



## **Alice Springs – Mark Swindles**

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**Alice Springs Convention Centre, Alice Springs**

**Speakers: Mark Swindles**

Mark Swindles: Yes, fantastic. Thank you for having me as well. My name is Mark Swindells. I am a tour operator in the Northern Territory. I am part owner of two businesses. Uluru Camel Tours and Uluru Segway Tours located down in Yulara in the bottom part of the Northern Territory, close to Uluru, of course. I'm representing myself, not my business partners, today or my organisation, but as a tour operator and a territorial.

Hon. Justice

Rachel Pepper:

Thank you. Whenever you're ready.

Mark Swindles:

OK, firstly, I'd like to introduce myself and give you a bit of a background. Firstly I just told a little fib. I'm not a territorial. I will be next year. I've been in the territory since 1993 and next year will be my 25th year and officially I will be a territorial and I'm planning to have a bit of a party there. Actually, it's quite a milestone. But originally, I came to the territory in 1993 for the reasons that I still think many people come to the territory, and that was for the adventure, the wide open spaces, the nature, and I came out here and I bought four wild camels and for several years I travelled through central Australia with my little band of camels, living quite a nomadic lifestyle and my trips got more and more adventurous, and in 1999 I crossed this country from west to east on a nine month camel trek and arrived at Byron Bay for New Year's Eve 2000.

And when you travel like that you travel at a very slow pace and you travel quite a nomadic lifestyle and you notice fine things in nature that most people would probably miss and one of the things I did notice was the legacy of mining and what it had left on the earth, especially in the Northern Territory, which is where my heart belongs. And as you are travelling through the desert, often, especially in the Gibson, Simpson sides of the Northern Territory, you would see the seismic lines. I'm not sure if people are aware what a seismic line is, but sometimes they can be hundreds of kilometres long. Other times, not so much. Sometimes they're in a, you know, patchwork sort of system and pretty much a mining company gets a bulldozer and, in a very straight line, drives that bulldozer across the earth.

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And some of the seismic lines I have experienced out there, I presume, are from the 1960s and 1970s, and I don't know how long it takes for a seismic line to disappear back into nature, but obviously 40 years is still not enough. And these seismic lines are quite amazing, actually, 'cause if there is a hill or a mountain in the way, some of the oldest mountains in the world, those bulldozer drivers must have had amazing courage because they would just cut a scar up and over and onto the other side and they are in a straight line. No tree or river or creek is spared.

The other thing that I noticed while I was out there was the water running freely where it shouldn't and this is once again a legacy from mining companies. And we have two water sources under the ground in central Australia, artesian and sub-artesian, of course it's the artesian water that will come up if it's allowed to and spill onto the ground and in the 90s there was a great effort, especially in the Simpson Desert region, to cap all of these bores that were bringing up water in large amounts 'cause we were told that the Great Artesian Basin was being lowered and any water that was being wasted and didn't have a reason to be on the surface was actually lowering the water table.

And I did notice that and I've also noticed over a long time and a long period, through tax payers money, most of these bores have now been capped because we know that the underground water is very precious, especially to desert people like ourselves in central Australia. And as I travelled in 1999 I finally reached Queensland and it was quite a, quite a shock, actually, because for the first time in my life I came across fracking and pipelines and water spilling onto the ground and this was very fresh. It was happening then and there. I haven't been back to Queensland till recently, which was earlier this year and I travelled through some of those regions, and I was quite shocked and staggered how fracking has in those, sort of 17 years, how it has really opened up, taken over the country and become quite an obvious sight on the landscape.

But eventually I started collecting camels and I had so many camels, I had to start a business. And that's quite a long story, but currently with my two business partners we employ 30 people at Yulara, around 30 people, and I also have about 50 camels as well. And I love tourism, it's a wonderful business and I'm very proud of my backyard, very passionate about my backyard and I think, you know, the place that we live, Yulara, is a beautiful place to live. We're actually the ninth largest town in the Northern Territory with a population of 1,000 people. And the town is 100% tourism. If it wasn't for tourism it wouldn't be there. We have our amazing rock in our backyard, Uluru and when you look at the figures with tourism it's quite staggering in the Northern Territory. Four to five times our population of people come and actually visit the Northern Territory on a holiday.

