



Top Didj Cultural Experience & Art Gallery – Hearing Transcript

Please be advised that this transcript was produced from a video recording. As such, the quality and accuracy of the transcript cannot be guaranteed and the Inquiry is not liable for any errors.

8 March 2017

Knotts Crossing Restaurant, Katherine

Speaker: Petrena Ariston

Petrena Ariston: My name is Petrena Ariston. Myself and my husband, we own Top Didj Cultural Experience and Art Gallery, and this is the art we've got around the wall here. Yeah, we've been involved with tourism since 1998. We used to have a shop in town but now down we're just down on the gorge road, which is seven kilometres out of town. We actually have an art gallery as well as your cultural experience with an Aboriginal artist, Manuel Pamkal.

That's where people come. They can sit and actually learn about Aboriginal culture because he actually lived in the bush for six years without seeing a white person. He's lived the traditional way as well as the white fella way. He's got a really good story to tell and then he actually ... They paint a little rock painting, learn how to light a fire with two sticks, and throw a spear with a Woomera.

That's our business. Since we moved to Katherine in '79, and there was less than 4,000 people here then, and of course, tourism has taken off as well as the RAAF base. So we've got about 9,000 people here now. I've never really been a political person but I did get involved when they wanted to put a nuclear waste dump just 40 kilometres out of town. So that got me involved politically, because it's very disappointing about our governments.

Anyway, then of course, then we started in with the fracking. When that came on board I went to a few meetings. I found it very confusing but we keep going and asking the questions. I'm very happy with this panel coming to Katherine and giving us the opportunity to have our say. I'll just start now. Sorry.

Well, my pick out of, this, which I found quite interesting, is the environmental impact and risk to the environment and other industries such as tourism. I am concerned about tourism and the environment in general when it comes to the impact of the unconventional oil and gas industry. The NT has vast areas of important savanna and grasslands that our government has signed over to be fracked by an invasive industry with extensive water



use, who are experimenting with technology, drilling through our aquifers and groundwater basins, are excluded from the NT Water Act and still unsure of what to do with the 10's of million litres of toxic produce water that each will create.

Tourism is a large economic driver of the Northern Territory economy. It has a broad impact upon the many other industry sectors and generates a significant number of jobs in the territory. We have a strong, vibrant, and multifaceted economy and a long established reputation as a unique tourism destination centered around our extraordinary natural landscapes and rich Aboriginal culture. According to Tourism NT corporate website, the combined international and domestic visitor results for the year ending June 2016, increases were experienced across the top end, about 24% to 513,000 holiday visitors, and central Australia up 9.2% to 432 hundred thousand holiday visitors.

The goal of the Tourism NT vision 2020 is to grow the visitor economy to 2.2 billion by 2020, as a measure by overnight expenditure. The NT is on the track if recent growth continues. The Australian tourism industry employs nearly a million people, with 929,000 people involved directly and indirectly. This accounts for 8% of Australia's total employment. This comes from a Tourism Australia website.

Shale fracking on the other hand is an unknown industry that still has many unanswered questions surrounding it. But one thing we do know, the gas industry pays less tax than other Aussie companies. Eighty-five percent of the companies exporting gas are foreign owned so the bulk of the profits go offshore as well. Only 2% of Australian workers are employed by the whole mining industry, and I got that from the Mining in Australia Wikipedia.

Could I have a drink of water? Sorry.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

I know you guys are quiet at the back now, but if you could please remain so just because we're all competing with the air conditioners, so it's a bit noisy. Thank you. Please continue.

Petrena Ariston:

Fracking in the NT potentially would follow the boom bust cycle and we can see what that has done to towns in the NT over the years. It could be argued that tourism is the far more sustainable industry than resource extraction, especially of a finite resource using hydraulic fracturing. I fear there is a risk that fracking would undermine the tourism industry substantially and it would take a very long time to recover and withdraw its visitor base, image, and brand.

