



Katherine – Michael and Glenys Somers

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

9 August 2017

Katherine Godinmayin Yijard Rivers Arts & Culture Centre, Katherine

Speakers: Michael Somers, Glenys Somers

Glenys Somers: My name is Glenys Somers. My husband and I, we own the Bitter Springs Cabins and Camping at Mataranka. We've owned it since 2010 and we have invested most of our life savings into it. Basically, we rely on tourism for our income and two other caravan parks in Mataranka do the same as well as the town. It's consisted of, we have the lime mine which is Northern Cement. We have three fuel stations, supermarket, and then the mango farm, two watermelon farms, and they're all the biggest in the Territory. Farmers, and also very large cattle stations in the area, so we have a lot to lose if it all goes bad, which it can. That's one thing.

Then also, we have based on two sets of springs, the Rainbow Springs which is at Mataranka Homestead and the Bitter Springs. They're both in Elsey National Park, just different sides. We all work off the Tindall Water Basin, the water system. Without them we are all out of work as water goes. All the town and other people in the area, we're basically nothing. So basically everybody's employed by those businesses so the whole town's finished if we lose our water, which is spring fed. That's the start. If the springs stop flowing the town will die and we all rely on the water in the springs, the river system, the ground water to survive as it all is one of the same.

Now, if the ground water and the springs are effected in any area it also will have an effect on the whole Roper river system, which is one of the main sources in the area. The Northern Territory and resulting problems are to the numerous and mental are at the moment. All you need to do is think about the industries it feeds. The whole Roper River is prawns, fishing, farming, tourism and public health and et cetera. All the water goes out to the Gulf and goes on from there so it's a big area.

When the gas companies come in to any area, they don't care about what is going on, happening later down the track so they have got what they want and we have the mess to clean up after. And the bill to go with it is with us, not them. It happened with Western Desert just down the road on the Roper River, area that they went broke and left a mess for the people to pay



to fix it up. And again, as many other sites throughout the territory has happened to.

If you put a value on gas or water, water, the drinking water, is worth a lot more than the gas as it is only about 5% or less on the planet. Without clean water all the gas makes no difference. As most of the water on our planet is salt it will cost us a lot of money to replace our fresh drinking water. With all desalination plants around the country costs too much to run all the time. As from the recent drought that Australia had most of the states have turned them off again because they just can't afford to run them.

If you drill a hole in anything it will leak over time as nothing last forever. I would like my children and their children to enjoy this area as we have over the years. What gives the government the right to let others come onto your land and do what they like and you can't do a thing about it? The government is supposed to work, to be employed by the people, work for the people. We pay their wages, not the mining industry, the gas industry.

Health risks involved with toxic gas and other chemicals in the air and in the ground. And once again, the gas companies have gone not to be seen again. Again, as they have got their money or gone bust again. Just look at the gas industry history around the world today. One mistake or one accident is just too many. History just keeps repeating itself over and over. When the money is involved, the government and big business, you cannot trust them at all. Have you all forgotten about who pays for it in the end? We all do. That's it.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Thank you very much Miss Somers. Can you just tell me a little bit more about this legacy mine issue, about the Western Desert?

Glenys Somers:

Western Desert?

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Yeah. What happened there?

Glenys Somers:

They got quite a large exploratory license to do ...

Michael Somers:

Scalp.

Glenys Somers:

Scalp mining. They were supposed to promise to do the Roper River Road, the Roper Highway.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Yeah.

Glenys Somers:

Didn't get done.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Okay.



Glenys Somers: And lots of other issues. They were supposed to build water containers to stop the water going into the river. They went broke and it's just left an awful mess and it's all just fallen apart because we had a reasonable wet season. And so all the water went straight into the river. You can't go fishing anymore, it's all poisoned. The same thing's happened at Macarthur but you're not allowed to know about it because they're not allowed to report on them. You just can't get any information anymore and it's just wrong. Because we're governed by the ABC we haven't got any other choice of media. The ABC won't come report on it because they're government and they haven't paid taxes or anything for years and the poor aboriginals are stuck. They can't eat the fish and that's what they rely on, their native food.

Michael Somers: If I can, Michael Somers.

Hon. Justice

Rachel Pepper: Yes, thank you.

