional media commentary and reporting as well as social media discussions in the lead up to the closure of the climb. Drawing on framing theory, three key frames emerge that illustrate the opposing perspectives on the role of destination tourism. Through the economic lens, UNESCO World Heritage attractions like the Uluru climb perform a crucial role in supporting a country's economy. As a national treasure, the rock should be freely accessible to all Australians (entitlement frame). However, the inclusive sustainability worldview considers a site's history, contemporary relationship with the (local) community and potential for future generations.

This case highlights issues in change management processes with regards to access to heritage sites. Insights into the narrative in the lead up to the closure of the climb enable readers to explore the complexities surrounding the desire to shift towards a more sustainable tourism model.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Uluru, destination travel, Indigenous Australians, selfie-tourism, overcrowding

Introduction

Increased visibility, selfie-tourism (Dinhopl & Gretzel, 2016) and social media inspired pilgrimages (Magasic, 2016) have placed immense pressure on many well-known tourism locations around the world (Pearce & Moscardo, 2015); and with it, controversy has followed. Social media has changed the way people research, discuss and share travel experiences. Most notably, social media have turned tourists into co-designers, co-producers and essentially co-marketers of tourism information and offerings (Sigala, 2019).

Many UNESCO World Heritage sites face increasing pressure due to rapidly growing tourist numbers, leading in some cases overcrowding (Seraphin, Sheeran, & Pilato, 2018; Vecco & Caust, 2019), which makes their future unsustainable. In Australia, Uluru, the large UNESCO World Heritage listed sandstone rock formation, has been a major drawcard for domestic and international tourists, attracting more than 395,000 visitors per year (Mackay, 2019). C*limbing* Uluru has been a major part of the tourist attraction.

In 2019 Uluru, the famous red-rock in the centre of Australia, was closed permanently to tourists wishing to climb the monolith, a move that ignited a fierce debate about the role, benefits and future of destination tourism. Communication plays a significant role when changes to tourism locations and offerings around the world occur, and this is highlighted in this case study that explores sustainable tourism, first nation people's rights and behaviour change within the context of Uluru, Australia. This case study highlights the crucial role of communication in positioning and justifying the establishment of sustainable tourism destinations that can be enjoyed for generations to come. The challenges associated with changes in tourist offerings (i.e. closure to climbers) and cultural beliefs surrounding sustainability will be discussed in this case study, inviting readers to explore best practice approaches and outcomes in the context of sustainable travel destinations.

Background

The role of tourism in Australia

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries and a major income source for many countries, including Australia. Tourism income is vital to Australia's economy and plays a key role for many sectors across the country. The country relies on it for employment, investment and growth (Tourism Research Australia, 2019). Tourism is a $152 billion industry that directly employed 666,000 people in 2018/19. It accounts for 8.2% of Australia's exports earnings and is a key driver of Australia's economy, contributing $55.9 billion to Australia's total GDP. Australia welcomed more than 9 million overseas visitors during the same period (Tourism Research Australia, 2019).

The significance of Uluru

Uluru is one of Australia's (and indeed the world's) most recognisable landmarks. The monolith is located in the centre of Australia, 335km from Alice Springs, the capital of the Northern Territory. Standing 348 metres high with a total circumference of 9.4 kilometres, 'the rock' holds an iconic place in many Aboriginal dreamtime stories, and is iconic in the minds of Australians. The site received World Heritage listing in 1987, recognising it as a place of outstanding universal value. World Heritage sites are recognised areas, structures, or sites, which due to their significance are marked for special protection that shelters them from development, tampering or any transformation that may cause them harm. The Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is known for its striking physical landscape, including its rock formations, which contrast sharply with the surrounding sand plains and desert, referred to as "an exceptional combination of natural and cultural elements" (Parks Australia, n.d.-b).

The rock has a history that dates back to Aboriginal Dreamtime, referring to the time when Ancestral Spirits moved across the land and created life and important physical geographical formations and sites. Aboriginal people are believed to have been in the area for at least 30,000 years (Parks Australia, n.d.-a). The European history of Uluru is much more recent, dating to 1873 when Englishman William Christie Gosse climbed the monolith and named it 'Ayers Rock' after Sir Henry Ayers, Chief Secretary of South Australia (Parks Australia, n.d.-a).