An extensive line of oil fracking wells dotted throughout the outback could undermine the tourism brand that Tourism NT and tour companies market nationally and internationally. This would be particularly true for visitors



who come from regions where fracking has been banned, suspended, or has generated controversy and public criticism in some way. I know when I talk to tourists who come into my business from overseas and Australia, particularly Queensland and New South Wales, they say, “Don’t let it happen.” I think, as a tourist, the very presence of well-drilling sights and flares burning gas will not only disfigure the beauty of the NT and its small communities, but will definitely discourage them to come back or recommend us as a destination.

When I have gone to public consultations or read one of their glossy brochures it all sounds so simple. At first, a few well pads rise and pipelines from shale developments seem only tiny holes, and cuts and the canvas still holds. But if you look at the heavily developed landscape down the road you will see real communities turned into industrial zones and the loss of natural habitats. Our savanna landscape, known to be the most pristine in the world, would become islands fragmented by the dense web of roads, pipelines, and well pads.

They never tell the whole story. What will the NT end up looking like? Not a place that tourists would want to come to. Might not be in our lifetime, but I don’t want our region to look like that in the future, and I have grandchildren living in the NT. What sort of legacy would I be leaving to them if I just stood back and let this happen? Once they get in it’s done, no turning back. In my area, only Katherine town is actually protected and we are told National Parks, but they can still drill next to them.

Also, what about the ecological implications for wide ranging sensitive species? Who cares about them? That’s not even considering the more extensively studied direct impacts of fracking potential ground water contamination, root degradation, and soil erosion. The reputation and constant promise of jobs and royalties has never been backed up, or the duration of them. But with tourism, we can see the long-term jobs and benefits.

Given the experience of the gas field in Queensland and in the USA, a responsible government should be in a position to carry out a cost benefit analysis for the introduction of a gas industry which accounts for the negative impacts on communities, the environment, and other industries, as well as the cost to the government in infrastructure, including ongoing maintenance. We are all aware and concerned about the legacy of environmental disasters associated with the mining industry, which demonstrates a failure of the regulatory arrangement of the Northern Territory Government to prevent such events and the eventual assumption by the government of the cost of the clean-up.

We now have contaminated water in the Katherine region from the chemicals used in firefighting farms for training at the RAAF base between



1988 and 2004. So deep shale gas extraction, which will see more chemicals possibly enter our water system, is a big issue in this town.

There are communities all over the world reeling from the toxic effects of fracking. It is mind-boggling what is happening in America and what is taking place now in Queensland. Fracking is not just ugly and intrusive. It's destructive and toxic. All gas wells fail and leak eventually, which means they will pollute our waterways and the air we breathe. If they contaminate our aquifers what can be done to fix them? Nothing.

I love the territory and its lifestyle and will do my utmost to protect it. Thank you.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Thank you very much. Are you willing to make that statement that you read out available to the taskforce?

Petrena Ariston:

Yes, I've got it.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Excellent, thank you very much. That's much appreciated. I'm now going to just open up your presentation. Thank you for that. That was very comprehensive to questions from the panel. Yes, Ms. Coram.

Ms Jane Coram:

Thank you Ms. Ariston. I was just wondering. You've touched on the sort of image of the NT that's marketed nationally and internationally. I was just wondering if you could describe a little more fully what that image is that's being portrayed that you are saying will be damaged.

Petrena Ariston:

Well, with the Northern Territory, I think it's one of the last bastions of just where people could just go out in the bush and not see anything. They can go down and they can drink from the water and they know that it's going to be clean. They can up and stand on a hill and breathe in the air and not cough and splatter. We get a lot of people from overseas in Europe, because they come from densely population areas.

We've had Germans coming to us, and they've been to Australia, to the top end, eight times. They come here. What do they come here for? Because they can go out and they can just see bush and empty spaces. Well, that's what they say, empty spaces. You talk to a mining person, which sometimes you hear them talk on the TV, when they've been out near Alice Springs, near Papunya Tula, which is a beautiful area. Like I say, it all depends on how you look at it. He said, "What's the problem? All I see is rocks and sand."