Which is pretty amazing when you think about it. It's a huge industry, it's a big industry. It's an industry that certainly needs protection and the reason it does need protection, especially environmentally, is for the reasons why people make the trip out to the Northern Territory, why they fly at great

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expense or why they drive at great expense and great time to actually, you know, spend in the car to actually get here. Why do people come all the way out to the Northern Territory to visit? Well, I can tell you what they're not coming for. They're not coming for the shopping. They're not coming for the nightlife. They definitely aren't coming for our beaches. And they're not coming to ski. They're coming to experience nature, they're coming to experience something that is quite rare these days, which is nature in its purest form, you know, untouched by man. Wildlife. People come for the isolation, the loneliness, the great expanses. They come to drive our amazing roads.

And I think the gas industry and fracking could actually deter people from actually coming. If you're coming for the natural beauty, unfortunately, I think something as industrial as gas mining will turn people away in their droves. We have a certain image in the Northern Territory, and that is this wild landscape, either the top end or down here in the south desert landscape, and people like it that they can drive through for sometimes hours without seeing any infrastructure or any people to want to actually come here and I think if that does change it'll be quite detrimental to tourism in the Northern Territory.

We're seeing, I meet people from all around the world. It's one of the privileges of my job and Yulara is quite an expensive destination to get to. It's not really what you call a backpacker destination even though we do get backpackers. It's more upper middle class people coming and a lot of our guests are quite intelligent people and one of the things they often say, especially with my business, is the thing that ties people together is they probably got a degree at some point in their life, they're professional people that come out. And we also get a lot of Australians and this year has been a wonderful year in tourism and for many reasons it's probably been the best year since the year 2000, the Olympic years, but we're seeing a lot more Australians travelling in their backyard and there's reasons for that. Australia, once again, is a safe destination but as the Australian dollar drops it becomes more expensive to travel overseas and people are out seeing their own country and even tourism, a lot of our guests drive to central Australia and they take many weeks off, annual holidays. They've got all their kids in the car. They're often pensioners doing this dream trip around their own country.

And there's a bit of a circuit and they travel on the outside of the Simpson Desert through four states, Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, Northern Territory, and back up through Queensland so there's a bit of a loop and they can go either way. And we're actually starting to hear, mainly Australians who are doing those longer trips, that it's so nice to be in the Northern Territory where there's no fracking. People are taking it, on board they're quite confronted by it, especially as they go through Queensland. It seems to be having quite an impact and they're just commonly referring to the Northern Territory, that, you know, it's wonderful that it hasn't happened to the territory and we, you know, it's still a great place to go to

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experience, you know, the bounty of natural beauty that we actually have in the Northern Territory.

So, this is happening more and more so, and that does concern me. My ears prick up every time I actually hear that. And fracking, you know, is happening in vast areas of Queensland and the gas pipelines are sort of, are now a patchwork throughout Queensland and people do notice it, they certainly do. So, I'm quite concerned about that. We also have many other industries besides camel riding, you know, the tourism world of Yulara, the pilots there's 14, I think, currently at the moment, that do joy flights in the region, around Yulara, Kata Tjuta. One of the most popular ones is flying over the Lake Amadeus Basin to King's Canyon that's one of the most popular ones. It's one of the ones that pilots push the most 'cause it's quite a long trip and they're keen to get their hours up. And I think that would be quite affected at the moment. It's really pristine, it's rare to even see a track out there. And you get, you know, this really wonderful experience when you fly. It's something I recommend all guests coming in to central Australia do 'cause it's, what really impresses people is there's nothing to see.

You know, there is nothing. There's no houses or buildings or tracks or roads. It is like it was thousands of years ago. And it's a very impressive site. And people pay big money to see nothing on the ground. It's just wonderful, stunning beauty and it's a rarity in this day and age and it's one of the, you know, the treasure of the Northern Territory. I think the gas mining, you know, has had great effect on certain regions in Queensland, but it's also had quite an effect on tourism in other parts of the Northern Territory. It's a hard one to actually say, it's hard to demonstrate because it hasn't yet happened, but in the cases that it has happened we can look at INPEX that in Darwin and certainly that had a great effect on Darwin tourism. A detrimental effect on Darwin tourism. There's quite a few articles that are written by Darwin papers, I think even Darwin council looked into it as well. And it's slowed down the Darwin tourism economy quite substantially to the point that NT Tourism relocated their office from Darwin to Alice Springs.