Today, the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park Board manages the park under Parks Australia, a joint agreement between the local Anangu people and the Australian government (Parks Australia, n.d.-a). The board is made up of eight Aboriginal members, two federal minister nominated positions (tourism and environment), one Northern Territory nominated position, as well as the Director of National Parks (Parks Australia, n.d.-a).

Since the park was listed as a World Heritage Site, annual visitor numbers have steadily risen. Increased tourism provides regional and national economic benefits. Northern Territory tourism contributes $2.25 billion to the regional and hence the Australian economy (Tourism Central Australia, 2019); $851 million of this is being generated in what is known as the Red Centre, the southern desert region of the Northern Territory. Tourism is a major source of employment, engaging 16,000 people in the Northern Territory (Tourism Central Australia, 2019). Uluru and Kata Tjuta National Park are key attractions, with over 395,000 domestic and international travellers visiting the site in 2018/19 (Mackay, 2019). Visitors come from all around the world with Japan, the USA, the United Kingdom, Germany and China representing key visiting countries. The region is serviced by two airports – Alice Springs and Ayers Rock Airport – the latter of which caters explicitly for visits to the world famous monolith (Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility, 2018).

The Uluru Climb

Visitors to Uluru started climbing the rock as early as in the 1930s. A climb chain was installed for safety reasons in 1964 (Parks Australia, n.d.-a), without consultation of the area's traditional owners. Adverse environment impacts on the rock, and the surrounding national park, have become apparent since earnest development of the park for tourism began in the 1950s (Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment). Ownership of Uluru and the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park was handed back to the local Anangu people in 1985 (Parks Australia, n.d.-a). The traditional owners have historically requested visitors to abstain from climbing the 348m rock formation, citing cultural reasons, as well as welfare concerns for visitors to their land (since the 1950s at least 36 people have died while climbing Uluru). Uluru is a deeply spiritual and sacred place for the Anangu people (Sacred Land Film Project, 2014). For them, every cave, feature and crevice of the formation has its own meaning (Parks Australia, n.d.-a). However, the climbing of the monolith continued. Signage (see image 1) at the site has been in place since the 1990s, requesting visitors not to climb the rock out of respect for the wishes of traditional owners. The signs are part of an education campaign by the Anangu people, which has been credited for the gradual decline in tourists choosing to climb the rock (Parks Australia, n.d.-a).

There are three key reasons for the closure of Uluru to climbers - cultural, environmental and safety (Parks Australia, n.d.-b).

1. **Cultural** - the rock has always been of great significance to the Anangu people, citing it as a spiritual and sacred site with links to their ancestors. Unsocial and disrespectful behaviour of tourists on the rock (urinating, defecating, playing golf, taking nude photos etc., (see Razak 2009) causes deep disrespect at a place where their ancestors' spirits live on.
2. **Environmental** - increased numbers of climbers over the past eighty years have caused erosion to parts of the rock. In addition to this, there is no sewage disposal (or toilets) on the monolith, which means any waste is washed off during heavy rains.
3. **Safety** - at least 37 people have died while attempting to climb Uluru, and more have required medical attention for heart attacks, head injuries from falls, panic attacks or fainting. The last

death was a Japanese tourist in 2018 ("Uluru: Japanese tourist, 76, dies climbing the rock," 2018). Cultural law requires the traditional owners to take responsibility to look after any visitors to their country. Hence each time a visitor is seriously or even fatally injured at Uluru, the local Anangu people share in the grieving process.

The Closure of the Climb

The closure of Uluru to climbing has been in development since 2010 when the park's management plan indicated it would work towards closure once fewer than 20 per cent of visitors were attempting the climb. At the time of the announcement, numbers were as low as between 50 and 140 climbers per day (Butler, 2018).

Ironically, once the ban was announced, the amount of people climbing Uluru gradually increased, resulting in a rush to climb the ancient monolith during the final weeks and days. Parks Australia did not record the exact number of visitors during the final weeks, but Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park manager, Mike Misso, said it was busiest they had been in more than a decade. "We know it's certainly in the hundreds and probably nearer 1000 [a day]". The final rush to climb the natural wonder was widely documented and shared via traditional and social media, depicting scrums of people fighting their way to the top (see images 3 & 4).