You get Europeans. People come from all over the world. They love that rocks that sand and when you look at it you can see it in Aboriginal paintings. For Aboriginal people, that's their life. It's not just rocks and sand. It means a lot to other people, not just what's underneath the ground. So



when you look at advertising, tourism advertising, it's all about the wide-open spaces, people sitting in waterfalls being able to have that water flow over them, and just be out there where there's nothing. Silence, they like the silence of just crickets or birds making noises, not flares going off. This is the thing with drilling, it industrialises the area, and you can hear the noise from kilometres away. So that's how it would change.

Ms Jane Coram: Thank you.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Really, you're talking about the brand, the brand of the Northern Territory.

Petrena Ariston: Yes, it's the brand. It's what people come here for. I mean there's not many places in the world you can go to that we can say have got this, and where they can come to and it's a safe place to come to. They can come here and walked around and do ... Well, within reason, but that's what they want. They want to come and see the natural Australia.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Yes. Anyone else? Yes, Dr. Ritchie.

Dr. David Ritchie: Just following that up, would you see if there was a prohibition on this industry in National Parks that that would make a difference? In other words, that particularly that the tourist industry is not usually taking people onto pastoral properties, which is all Aboriginal land where this would be covered. Would that cover some of your concerns?

Petrena Ariston: Well, supposedly, parks are exempt from getting mined but I mean things change, don't they? If they get in and the gas is there and then need to put a drill somewhere, what do you think is going to happen? You know, I just don't trust the governments and the companies because just what I've seen what's happened in America. Like you say, yes but, they can also have a drill right next to a National Park as well.

It's not just a little drill down. It's all the infrastructure that goes with it. It impacts on everything around it. Just the big trucks on the road, guy with fluoro shirts on, fly in fly out, it's just going to change the whole aspect of when people fly in. It's going to industrialise the place. We do have people ... tourists go out to cattle stations that they do have tourism events out there. They'll have to make sure they had one where there was no gas fields I suppose, but it will definitely; it will just change the whole atmosphere of the Northern Territory.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Yes, Mr. Priestly.

Prof. Brian Priestly: We've had a fairly broad spectrum of opinion on the efficacy of regulation on the mining industry that's been presented before the panel. I take it your view of the regulatory efficiency is pretty contemptuous; that you don't



think it's been very effective. Can you see any circumstance under which a specific regulation of the hydraulic fracturing industry could change your opinion of that?

Petrena Ariston:

Look, I'm not against progress. I mean I know we've got to do something about our energy resources but I think fracking isn't the way to go. As far as regulation, it doesn't matter what governments in, we have got a legacy now of so many mining problems. While I've read that it's over a billion dollars, but then people say it's even more than that, and also we're going to have to pay for that. They say that they haven't got the money so it's going to be left. It will be left there.

I mean I've got grandchildren that live here. How much longer ...? We've got Red Bank, where there's acid seeping into the creeks and stuff. It's going to eventually affect a lot more areas than where it is way out back. As far as regulation, okay, I've had a lot of meetings with the mining and companies and stuff. Every time they come here they tell us about the little bit of chemicals. I mean we're not stupid. They say how it's in ice cream. I don't eat ice cream anyway and I've got vinegar and bicarb under my cupboard.

I'm just sick of how they have a little bucket and they say, "Oh, this is what we're going to put in." It's a lot. I know it's .5%, but in that concept of what they're doing it's a lot of chemicals they're putting in there, and not only those chemicals they're putting in there ... And I think it's BTEX they say they won't use. That's naturally occurring in the ground, so they're putting all that poison in. Then they're interfering with the underground and uranium and all that sort of stuff is going to be coming up and it's going to be in the water.