For a couple of years there it was very difficult to get a room in Darwin. The rooms were booked up by mining construction, men engineers, men and women engineers, and surveyors and construction people. You know, it was a massive project and these people were there to work. They weren't there as tourists and they didn't go to restaurants and they didn't go on tours and they took over the accommodation situation in Darwin and people knew it was only a flash in the pan so people didn't go building up more accommodation. I suppose if you owned a hotel it was quite a good time for you but if you're another tour operator it was quite a hard time for several years. In fact, from what I understand, some people did close up shop and, you know, it's hard to start up a business in Australia. I'm sure, I'm not sure people are aware of that. It's very difficult and when your business goes down it's probably hard to start it back up again after, but it's, you know, tourism is a great investment on, we invest heavily into tourism and we invest heavily into publicising the Northern Territory.

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And I certainly feel that, you know, when you promote the Northern Territory, you don't see instantaneously. Often you see it years later. What you do today you might not see the benefits for many years to come, but certainly the downfall as well, if a negative thing happens and people stop going to a location then it can take many years to build it back up. And that certainly happened in Darwin with the accommodation being taken over by the Inpex construction and it pushed the prices of rooms up considerably as well, so I said ..Tourism relocated to central Australia. Why promote something if you can't get people in there? The effect of staffing as well, too, at large gas industry, I think would be challenging for actually a operator in central Australia. It's very hard to compete with wages and it is a big issue, staffing in central Australia. We pay above the award wage. We really try and look after our staff. We have probably better accommodation than probably other camel farms out there. We really try to lift the standard but at the end of the day we have seen the effect of mining booms and in remote areas they will poach your staff.

And you know this has gone on forever and a day, you now. I read a book recently about the gold rush in Melbourne, how people, sailors left the boats and people left their job and people downed tools and off they went. It was a better opportunity out there, but it did make it very difficult for people to actually run businesses and I could see the same happening in central Australia. Of course, you know, miners will always be miners, and as we know, they party pretty hard. There's issues with, you know, drugs and violence. There are towns out there that are mining towns still to this day, Kalgoorlie, .... Leonora, Coober Pedy, Broken Hill, and I don't know if anyone's ever spent time there on a Friday or Saturday night. I'm not a small guy but on the couple of occasions I have actually had to overnight in those places I go and sit in my hotel room. I'm not the tourist out there walking the streets, I don't feel safe.

Unfortunately, Alice Springs has a bit of an issue these days with the perception that there is, that it's a dangerous, violent place. I don't know how adding hundreds of miners into the mix is actually going to help that situation. Especially our elderly travellers, retirees, they like to know that they're safe and already they are bypassing Alice Springs. They'll camp by the side but we're having, you know, there's certainly a big effect there that, especially with elderly people, if they don't feel safe and content to camp, they'll move on. And I don't, I think that issue with large numbers of miners, it's Australia wide, it's always happening and always will happen. You know, when you have over, wealthy young men who are away from home and they're only, entertainment on a Friday or Saturday night to drink it does have a huge social issues.

So, I can see, you know, that it will be detrimental to tourism and certainly, you know, just the look of, the raw industrial look of, you know, gas fields that won't encourage people to come out. I think it will push people away. The other thing I'd like to bring up, too, is Yulara, as I said before, is the ninth largest town population wise in the Northern Territory and we're right in the middle of the Amadeus Gas Basin there and I'd really like to make a

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point that it would be great if the inquiry could come down to Yulara. We just finished a very busy peak season. It's 950 kilometre round trip for myself to come in here, and considering in central Australia it's the second largest town it would be wonderful if the town of Yulara could be included on the list of towns that will be consulted. I think it's very, very important. I think this matter, as well too, it all seems to be happening so quickly, you know, we've got a year to make such a momentous decision and I think, too, personally, a referendum on a subject like this, that wouldn't be out of the question.