The decision to permanently close the site to climbers ignited a fierce debate surrounding the ownership of the rock, citizen rights, sustainability and even racism. Public concerns were raised about soon to be restricted access to a cultural treasure, whilst other parts of the (global) community hailed the closure a triumph for the local Anangu people and indeed other first nation's representatives. Although the closure was well publicised in the lead-up, the final weeks and months of its operation saw a rush of visitors, scrambling to embrace their last chance to climb "the rock". Labelled by some as a "symbolic act of white nationalism" or a "racist message of white superiority over Indigenous Australians" (Bolger & Baker, 2019); others made the point that the sheer number of tourists seeking to scale Uluru one last time was a clear indication that the climb should not be closed and any restrictions would negatively impact on Central and Northern Australian tourism. The next section provides an insight into the traditional and digital media narrative, including emerging themes, in the lead up to the permanent closure.

Uluru was closed for climbing on October 26th 2019, at the end of a two year notice period. Since then, Parks Australia states that "visitors are advised that climbing Uluru is a breach of the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Act, and penalties will be issued to visitors attempting to do so" (Parks Australia, n.d.-a).

Methodology

This case study provides an insight into key arguments and the language used to support core positions in traditional, as well as digital media commentary. It uses a mixed-method approach, including the critical analysis of news coverage and online discussions between June 2019, when the imminent closure of the climb started to attract substantial media coverage, driven by a dramatic increase in tourist numbers, and January 2020, when the early impacts of the closure became apparent. Data was collected with the help of Salesforce's Social Studio. Social Studio is a social media management platform, which supports social media monitoring and listening. Via searches for relevant hashtags such as #Uluru and #UluruClimb it enabled the creation of a topic specific dashboard that explores digital media results from more than 150 million sites and sources, including social media platforms and online news sites (Salesforce, n.d.). Even though this software has provided an insight into trends, the aim of this study was not to provide a systematic analysis of online activity based on quantitative insights, but rather an exploration of key themes and dominant narratives in the media coverage and online conversations in

the lead up to the closure of the Uluru climb. Hence, the Social Studio data was complemented by manual news searches and consequently explored with the aid of the qualitative data analysis computer software package NVivo 12, drawing on framing theory (Entman, 1993). *Framing* involves the selection of "some aspects of a perceived reality and make[ing] them more salient in a communications text" (Entman, 1993, p.52). Frames intentionally highlight a specific perspective on an issue while simultaneously downplaying alternative or opposing views (Entman, 1993). Frames perform an important role in influencing public opinion and individual behaviour. Hence, they can guide and inform policy making.

Findings

Closure of Uluru to climbing: a conflict of perspectives

The month leading up to the closure of Uluru to climbing saw the greatest number of commentary on social media. Immediately following the closure, commentary remained steady, but greatly reduced in volume. The Social Studio based data analysis provides further insights into mentions of #Uluru during the key discussion period from 1 October to 7 November 2019, capturing a total of 93,000 posts, including images, video, news items, blogs and comments.

The majority of posts (93.6%) were from Twitter, not surprising given its political use; followed by forums and YouTube commentary leading after this with only 1.8% of the posts each. Facebook was the fourth most popular platform, but yet only had 0.9% posts specifically using the #Uluru hashtag. It is worth to note that social listening software can only access public posts. Many more private conversations would have most likely taken place on Facebook and possibly Instagram that could not be captured for privacy and data protection reasons.

A word cloud of the most popular terms across this period (see Figure 1) does not appear overly negative or critical and highlights key issues surrounding the closure. The most negative term used in this period is arguably 'apartheid'. Key sentiment across this period was rated 57.7% positive; however, it is worth noting that social listening software like Social Studio is unable to detect sarcasm, so the actual sentiment could have been more negative. The largest volume of negative sentiment, not surprisingly occurred on Friday, October 25th - the weekend before the closure took effect, attracting 7,897 posts. Posts highlighted as negative in Social Studio used terms like 'banned' and discussed access to the site, apartheid and entry prices. On the final day, celebrations of the closure of the climb far outweighed the negative sentiment. Despite the fact that the data search did not filter results based on language, the majority of social media posts were written in English. These originated from countries including Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and India, in descending order. Interestingly, the countries from which Uluru draws the biggest number of tourists, Japan and Germany (Parks Australia, n.d.-b), did not rate significantly in the posts, which raises questions about target audiences and key messaging. The key 'influencers' leading the debate and news on the closure were indeed traditional news sites including ABC News, Al Jazeera, BBC News, CNN, Reuters and Sky News, who on the one hand were reporting on social media discussions and outrage surrounding the number of climbers and the imminent closure, but on the other hand were referenced again via social media debate, illustrating the increasingly common cyclical nature between social media debate and reporting.

