

# SORRY ROCKS

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 as far away as Germany, the USA and the United Kingdom and from all over Australia.

*"Could this join all of the returned pieces of rock, souvenired from Uluru? My sister collected it in 1978, when it was called Ayers Rock and [everyone] was ignorant of its ancient history and link to aboriginal tribes and culture."*  
(200 gram piece of Uluru, received December 2013, from Ourimbah, NSW, Australia)

*"After revisiting the park I was told about not removing any rocks from Kata Tjuta... I didn't know. So I do apologise for same."* (500 gram piece of Kata Tjuta, received January 2014, from Woodford, QLD, Australia)

More often than not, the parcels returned to the park are accompanied with individually written notes and letters of apology. It is for this reason the returned rocks have become known as the 'sorry rocks'.

The letters reveal that most visitors return the rocks because they recognise it was wrong to take them and wish to see the pieces of Uluru return home. A small proportion of visitors believe that they have been riddled with bad luck or even been cursed as a result of removing the rocks.

*"When I received the rock I was so worried that I want to return it as soon as possible....[in] just one week, my brother broke up with his girlfriend, my father went to hospital and he will do heart surgery on the 20 January. Anyway I just want to return the rock to its rightful place and say good bye to the bad luck!"* (300 gram piece of Uluru, received January 2014, from Hong Kong)

## Uluru is Aboriginal land

*Anangu*, the 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 disrespecting the law of the land. *Anangu* recognise no 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. She says *"It is good that you've sent these letters back. But, please, please don't take anymore – don't take anything from Uluru."* Another traditional owner Johnny Jingo explains *"It's fine you can take a photo of this place and take that away...but leave the rocks."*



### A management challenge

The returned rocks and sand pose a particular challenge for park management. As well as creating additional work for an already busy team of 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 returned rocks have been geologically identified as coming from another region and only recently, the park received a package containing sea shells.

Each returned item is catalogued on a database, noting the country, weight and source of the souvenired rocks. If a letter is attached to the parcel this is also recorded in the database. As it is impossible to identify the precise origin of the rock, these returned souvenirs are used to assist in repairing areas of erosion and flood runoff in the park.

### Respect for culture and environment

Removing rocks and sand from the landscape is disrespectful to *Anangu* beliefs and culture. Under Australian law, removing rocks, soil and sand from the park is also illegal, and visitors can be fined up to \$8,500 for doing so.

### To Uluru-Kata Tjuta - from France

*"Kata Tjuta, I didn't even know you existed but you absolutely blew my mind. I sat at a lookout for almost an hour and watched a little bird sail on your thermals. It was a beautiful moment and I took a nearby stone so I could hold a piece of you forever.*

*Uluru, I took one from you too. I wanted to take away some of your magic with me for the rest of my travels, for the rest of my life even. I realise it was wrong to do so, therefore I am sending both pieces back to you. Forgive me for being foolish and thank you for letting me spend time with you and absorb your beauty."*

(220grams, received January 2014, from France)





## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SORRY ROCKS

### 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 containing sacred sites are also returned.

### How many returned items are received by the park each year?

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

### Who is returning rocks and sand?

The packages and letters come from previous visitors as well as people who have never visited the park but have been given a rock as a gift. Returned rocks come from all over Australia and the world. Those returned by international visitors most commonly come from people residing in Germany, the United Kingdom and the USA. However, there have also been rocks returned by people residing in Japan, Hong Kong, China, New Zealand, Austria, France and Sweden – in fact from all corners of the globe.

### Why do people return rocks and sand?

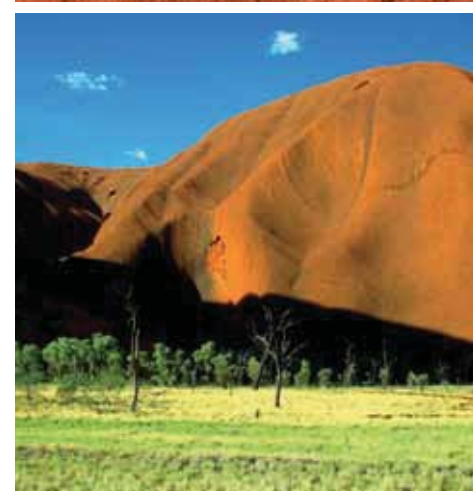
The most typical letters reveal that people wish to do the right thing and see their souvenired objects returned home to Uluru where they belong. In most cases people offer an apology for their behaviour and some express a new learned respect for *Anangu* culture. A small proportion of people return their souvenired materials because they believe they have been cursed, or have experienced bad luck.

### How long has this been happening?

While people have been returning souvenired rocks and sand to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park since the late 1970s, the frequency of returns increased following the Handback of the park to *Anangu* traditional owners in 1985. The Handback and rising visitor awareness of the park's World Heritage status has led to a steady stream of returned souvenired rocks and soil.

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

Most souvenired rocks returned to the park have been mailed within five to 10 years of them being taken. In some cases it has taken visitors 40 years to return their rocks, and in these situations it is often found and returned by a person related to the original rock remover.



## MORE SORRY ROCKS FAQs

### Did you know?

- The largest rock piece returned to date weighs 32 kg
- Some people return their souvenired materials because they believe they have been cursed, or have experienced bad luck
- It has taken 40 years for some rocks to be returned
- Many rocks are returned by those who recieved them as a gift
- Approximately 365 packages are returned each year
- It is impossible to identify the precise origin of the sorry rocks taken
- It is illegal to remove rocks and sand from Australian national parks
- Visitors removing rocks and sand could be fined up to \$8,500

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

The care of returned materials is taken seriously by *Anangu* and the Parks Australia staff. Each returned item is catalogued on a database. As it is impossible to identify the correct origin of the rock, these returned souvenirs are used to assist in repairing areas of erosion and flood runoff in the park.

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

*Anangu*, the traditional owners of Uluru, 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?

As neither *Anangu* nor park staff know whether or not rocks have been removed from particular sacred areas around Uluru and Kata Tjuta, the 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 being returned to the park landscape. 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. If every one of the park's annual visitors was to take a 'souvenir', think of the environmental impact.

### Does the return of souvenired rocks occur at other places?

People souvenir objects from heritage places all over the world. Not surprisingly there are other examples in the world where people are also returning objects to sites of natural, cultural and spiritual significance. The most comparable example of people returning souvenired objects to heritage sites, at least in terms of scale, occurs in Hawaii. At Hawaii Volcanoes National Park in the USA people remove lava rock and black sand as souvenirs. Some later return them out of respect for the Pele Goddess believed to be associated with volcanic activity on Big Island. Not dissimilar to Uluru, some people believe that removing lava rock results in bad luck. On a daily basis the United States Park Service receives returned rocks and letters of apology from regretful tourists from all over the world.