It is a very important subject. A lot of indigenous people who still aren't aware of what is going on because they live in a region where they have little access to the news. They have no access to newspapers. I've lived on several aboriginal communities and there is no newpapers for sale. People don't have computers and internet access, so there's a whole group of people that aren't being consulted out there and I think that's very important that they are consulted because this will have a dramatic effect on their lives but it's also their country as well. And I think if they're not made aware, especially around the Lake Amadeus Basin, you have, you know, Docker River and ...and .... I think these people need to be informed as well and hints, you know, Yulara is a little bit easier for them to visit than it is Alice Springs. So, please consider that and please, it would be wonderful if you could put us on the list of towns that will be involved in this debate. I think that's, yeah, come to a, the end of my input there.

- Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Thank you very much. I understand you drove here today, is that right?
- Mark Swindles: That's correct, yes.
- Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: How long did that take, Mr. Swindles, for you to get here?
- Mark Swindles: I don't want to quite admit to that because I might have been speeding but-
- Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: How long would it normally?
- Mark Swindles: Normally take? I think it's 460 kilometres so it should take about four hours plus prescribed breaks as well, so yeah.
- Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Well, I must say, the panel's extraordinarily grateful that you have made the effort to come all that way today.
- Mark Swindles: I don't see it as, you know, I see this as a very important subject, debate, and it was no effort for me to come. In fact I dropped what I was doing. As I said we were in a very busy part of the year but this is a very important subject. I'm very passionate about the Northern Territory and central Australia and tourism and it's my pleasure to come in and be able to give my opinion.
- Hon. Justice

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Rachel Pepper: Thank you. And I was very interested to hear about the, curiously, you're the first person to have actually raised it, as far as I'm aware anyway, the impact on tourism in Darwin and the fact that, you know, nobody could get, actually, accommodation, tourists could get accommodation.

Mark Swindles: Yes, yeah.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: That's logical when you it it's logical, but it hasn't been raised before, so, thank you very much for that. It's something to consider. Just in relation to, did you have to drive through the wells in and around Palm Valley to get here?

Mark Swindles: No, that's another route that you could drive through. It's a lot longer and part of the road is dirt. It's called the Mereenie Loop Road and it's a beautiful drive. Hopefully one day it will be a .... but that is one of the jewels of the crown in central Australia. When you connect up Alice Springs to the West McDonald Range and Palm Valley and out to ...and then you come around the back of the West McDonald Ranges to Kings Canyon and then you drive down past Mount Conner and onto Uluru and Kata Tjuta, that is on par with probably the Great Ocean Road. It should be one of the most publicised and tourist promoted drives in Australia. It really is a stunning drive that I can't think of actually a better drive in Australia that takes you past so many iconic landmarks that the only issue is that there's on section that's still at quite rough and dirt and hopefully within, you know, the next decade that will finally be bituminised and that is the jewel, the crown, of tourism in central Australia. When it's opened up to caravaners and people in two-wheel drive vehicles it will be a huge boost to NT tourism.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: That's, sorry, that's heading out towards Hermannsburg, is that right?

Mark Swindles: That's correct, yeah.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: OK, and so it's taking you in a Palm Valley, Mereenie, that area?

Mark Swindles: Yes, yep.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Because my, according to my information that we have, there are close to 90 wells in that area of which 34 have been fracked. I'm just wondering what sort of impact that has had on tourism in that area.

Mark Swindles: It's probably quite hidden. I've seen probably more of it than most people. I think the main area that, there's two roads you can take, you know, I think the most popular one, actually, steers away from that area. Yet, it's got, I suppose, not well publicised because it is out of eyeshot of most people.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: It's out of plain shot as well?

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Mark Swindles: Definitely not, no. There's not as many flights that go over that region. If you fly from Yulara over King's Canyon you go out to Gosses Bluff you will see that, yeah, that out there, yeah, yep.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Thank you. And I should just state now clearly, that in terms of a referendum, a number of people have raised a number of groups, and individuals have raised that suggestion and again that falls outside our terms of reference. I understand why people are coming forward to that suggestion, but they, well and truly, that is outside our terms of reference.

Mark Swindles: OK, good to know.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: It will be up to the government and I keep saying this but it will absolutely be up to the government to lift the moratorium or not. We're here to identify the risks.