Figure 1: Wordcloud from Social Studio on #Uluru 1 October - 7 November 2019

International media were sympathetic to the Aboriginal perspective with the New York Times writing an in depth analysis of the history of the rock and the traditional owners (Tarabay, 2019). The article focussed on the marginalisation of indigenous Australians and claimed that most Australians supported the Anangu's rights. It highlights the challenges associated with *bucket list tourism*, sharing the story of one Australian family who drove more than 2,700km (1,700 miles) to climb the rock and said they would immediately leave the area if that was no longer possible. The BBC reported on the reasons behind the closure, as well as the anger of the Anangu people at the final rush to climb the ancient monolith (Mao, 2019). The British broadcaster furthermore aired a special titled, Reclaiming the Rock, which focussed on the controversial practice of climbing. The Irish Times ran a title *'Respect is given': Australia closes climb on sacred Uluru (Readfearn & Allam, 2019)* (also in The Australian edition of The Guardian) and Al Jazeera's ran the article "*'Not a theme park': Tourists rush to beat Uluru climbing ban" (2019)*.

Australian media, arguably not surprisingly, was more mixed in its reporting on the closure. Media coverage that highlighted the controversy, led by The Guardian, ABC News, The Canberra Times, The Mercury News and SBS, was mostly respectful. The following headlines give insight into the news reporting; indeed, the controversy seemed mostly social media commentary, as opposed to traditional media led:

- Uluru climbing ban: Tourists scale sacred rock for final time (BBC News 2019)
- A Climbing Ban at Uluru Ends a Chapter. But There's More to This Australian Story (Tarabay 2019)
- 'Shooting yourself in the foot': Tourists question Uluru climb ban (Roberts 2019)
- Uluru climb closed permanently as hundreds scale sacred site on final day (Heaney & Jonscher 2019)
- Uluru climb's final hour before permanent closure (Vivian & Jonscher 2019)
- Outrage as visitors crowd Uluru in final weeks before long-awaited climb ban (Bolger & Baker 2019)
- The last climb up Australia's majestic Uluru (Patrick 2019)

Social media commentary, as well as comments in response to news articles, sparked the most controversy. Comments on the rush to climb included "this is what white privilege looks like in Australia" (Brown 2019) and "The lengthy queue of people waiting for one last crack at violating indigenous rights before the white government finally puts an end to it is pretty depressing" (Brown 2019). Media comments often noted the positioning of tourist sites as attractions, quoting traditional owner Sammy Wilson's comment that stating Uluru was 'not Disneyland' (see e.g. Marchese 2019). These comments highlight the difference between manufactured tourist attractions and cultural tourist

sites, emphasising that the latter should not be seen as 'something to be conquered', and perhaps, need to be treated differently.

Ownership of place in sustainable tourism was an issue highlighted by the public and political response. One Nation party leader Pauline Hansen likened the closure to 'closing down Bondi Beach', referring to the monolith as a public site that should be accessible to all Australians. This position has also highlighted the economic benefit of the rock to Indigenous communities, and in particular Australian tourism ("Pauline Hanson compares stopping Uluru climbers to 'closing down Bondi Beach'" 2019).

Since 1985 Uluru-KataTjuta National Park has been managed jointly between traditional people (Anangu people) and Parks Australia. From a sustainability perspective, the closure has been highlighted as an opportunity for the Anangu people to take ownership of their land and empower them to deliver tourism in a way that is sustainable to Uluru but also their culture (Whitford & Becken 2017). However, if the Uluru case study is used as an example, bucket-list tourism is almost at odds with true sustainable tourism. As Cheer (2019) points out in his SBS article:

> If joint management aimed to deliver improved economic and social outcomes for Anangu residents, it has proven to be a spectacular failure. Today, Yulara [a purpose-built resort town, 20 kilometers from Uluru] and Mutitjulu [the local community at the base of Uluru and home to the Anangu], stand in stark contrast. Yulara is filled with cashed-up, bucket-list travellers from all over the world, while Mutitjulu is an outpost of lingering disadvantage where overcrowding, underemployment, poverty, high rates of suicide and preventable diseases remain pervasive problems.

