



Australian Government

Fact sheet



20th Anniversary “Handback” – a brief background

Explorer Ernest Giles travelled through the area in 1872 and named Mount Olga. In 1873 William Gosse was the first European to sight Uluru, naming it after the Chief Secretary of South Australia, Sir Henry Ayers. Giles was the first European to climb the rock - accompanied by an Afghan camel driver named Khamran.

The area around Uluru and Kata Tjuta was declared an Aboriginal Reserve in the early 1900s (and many senior Anangu still talk about being 'herded' into the Reserve). Ayers Rock was declared a national park in 1950, and in 1958 both Ayers Rock and Mt Olga were excised from the Reserve to form the Ayers Rock Mt Olga National Park. Title was vested in the Director of the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, but from 1978 until 1985, the park was actually run by officers of the Territory's Parks and Wildlife Service. The first park 'curator' was a part-timer: he simply spent winter at the Rock.

The "Handover" (as it was then called) of Uluru in 1985 was a symbolic highpoint for land rights. The land had been alienated from the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 by the declaration of the Uluru and Kata Tjuta (Ayers Rock - Mt Olga) National Park in 1977. In the late 1970s traditional owners, the Pitjantjatjara Council and the Central Land Council lobbied the then PM Malcolm Fraser and Aboriginal Affairs Minister Fred Chaney to amend the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) to allow an Aboriginal land claim. There were offers and counter offers from the Commonwealth and the Northern Territory Government (who wanted title transferred from the Commonwealth to the Territory, with a reduced title to the traditional owners and Aboriginal people involved in Management but not in control).

The stalemate continued until the Hawke Government announced in November 1983 that it would amend the Aboriginal Land Rights Act and return the title for Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park to the traditional owners. The land was to be leased back to the Australian Parks and Wildlife Service, and run under a system of 'joint management' like Kakadu National Park, with a Board of Management comprising a majority of Anangu members.

On 26 October 1985, hundreds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people attended the 'Handover' when Governor-General Sir Ninian Stephen passed over the title deeds at a ceremony at the base of Uluru. Five minutes later the traditional owners signed an agreement leasing the Park back to the Australian Parks and Wildlife Service for 99 years. The Northern Territory government was so angered by the handover that it withdrew from the management arrangements.

The first Board Chair was Yami Lester (formerly a land rights campaigner and an executive member of the Pitjantjatjara Council) He stood by and translated Sir Ninian Stephen in 1985. The current Chair, Donald Fraser, was also a land rights campaigner.