As far as you're saying, sorry, about regulation, I just try to think of how they can do it properly. Then they say, "Oh, the water, we're going to truck it over to ..." One meeting I went to the government said they're going to truck it over to Mount Isa. It's going to be a lot of trucks and I forgot to say who is going to pay for this? Then we have drilling people come to our meetings and they say, "You know what, when you're out in the bush and it's all to do with money, they're not going to put it in the truck. They're going to go somewhere and just let it out in a creek." I mean this happens.

When you say regulation, is this going to be somebody watching them all the time? I don't have faith, I'm sorry, in how it's going to be monitored. Like you say, if this is going to be hundreds of wells, this is a lot of wastewater. It's mind-boggling. I just think if we're going to do it, it's got to be done very, very slowly because I just can't see how you can regulate it, especially not self-regulation anyway, which is what the previous government wanted to do.



Mistakes happen. Every meeting I've been to and they go on about how they've done it for 40 years but we know they haven't. This even states here the first one ... This is shale we're talking about, shale extraction. This happened in 2015. If you go to every meeting we go to, Matt Damon ... Sorry, I'm not sure what his name is. Yeah, he always says, "We've been doing it for 50 years in the territory." When we say, "Okay, tell us where you've done the shale extraction in the territory." "We haven't." "Why do you keep saying you have?" They just sort of fumble it off.

People that aren't involved in it, just the ordinary person in the street, they hear this all the time and they think, oh, well they know what they're doing. They've been doing it for 50 years. They haven't! They've been doing conventional fracking and that's what really makes me angry because we can't do anything about that. I really think anybody who wants to go ahead with this industry we should have like the Q&A on ABC. We should have like a fact sheet. If you think someone said something that's wrong, you can go in and you can find a like a facts-

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Fact check.

Petrena Ariston:

Fact check. Sorry, yes, because there's so many lies out there. But we keep saying, "You can't say that," and they go, "Oh," but then they keep saying it, you know what I mean? Then they say it on TV or do it in the paper and we can't actually say to them straight away, "You were lying." Or they cherry pick of what the chief scientists, the past and present, said. This same gentleman said that, "Oh, they said that if it's regulated it's all right." Well, I have got something I can just give you. Well, I've gone to see what the past and present chief scientists have said and it's completely different to what he said in his little article in the paper, which people read and think oh, well it must be all right. The chief scientist says it's all right, as long as they regulate it properly.

He didn't reference a person's name, which chief scientist it was, and didn't reference it. I've got their names here, Finkel and Ian Chubb, and I've referenced where I've got the information from.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Thank you. Yes, Dr. Jones.

Dr. David Jones:

Ms. Ariston, you referred to people saying to you, your visitors saying, "Don't let it happen here." To what extent are they basing on that this is such a lovely landscape that it shouldn't be spoiled, or their personal experiences with the industry elsewhere?

Petrena Ariston:

Well, sometimes it is their personal experience because we have people from Queensland that have come for around Chinchilla. I know that that's coal seam gas. It's the same companies. They'll do the same thing. It's a different system but it's the same companies and it's supposed to be regulated and they're having a lot of problems over there. They say how it's



affected their area. I can't remember exactly, but they say that it's really affected where they live and they love coming to the territory and then don't want to see it happen here. They've seen the damage and they say, "They say one thing and do another."

Dr. David Jones: Have you had any people, say, from the US, from the shale areas there comment to you?

Petrena Ariston: We've had John Fenton come over. John Fenton came over and gave a talk and I was quite open-minded about just going there and just listen to what he said. It's just devastating what's happened to him and he's not making any money out of it. He just come to tell people this is what will happen. They say one thing and then the other thing happens.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Sorry, who is John Fenton? I've not heard that name before.

Petrena Ariston: Sorry?

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Who is John Fenton? I have not heard that name before. Is he a scientist or is he a farmer or ...?

Petrena Ariston: I think I could be quite wrong here. I'm a bit nervous, but I think it's Dakota.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: North Dakota?