In the growing Indigenous tourism economy, cultural sustainability becomes the driving force, with economic and employment following. Issues have been raised about the lack of education and training for indigenous groups to truly take ownership of the site (Cheer 2019). Sustainable tourism extends beyond the tourist site itself and should be viewed holistic with a longevity for generations to benefit. On the flip side, studies have pointed to the fact that although indigenous tourism offerings may be growing, particularly in Australia, participation in indigenous tourism is in decline (Ruhanen, Whitford, & McLennan 2015).

On October 26th 2019 Uluru, the famous red-rock in the centre of Australia, was closed permanently to tourists wishing to climb the monolith. Contrary to expectations, and consequently attracting widespread criticism, Australia's Prime Minister at the time, Scott Morrison, did not attend the official celebrations (Allam & Bowers 2019). Following the closure, media and online narrative shifted towards celebrating the closure as a 'coup' for Indigenous Australians. However, a counter narrative, raising concerns about the resulting economic impact prevailed. Examples of media headlines included:

- Celebrations at Uluru after climbers permanently banned (AFP 2019)
- How the world has reacted to the Uluru climbing ban (Brown 2019)
- Tourism takes tumble after Uluru climbing ban (Allen 2020)
- The Uluru climb ban is in effect, but new tourism opportunities could empower traditional owners (Cheer 2019)

Framing the closure

Based on framing theory, three key frames emerged as a result of the qualitative data analysis. The *economic* perspective – or frame – on the closure of the Uluru climb very much focusses on the importance of the site – and in particular the climb - as a tourism destination, which was evidenced by the last minute rush of visitors. Through an economic lens, the closure is expected to impact on tourism numbers and income, leading to job losses, and effectively not only impacting on local providers but the Australian economy per se. Moreover, by removing one of Australia's key attractions a ripple effect may lead to Australia's attractiveness as an international tourism destination being negatively impacted,

leading to broader implications, losses and effectively a weakened industry. This perspective is indirectly supported by an *entitlement frame,* through which Uluru is positioned as a national, public treasure, which should be accessible and free to enjoy for all Australians, as opposed to a select few (traditional owners). Climbing the rock has been a family tradition for many, and the interests of a small group of people should not come at the exclusion of others.

This narrative is being counteracted by an *inclusive sustainability frame,* which emphasises the need to show respect for the sacred site and Australian Aboriginal culture. Here, the focus is not on immediate gratification, but on the preservation of the ancient rock formation for future generations. *Inclusive* refers to the empowerment of the local community and operators, as opposed to the focus on job and revenue generation in general, which frequently limits benefits to major resorts and tourism providers. This inclusive perspective furthermore shifts the focus away from a single site that attracts the risk of overcrowding (i.e. climbing the rock) to distributed tourism opportunities throughout the region (camel rides, canyon tours, hiking, Segway tours, sunset dinners, birdwatching, etc). Sustainable tourism is not just a marketing responsibility, attracting a growing focus internationally, as it is a core part of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. Tourism can be linked to many of the 17 goals, as they are interconnected; however, the goals of partnerships and reduced inequalities fit best with the decision to close Uluru (United Nations, 2017). The (UN) believes tourism can develop and promote sustainable opportunities that advance "economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainable development" (United Nations, 2017). The 2019 UN World Tourism Day focus aligned with its Sustainable Development Goals, specifically to celebrate the skills, education and jobs created through tourism worldwide (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) is focussed on balancing the needs of development in tourism to drive countries forward, with employment being a "driver of equality and sustainable development" (World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)). Uluru is an example that illustrates the UN sustainable goals in this area, and although yet to be seen, could become a blueprint for how to establish sustainable tourism after significant changes to accessibility.

