



Australian Government  
Director of National Parks



## Fact Sheet

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### The sorry rock phenomenon at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park

Every day, rangers at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park receive parcels containing souvenired rocks and sand, sent by guilty tourists. Taken as a memory of their experience of Uluru, these little 'pieces of place' are being returned to the park from countries as far away as Germany, the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

*Many years ago (1988) our family visited Uluru and collected these pieces of the rock. We have all had pangs of guilt ever since could you please return these to their rightful place. July 2003*

*We took this rocks as memorabilia from our last holiday and since heard it is bad luck and disrespectful. Please accept back the rock and our sincere apologies. October 2004*

More often than not, the parcels are accompanied by personal hand-written letters of apology. It is for this reason the returned rocks at Uluru have become known to park staff as the 'sorry rocks'. The letters reveal that many visitors return the rocks because they recognise the error in their ways and wish to see the pieces of Uluru return home. A small number of visitors believe that they have been riddled with bad luck or even been cursed as a result of removing the rocks.

*I believe that my family is experiencing a lot of ill health and bad luck since then and although people may laugh at my superstitious nature I believe the stones are something to do with this. 2000*

Anangu, the Aboriginal traditional owners of Uluru, believe that rocks and sand belong at Uluru, not in the homes or pockets of visitors. Under Tjukurpa, the Anangu law governing life and land, there are consequences for disobeying the law of the land. Anangu recognise no specific curse associated with removing rocks and sand but refer to the respect that should be shown to the land, especially as a visitor.

Traditional owner, Barbara Tjikatu, acknowledges the returned rocks as a sign of respect. 'It is good that you've sent these letters back,' she says. 'But, please, please don't take anymore – don't take anything from Uluru.' Johnny Jingo, another traditional owner says, 'It's fine to take a photo of this place and take that away...but leave the rocks.'

*Whilst visiting Uluru last year my boyfriend took a rock. I was not happy about it, and after nearly a year of persuading, I have managed to get him to let me send it back...I do hope not everyone is as stupid as my boyfriend – otherwise Uluru will be rapidly decreasing in size! September 2003*

Removing rocks and sand from the landscape is not only disrespectful to Anangu culture, it is also illegal. Under Australian law, visitors can be fined up to \$5000 for removing rocks, sand or soil from the park.

### A management challenge

The rocks and sand returned to the park poses a particular challenge for park managers. As well as creating additional work for busy staff, there is uncertainty about the exact origin of rocks returned. Unfortunately it is not as straightforward as returning the materials to their original location. Indeed, some rocks received by the park have been geologically identified as coming from another region, or country.

The park has been working with a researcher from the University of Western Sydney to document the significance of the sorry rock phenomenon. This work and the consultations undertaken with Anangu will assist in developing approaches for managing and interpreting the sorry rocks.

## Sorry rocks: frequently asked questions

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### What types of materials are returned?

The packages received by the park mostly contain rocks, about the size that fits in a visitor's hand. Other items such as sand, twigs, seeds and photographs of sacred sites are also returned.

### How many returned items are received each year?

The park receives about 365 packages of returned rocks and sand each year – about one package each day. The largest parcel was a 32 kilogram rock returned by a couple living in Adelaide, Australia.

### Who is returning rocks and sand?

The packages and accompanying letters are returned by previous visitors to the park, as well as people who have never visited the park. Sometimes visitors take rocks home with them to show family or friends, or even as a gift. Returned rocks have come from all over Australia and the world. Those returned by international visitors most commonly come from people living in Germany, England and the USA. However, there have also been rocks returned by people living in Japan, China, New Zealand and Sweden.

### Why do people return rocks and sand?

The letters reveal that people are returning rocks and sand for a variety of reasons. Most typically people wish to do the right thing and see their souvenired objects returned home to Uluru where they belong. In most cases people offer an apology for their behaviour and some say they've learned a new respect for Anangu culture. A small number of people return their souvenired materials because they believe they have been cursed, or have experienced bad luck.

### How long has this been happening?

Whilst the phenomenon began in the late 1970s, the frequency of returns increased exponentially following the Handback of the park to Anangu traditional owners in 1985. Perhaps this increase in returns was a reflection of a growing awareness of Aboriginal cultural values in the park. It may also have been the result of increased media attention about the perceived 'curse' associated with removing rocks from Uluru in Australia and internationally.

### How long does it take before people return souvenired rocks?

Most souvenired rocks are returned within five to ten years of their being taken. In some cases it has taken visitors 40 years to return their rocks, often because they have been found and returned by a person related to the original remover.

### How does the park currently manage the returns?

Since October 2002, the returned rocks and their accompanying letters have been gathered as a temporary 'collection' in the park.

The care of returned materials to the park is taken seriously by Anangu and the Parks Australia staff. With the assistance of a research student from the University of Western Sydney, the staff ensure that the traditional owners are informed of the numbers and type of materials being returned, and as part of the research process Anangu are considering a range of different options for managing the returned materials.

The quantity and frequency of returns, especially over the last five to 10 years, has meant that it is impossible for Anangu to respond to each individual return. Nevertheless, Anangu believe that it is good that the rocks are home.

### What do Anangu have to say about the sorry rocks?

The traditional owners, Anangu, believe that rocks and sand belong at Uluru, not in the homes or pockets of visitors. They would like to see visitors show their respect when visiting Uluru by not removing rocks or taking sand.

### What other issues need to be considered?

In addition to the concerns expressed by Anangu, there are issues associated with the actual return of materials. For example, Anangu and park staff are unsure about whether or not rocks have been removed from particular sacred areas around Uluru and Kata Tjuta. This means traditional owners are reluctant to return rocks to places that they may not belong.

There is also the threat of micro-pathogens being introduced to the park by contaminated rocks from elsewhere in Australia. Fortunately Australia's strict quarantine laws mean that rocks returned to the park from overseas are intercepted by the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) for treatment before they are returned to Uluru.

### Does this phenomenon of people returning souvenired items occur at other places?

People souvenir objects from heritage places all over the world. They are also returning objects to sites of natural, cultural and spiritual significance. For example, at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, people souvenir lava rock and black sand. Some later return them out of respect for the Pele Goddess believed to be associated with volcanic activity on Big Island – and some because they believe that removing lava rock results in bad luck. Every day, the US Park Service receives returned rocks and letters of apology from regretful tourists from all over the world.