Petrena Ariston: Wyoming, sorry. He has got a property there. He has cattle. Over there it's everywhere. He said, "Oh, well, I think we should be able to work together," and of course that hasn't happened. He's lost a lot of his land and he's got sick. He's losing his hair. All that sort of stuff happened and they've destroyed his water. He has to get water brought in to his property now. The people next door to him actually left. Because they put filters on their water and it was just so black and just undrinkable that they couldn't use it anymore. They actually ... They pay them out over there to keep quiet.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Dr. Beck.

Dr. Vaughan Beck: You have very clearly articulated your concerns with industry and government. I'm wondering if we could imagine an ideal world where there was free and open disclosure and an independent regulation, and there would be disclosures on what chemicals were going to be used, what leaks, what accidents occurred, how they were remediated. There was a much more informed and open system. Would that persuade you otherwise or would you still continue to have your reservations that you've clearly identified?



Petrena Ariston: Thank you. Yes, I think I'd still have reservations because it's going to change the landscape, no matter what, which I think will affect tourism. As far as like putting in regulations, and then if a mistake happens ... So you're saying if they can clean it up. What if they can't clean it up? This is the question I just keep asking all the gas people that we talk to. If you contaminate an aquifer how can you fix it up? They never answer because they can't.

That's the one thing that once your aquifer is gone, it's gone. Water is going to be the next gold they say, and they can use water without any regulation or anything. It's the amount of water that they use ... I just cannot see it working. It would be nice if it could but, sorry, I don't think it will work.

Dr. Vaughan Beck: Thank you.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Yes.

Dr. Alan Andersen: Ms. Ariston, I'd like to ask you a question about your concern about how the industry will affect the landscape from a tourist's perspective, and the importance of the iconic outback wilderness values in the Northern Territory. The question is in the broader context of the national push for northern development that we all know about. Gas development is one of the potential developments but there are others, like irrigated agriculture. I just wanted to hear your views on how potential gas development would compare with other potential developments, like irrigated agriculture, from a tourism experience perspective.

Petrena Ariston: I think, if done properly too, irrigated agriculture is not as invasive. Also, I wonder how they're going to work together because we have ... Up in the territory I mean I do like the way it is but I know you've got to develop the north, but I think developing it in a sustainable way. That's how we have to go and I don't think gas extraction is that way. We should be maybe developing ... I know renewables it's got a long way to go, but let's start working with that.

When we have to change the structure of the way we get our energy, so maybe that's one way that the territory could develop in the north, sort of work in that sort of area with renewables. The agricultural side of it, I don't think would have too much of an effect on tourism, with the areas that it is. Like I said, it's just not as invasive. You've got your areas where they can do the agriculture, but with this mining it's sort of going to be dotted all over the place and it's going to get bigger and bigger.

They always show people one little well. This is going to be massive if they do the wells that they're going to do. It's going to be more invasive than agriculture, I think.

Hon. Justice
4. Katherine - Top Didj Cultural Experience & Art Gallery, Petrena Ariston



Rachel Pepper: I've got a question. You talked about the, and I'll perhaps use a more gentle word, the misinformation spread by the gas companies. Do you think that there's been any misinformation spread by those who are against fracking?

Petrena Ariston: Oh, I'm sure there has been because I'm very diligent of finding out facts. If somebody tells me something I go on ... You can't believe everything you hear; you see on the YouTube or on the internet. Yes, I'm not saying that there haven't been falsehoods said about that as well. Both sides, you've got to check that and just see. I know with the people here; we have had lots of people put up pictures. I said, "Well, that's not what it's going to be like. Don't use that picture." Or, animals dead but it was from a lightning strike. It wasn't from drinking the water and stuff like that.

Sometimes things have happened and when we've seen that, as our group, we've rectified that, but yes, it does happen both sides.

Hon. Justice

Rachel Pepper: Thank you. Thank you very much Ms. Ariston for coming to speak today. It's really appreciated. Thank you.

Petrena Ariston: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Hon. Justice

Rachel Pepper: Thank you.