Mark Swindles: Yes, yep.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Which we've done, I hope. I'm confident we have. We're now in the process of assessing those risks and that will, it's that assessment that will form, and subsequent recommendations will form the basis of our final report. And I should also state, just to clarify for people who may be concerned, this is of course the second time we've come to Alice Springs. We will be back again, there will be another round of consultation in Alice Springs. So, this won't be the last time people have the opportunity to come in person and present to the panel or engage with the panel in person. And as for your suggestion about Yulara, we will, I will open some investigations about that and-

Mark Swindles: Thank you very much.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Think further about that, absolutely.

Mark Swindles: And we we're gathering a petition of names to lobby you as well, to, we'll send to-

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: We're not making the decision to lift the moratorium.

Mark Swindles: No, no, no, as far as coming to Yulara.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Ah, right, right, right-

Mark Swindles: To support our, yeah.

Hon. Justice

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- Rachel Pepper: That's different.
- Mark Swindles: Great. Fantastic.
- Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Any further, yes, Dr. Smith.
- Dr Ross Smith: Thank you very much for that very informative presentation. I was just trying to followup on a couple things you said.
- Mark Swindles: Sure.
- Dr Ross Smith: One about your trek across the country in 1999 and I remember reports of that at the time so congratulations on achieving that feat. When you said that you got into Queensland and you saw evidence of fracking, where abouts was that? Was that in the-
- Mark Swindles: In the, I think, the ....region, through there. I travelled through ...was the first town that I hit in Queensland, so .... and then .... and then onto Roma and then through to Townsville so it's quite, or sort of main arterial sort of region I went through. I tried to stay off the roads as much as possible of course, as you get closer and closer to the east coast, the more you are committed. I actually travelled down a railway for quite a few hundred kilometres as well. It was easier travelling on the side of the Queensland Railways and deal with a couple of trains than hundreds of trucks and vehicles every day.
- Dr Ross Smith: And then the said you returned last year. Was that to the same area or was that-
- Mark Swindles: No, not to similar areas, so I crossed quite a few paths there and, but no, I wasn't travelling on camels and I wasn't able to travel on that exact route. Yeah, I was towing a caravan at the time.
- Dr Ross Smith: I just wondered whether you were in the CSG areas, which of course, didn't exist in that late 90s, and whether you were looking at the same industry that expanded or were you looking at the new industry that's come now on your return.
- Mark Swindles: The new industry, yeah, yep.
- Dr Ross Smith: Thanks for ...
- Dr Alan Andersen: Well, thanks Mr. Swindles for your presentation. I wanted to, well, guess start off by just making the comment that the interim report fully recognises the importance of the iconic outback landscapes in the NT and the need to protect them, to protect the tourism industry that depends on them. One of the issues, you notice this, that most of the tourists as I guess reflects these iconic landscapes, it's sort of either north in the top end, south in the desert, but not so much in the central region, in the ...Plateau region, which is the

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most prospective region for shale gas development and so I guess my question is, if there were shale gas development in a region like that, and so it wasn't directly impacting central Australia, to what extent do you think that would still detract from the tourism in central Australia, because to have this idea of broader fracking industry in the NT, even if it's not specifically in central Australia?

Mark Swindles:

Something about tourist travel by road and we have the course of Stuart Highway, which cuts Australia in half, and then we have other roads like the Plenty Highway and the Great Central Road, and the West MacDonnell Ranges, they're our sort of main tourist roads and I think they cover a huge part of central Australia. Are they proposing that they would only hide the mining in pockets of land where no one could see it, or is it open to all regions? I would have to query that. I think it's case by case basis, but I can't imagine a gas company, if they want to drill for gas 'cause it's gas underground, they will drill if they have the right to do that then and there, it won't be part of their agenda to hide it in some remote corner and only drilling in regions where tourists aren't able to see it. I can't see that happening. I imagine once the door is open they will drill where it's most profitable to drill, not away from the sight of tourists.

Hon. Justice

Rachel Pepper:

Yes, Dr. Beck.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: Yes, I appreciate and your comments about pristine nature of the Territory you're quite passionate about that. I just want to explore some of the comments that you made in respect to the Amadeus Basin and the gas oil rigs that are already there, because you mentioned about the, you know, iconic nature of the Betaloo and so that's cutting around those oil and gas wells. And also you, I think you mentioned, that when people were flying over to King's Canyon, some of those oil and gas wells could be seen. So, I'm trying to get a firstly, an assessment of what you think, if any..has been on tourism because of those oil and gas wells. And secondly to just acknowledge that with a potential shale gas well, that the number of wells could be an order of magnitude difference, but let's concentrate on your experience with respect to the facilities that are already here and the impact or otherwise that people will perceive attached to those facilities.