The aftermath

Media coverage three months after the closure reported major financial impacts with some hotel and resort prices being reduced by up to 40 per cent (Allen 2020). It is unclear if this immediate decrease in numbers is a result of the increased demand in 2019, or indeed if other environmental factors (e.g. hottest time of the year, worldwide coverage of large scale wildfires across Australia) may have influenced demand. The full (economic) impact of the closure will only become apparent over the coming years. Parks Australia has been adamant that the closure will not have a dramatic effect on tourism numbers across the region. However, others are far less optimistic, predicting a long-term decline in tourism income. Notably, the last minute rush to climb Uluru "one last time" was largely driven by domestic tourists. In the intermediate term, Australia's entire tourism sector has ground to a hold, due to travel and border restrictions imposed as a result of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Only time will tell what the future holds for Australia's famous red monolith. In the meantime indigenous leaders have initiated campaigns that promote other ways to enjoy Uluru and its surroundings, without climbing the rock, (O'Rourke, 2019; We Are Explorers, n.d.; Welcome to Country, 2017) including tips on how to take the perfect selfie, which can be re-activated once Australia's Red Centre re-opens first to domestic and eventually international tourists.

Discussion

This inductive study develops an understanding of the public narrative surrounding sustainable tourism changes. Using the case study of Uluru and the climbing ban, this case provides an insight into the voices of various stakeholder groups involved in the climbing ban debate. The aim is to inform future communication efforts around sustainable tourism and how to use language when there is a shift from

an economic to a sustainable tourism model, promoting the United Nations' goal (16) to "promote a peaceful and inclusive society" (UNESCO, 2019).

As sustainable tourism becomes a focus for more locations around the world (see Machu Picchu, the Louvre, Mount Everest, Cambodia, The Galapagos Islands etc.), changes in how people traverse these places are inevitable. For communication professionals in tourism, communication campaigns and language surrounding closures, and/or changes in visitation policies, are becoming more important. Uluru is one such case study that highlights both the positive and negative arguments surrounding its closure. While climbing is no longer allowed, the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park's Board of Management believes that the site still has plenty to offer and should be considered a unique tourist destination. Uluru is considered one of Australia's most significant cultural destinations, a fact recognised by UNESCO in 1994 when it received World Heritage listing for its cultural landscape, having already been inscribed for its natural values back in 1987 (Parks Australia, n.d.-a).

Behaviour change in a 'bucket list' tourism environment

This case study highlights the role of iconic tourist locations in a nation's identity. Uluru is the iconic rock that many international tourists equate with Australia. The rise of social media has meant it also offers the perfect Instagram photo - and is hence on the 'bucket list' for many tourists. Thurnell and Read (2017) claim the increasing popularity of the bucket list rose out of the 2007 motion picture *The Bucket List*. Uluru itself has featured in many movies and the popularity of the novel *Crazy Rich Asians* and consequent movie cannot be dismissed for its role in the popularity of the rock. Just as a nation's identity can be defined by a single image or tourist site, bucket lists can also be a form of how tourists display their identity (Thurnell & Read, 2017).

Conclusion

The Uluru case study points to several issues arising from sustainable tourism and changes in how tourists behave around major tourist destinations. The decision to close Uluru to climbing may become a pivotal case study in sustainable tourism.

The closure of Uluru may have set a precedence for other sites of cultural significance considering changes to tourist access. Elders of the Jinibara people have been fighting the Queensland government for more than twenty years to stop people climbing Mount Coonowrin and Mount Beerwah in the Glass House Mountains (Butson, 2019). At present the Queensland Government does not seem to be engaging with the possibility of closure, having recently allocated more than $3 million for park upgrades. Despite this, Uluru highlights the beginning of changes occurring across the world and may lead the way for other countries to restrict access to a sacred site and those under threat from over tourism.

The closure has divided nation as illustrated social media debate and commentary and this highlights the challenges when moving to more sustainable tourism models. Communicating sustainability and indeed, tourism changes, is filled with nuance and differing opinions. While case studies are important to evaluate outcomes, none can fully identify the exact method to communicate. Cultural beliefs and long-held notions of national identity are tied up in the language and sentiment and must be addressed on a 'case by case' approach for each situation.

The Uluru case study highlights that there is a need for local businesses, and national tourism bodies to lead the way with sustainability initiatives and show other ways in which tourists can enjoy Uluru. The case study raises questions around the word sustainability and the need to continually expand the definition beyond financial, economic and employment gains. The Uluru case highlights the role of

tourism in national identity and how this understanding may change over time to reflect shifts in practices and approaches to sustainable tourism.