Mark Swindles:

Yes, certainly when you fly from Yulara to King's Canyon, you won't see any facilities, they're further north. If you do the flight to Gosses Bluff, which is in north of King's Canyon, then you will see the Mereenie oil fields out there. That's certainly the case. I think at the moment the very small Mereenie gas fields is not hidden, it just happens to be not in an area where you can see it from the ground. Or you have to know what you're looking for. I mean, some of those, some of the camps are on top of, right on the top of hills, on top of our mountains. They're pretty obvious. But, it's a small, small field and it's hidden accidentally.

It's not within eyeshot of major tourist routes but I think if the Lake Amadeus Basin is opened up then I would think that there would be, obviously, a lot of infrastructure out there, which will be visual and I

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presume, and I'm just presuming here, I don't know why I think this, but Yulara, the ninth largest town in the Northern Territory with a airport and a main road, and hotels and bars will somehow become a little centre for the mining because we have existing infrastructure there. So, I'm only presuming that. Sorry to presume something, but often industries do want to attach themselves to existing infrastructure and I would imagine our beautiful bitumen Road and our airports would be pretty tempting and our petrol stations and service stations, yeah, to bring it in-stream close. If you were going to start somewhere, I think that would be the place you would start. You have to get your products to the marketplace, so yeah.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: It's interesting just to hear that those existing infrastructure facilities, I think, I'd just like to characterise them having minimal, no impact upon the tourist industry as they are at the moment. Further development, I think you've indicated, that there are potential concerns that you'd voiced in terms of number of issues surrounding visual impact as well as impact on towns.

Mark Swindles: Yes, very much so, yeah.

Dr Vaughan Beck AM: Thank you.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Yes, Dr. Ritchie.

Dr David Ritchie: I would just like to put to you a comment made by Dominic ..yesterday and we were talking on similar things to what we've been talking about now. And he used the phrase, the real and perceived problems of the fracking industry and I think you're hopefully in a good position to make an assessment of the effect of the, go back a step, we've discussed the way that ..... is still an iconic park. It is got current gas wells pretty close to it and that there's no suggestion, really, that that has detracted from the values of ....The subsequent to the Amadeus field being developed, there appears to be a very, very strong negative perception about the fracking industry. Your industry, tourism, perhaps more than any other that deals in people's perception of a place, how they can see-

Mark Swindles: Very much so.

Dr David Ritchie: A destination. So, I'd just like a comment on that it's, I think, what we've been trying to get to in these last hour questions, how much is it about the way people perceive the idea of industry, and how much is it about, say, losing the visual and amenity of a particular part of a tourist route because of the side of the well or the pipeline?

Mark Swindles: Perception is everything in tourism. We, as an industry, we present ourselves with, you know, ads throughout the whole world and the whole of Australia. The perception is, and the perception that we give out, about the Northern Territory, is that it's this beautiful, wild pristine place and with, you know, stunning landscapes and, you know, perfect nature there. The perception that we give of the Northern Territory is very, very different to

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any other tourism brand. The perception is one of the things we put a lot of emphasis into and I think you also want to deliver what you perceive as well, I think it can be very detrimental if, and I, you know, when I produce brochures or produce ads for our business, I make sure that I don't perceive something that people aren't gonna get, 'cause then I have complaints.

And I'm very careful about that. You know, when you have photographs of my beautiful camel string with Uluru in the background, we're 11 Ks away from Uluru and it's quite easy for the trick of a camera lens to make Uluru look a lot close to that than what it actually is. So, the perception of the Northern Territory is something that we've been, in the tourism industry, working for generations. Sorry, not generations, but decades, to get a certain image out there and that's why people come here. I think anything that takes away from that is quite detrimental. You know, people go to ... to see this mining town, that's what they're expecting. You know, they've got that big hole there, the big mine, I think they call it the Big Hole and people actually pay to get on and have a look at that. That's their image, that's their perception, but it's not what we're trying to actually promote.

You know, we're promoting that there's nothing out there, you know, that's the nice thing and if you change that there might be other nice areas for people to go through to go to on their holidays. So, people have thousands of choices these days where to go for holiday. Thousands of choices. It's amazing. More so than ever before, air travel is cheap and people research their holidays and it's so easy to go anywhere in the world, and every other destination's competition, you know? People have four weeks a year and we're trying to push our image, push ourselves to the top of their list and it's not that easy. It really isn't that easy, and, you know, there's a big world out there and I think we have to be very careful if we lose the image that we've got and we lose the reason why people are coming here, we'll regret it.

Dr David Ritchie: So, just to summarise that it would be, you know the problem of this perception being changed and is there a negative perception is not solved by having a buffer of a hundred metres of trees between the road and the drill pads, because you would say that the authenticity of the perception is then challenged by the, you know, would be kind of compromised.

Mark Swindles: Yes, yep.

Dr David Ritchie: Thank you.

Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Any further questions or comments? Yes, Professor Priestly.

Professor  
Brian Priestly: Yeah, thank you Mr. Swindles, you've focused a lot on the visual impacts of the industry on tourism and so on. One of the risks that we've identified that will need mitigation if the industry is to go ahead is the impact of increased traffic, particularly movement of, large-scale movement, of vehicles with equipment and so on. What impact do you think that that would have on

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the tourism industry and what sort of steps could be taken to mitigate those risks?

Mark Swindles: That's a very good question. When I drove in yesterday it was a slower trip than usual 'cause the roads are very, very heavy. The roads are a lot of traffic, well what I consider a lot of traffic at the moment. Maybe if you come from Sydney or Melbourne it's not the case at all. But there was, it was quite slow. There was a lot of elderly people pulling caravans on the highway, hundreds of them. Thousands of them. The elderly people, retirees in Australia, they're a bit like nomadic birds. When it becomes cold and chilly down south, they hook their car to their caravan and they start driving north and they spend quite a bit of time up north fishing and travelling and experiencing the top end, and then as soon as it starts getting humid they, and the roads get cut off because of the wet, they head south again. I hear a lot from the truck drivers complaining that this time of the year it's pretty chaotic out there.

Road train drivers and elderly people in overloaded caravans don't tend to mix too well. So, I would think that there would be quite an issue. You might not be aware, but there's great pressure on truck drivers not to drive at night any more. Some insurance companies won't insure truck drivers to drive at night. It's changing the whole industry because truck drivers do like to drive at night. It's less wear and tear on the vehicles and less traffic out there to deal with and probably less police as well, but, they do like to drive at night but there's a lot of companies that won't allow their drivers to drive at night. They've got to park up. Some insurance companies won't allow their drivers to, the vehicle isn't insured if they drive at night.

It's very difficult for a lot of the truck drivers, especially if they're carting cattle, because they want to get them into, off the truck, into the market as quickly as possible. You don't want to draw out that experience, so things are changing quite dramatically in the Northern Territory. Truck drivers are now forced to drive in those peak periods and I think it will have a huge impact. Our roads, the Stuart Highway was built for road trains, it's a beautiful road, but the ..Highway is narrow, it's not built for road train so there's no concept of, you know, heavy transport out there. Of course, a lot of our roads are dirt roads and they're damaged terribly by trucks.

I've seen movement of mining machinery through the Great Central Road. I don't know whether these large trucks with, you know, huge dozers and things are going, but a freshly graded road can be ruined by a few of these low loaders coming down, so yeah, certainly, heavy transport does have an effect on tourism and roads and as I said we get a lot of elderly people, and you know, it can be quite frustrating getting stuck behind a convoy of caravans and, you know, when you meet these people at the road houses they're quite elderly people who would probably struggle sometimes driving in their local supermarket, let alone having an overloaded vehicle pulling an overloaded caravan at 80 kilometres an hour. They can be a hazard and as I said very frustrating for truck drivers.

Hon. Justice

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- Rachel Pepper: Again Mr. Swindles, thank you so much for coming considerable distance to meet with the panel and share your views. It has been quite enlightening. Given us a great deal to think about. And as I said, we will absolutely take on board your suggestion to come down to Yulara and do some investigations and see whether or not we can fit that into our existing time table.
- Mark Swindles: Thank you very much.
- Hon. Justice  
Rachel Pepper: Thank you.
- Mark Swindles: Thank you for your time, too.