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Appendix

Additional material

Image 1: Climb Closure signage at the bottom of Uluru, online image, viewed 25th July 2020, https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/10/25/uluru-permanently-closed-to-climbers/

Image 2: Original signage asking visitors not to climb, online image, viewed 25th July 2020, https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2017/10/26/5-reasons-why-you-shouldnt-climb-uluru

Image 3: Example of social media post, commenting on the rush to climb Uluru prior to its permanent closure, Source. www.twitter.com

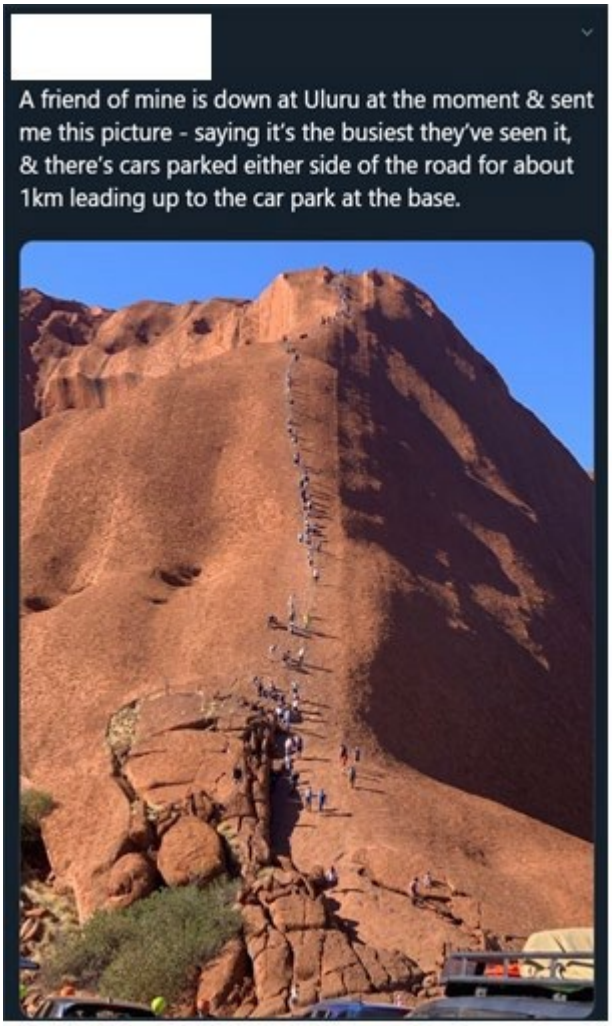

Image 4: social media post depicting the rush of climbers over the final weeks of the climb, Source www.twitter.com

Teaching Notes

Sustainable tourism and public opinion: Examining the language surrounding the closure of Uluru to climbers

Summary of the case study

The Uluru case study points to several issues arising from sustainable tourism and changes in how tourists behave around major tourist destinations. The decision to close Uluru to climbing may become a pivotal case study in sustainable tourism. As first nations people take greater ownership of their land, it is unlikely Uluru will be an exception, rather, it may lead the way as to how location based tourism can be both culturally sensitive, sustainable and still promote a desire for people to visit the area.

Teaching objectives and suggested themes

The teaching objectives of this case study are to:

1. **Learn about the role social media, and the media has to play in public sentiment and opinion surrounding the closure of national tourism sites**
   Social media has played a significant role in increasing tourism numbers in many places across the world, so much so that some locations are straining under the 'tourism selfie' and social media pilgrimage effects.

2. **Describe the key issues facing first nations' people and sustainability within the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**
   The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals have been adopted by all UN Member states. There are 17 Sustainable Goals "which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership" (United Nations, n.d.).

3. **Understand how sustainability policy is changing the future of some tourism sites, and the need to plan for robust communication strategies to prevent misinformation**
   Uluru is a case study that highlights the beginning of larger issues tourism sites around the world will face. With climate change, firmly on the agenda, tourism sites will face increasing scrutiny from conservationists, governments, politicians, activists and academics.

Target Audience

This case study is suitable for second or third year undergraduate students undertaking a bachelor's degree in the areas of communication, public relations, marketing, management, tourism and events. It is also suitable for postgraduate students with a discussion intended at this level to explore deeper issues.

Teaching Approach and strategy

Depending on the curriculum, the teaching around this case study can be adapted as needed and this case study is intended for multi-use, i.e. in a marketing, communication or tourism contexts.

Prior to the case study, varying levels of sustainability in tourism need to be taught. The minimum is an introduction to sustainability, key themes emerging across the globe and a cross-cultural perspective.

An exploratory lesson can have students research tourism sites around the world that are being impacted by selfie-culture and bucket list tourism and what the corresponding country is doing to ensure a more sustainable approach. On a deeper level, trends and economic, financial and cultural elements of sustainability in tourism can be discussed. Students should also have an understanding of the role communication has to play in sustainable tourism, with a particular focus on the impact of social media.

Specific activities to develop an understanding of different perspectives may be as follows:

- Prepare a media announcement for the closure of (chosen local landmark) from a) local indigenous groups b) government c) governing body
- Role play a media interview announcing the closure of [chosen local landmark]. Students should take on the roles of journalists and spokesperson for the government or landmark organisation. Students will need time to prepare key messages and approach
- A class debate can be held with the key themes of sustainability versus economic and employment viability - Which perspective is more important when it comes to tourism?

Further questions to use in class, or for assessment, may include:

1. Is a ban the right solution? Should we have to go this far? Could education address cultural and sustainability issues more effectively?
2. Should local community interests overrule national economic interest? Where should governments draw the line?
3. How could Uluru attract visitors now the climb has been closed? Is there a way to provide other sustainable tourism options?
4. What is the effect of the closure of Uluru on the climbing or accessing of other sites in Australia and around the world? How can tourism balance economic needs (e.g. local employment) and culture /sustainability?
5. Discuss challenges /obstacles to developing the indigenous tourism industry

Example responses

There are no single correct answers to the questions above, however, at its core, the closure of Uluru to climbing is a behaviour change campaign, although it was never articulated as such, which hence led to some of the negative sentiment. Rather than celebrate the multiple ways in which Uluru can be enjoyed, critics focused on the loss of access to an icon and the perception that this can only be achieved through literally mounting it. A secondary focus was on the economic loss, as a result of the closure. This campaign is not dissimilar to campaigns that have occurred all around the world in a bid to get tourists to change their behaviour in regard to well renowned cultural and heritage sites to ensure they will remain accessible for generations to come.

Suggested Group Activity

As Communication Manager for Parks Australia, the Board has asked you for a communication strategy to reinvigorate interest in Uluru and ensure tourism remains viable. Prepare a 12 months plan aimed at communicating reasons to visit Uluru now that the rock is closed to climbing. You should target your messages to the key tourist segments mentioned in the case study. The following headings should be a guide:

1. Research - strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats and/or political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental. Consider presenting this in a visual format.

2. Objectives - identify three key objectives your plan would aim to meet. Ensure they are focussed on sustainability and communication. Make them SMART - specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely.
3. Target audience - you may choose 3-4 different segments, profile these and identify a 'typical demographic'.
4. Key messages - keep these short and focussed. One to two key messages per target audience
5. Strategy - outline your key communication campaign and how you'll reach each audience.

Present your strategy in groups, using no more than 5 PowerPoint slides and taking no longer than ten minutes.

Suggested readings Social Media and tourism

- Magasic, M. (2016). The 'selfie gaze' and 'social media pilgrimage': Two frames for conceptualising the experience of social media using tourists. In Information and communication technologies in tourism 2016 (pp. 173-182): Springer.
- Sigala, M. (2019). The bright and the dark sides of social media in tourism experiences, tourists' behavior, and well-being. In Handbook of Globalisation and Tourism: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Thurnell-Read, T. (2017). "'What's on your Bucket List?': Tourism, identity and imperative experiential discourse." Annals of Tourism Research 67: 58-66.

First nation's people and tourism

- Ruhanen, L., et al. (2015). "Indigenous tourism in Australia: Time for a reality check." Tourism Management 48: 73-83.
- Northern Territory - https://northernterritory.com/articles/how-to-experience-uluru-withoutwalking-on-it
- Welcome to Country - https://www.welcometocountry.org/enjoy-uluru-without-climbing/
- Aboriginal Dreamtime https://theconversation.com/dreamtime-and-the-dreaming-an-introduction20833