Michael Somers: There's more a principle of the mining companies, whether it be the gas or any other mining company that comes into a situation and they do their mining. If they do strike problems a lot of them do go bankrupt and they're supposed to have guaranteed monies for rehabilitation at the end of it all. Now, a lot of times it's bank guarantees of money, but if it's a bank guarantee on a company and the company goes bankrupt there's no money there for rehabilitation anyway. So the bank guarantee doesn't really mean anything at all.

With the Western Desert situation they were given a 4,000 square kilometer lease for scalp mining for iron ore. They did do a portion and then they decided they wanted a bit more for exploration purposes but the whole deal was for resale of the business in the end, not for them to mine it themselves. It was just to make it look good to sell it off. And then things just went bad for them of course so they ended up selling up. But they had half of the mine done and stock piles of iron ore left all over the place and equipment left everywhere and the roads were never repaired or built or any of the infrastructure done that they were supposed to do, which is quite a common thing with a lot of the small mines that are coming to the areas.

I think that's probably one of the main concerns if something does go wrong with the gas department or the gas industry, that who does clean it up? And how do they clean it up is more the biggest problem. Who pays for it all, especially if they do go broke? Because there's no money in the background, in the coffers, to do the repairs, and the territory definitely can't afford it.

Glenys Somers: Plus also, we don't even get gas. So why should we even spoil our land?

Hon. Justice

Rachel Pepper: What do you mean we don't get gas? What does that mean, the territory or what does that mean?

Michael Somers: Well, we don't get a gas supply.



Glenys Somers: No territories house is supplied with gas.

Michael Somers: Natural gas.

Glenys Somers: Yeah.

Michael Somers: And the other concern is the financial factor of what it does cost to get the gas out of the ground and what they're getting for it and what the government is going to make out of it themselves, as in for royalties or for commissions or whatever they might be getting paid by the gas department or the gas companies in comparison to the tourist industry or the agricultural industry or [crosstalk] in a combination?

Glenys Somers: Tourist industry, the last figures I got from the Minister for Tourism, was 2.40 ...

Michael Somers: 2.4 billion.

Glenys Somers: Billion dollars. That's just tourism alone, and it's growing every year. Now, if they start mucking up with our water systems like springs and all that because Katherine's got them. We've got them all through the whole territory. We only have to start losing one or two of those and it's a big factor in tourism because the two things they come to see is the wilderness, the animals, because we are unique. We don't have a lot of other things like other states do. Ayers Rock you're not allowed to climb anymore just through different situations, but you have the Devils Marbles as you're coming up the Stuart Highway.

There's lots of things to see but most of the tourists are coming to see Ayers Rock, Alice Springs, Devils Marbles. They'll stop at Tennant and then they'll come up and see, back of Elliot, all the birdies go there because there's lakes out there that are water holes all year round. They go to what they call Longreach water hole and that's a big tourist attraction. All the way along there is sections on the tourist run for birds. We have birds that most other countries don't have and they're quite unique. At the moment they're just on the changeover, the birds, because the season's changing so new birds are arriving every day and other birds are going.

With the tourists, we'll have in our park we've got 120 sites. Now we'll have anything from two to three hundred people there a night during tourist season, basically work from Mother's Day, Father's Day. That's our peak. In that time we will have at least 10 countries in there. It's quite amazing and that's what they come for. We've had people that come back to us every year for the last six, seven years because of the fact they only get the certain amount of holidays. They're not going to stay at home because the dollar's really good at the moment for them to come because it's slow. Now they pick a chunk and they keep coming back.

Now this last year these people went to Broome but they remembered Mataranka because they'd been there so many times, and they went to



Broome and they said, "Oh, it was so expensive there.", and then they came back and stayed a week of their two week holiday at our place because of the birds and the springs and everything. Now if the springs stop, that's just all over. And then what's going to happen to us? We've invested a lot of our money, and a lot of other people around the territory, in tourism. Tourism's been kicking off more and more every year. But tourism itself can't sustain the territory. No industry can. The gas industry I don't think is going to sustain us for five minutes because of the fact it might employ a few people at the start but then it doesn't employ them after. And most people, through the other mining that's happened in the area, they've all lost a lot of money. Mataranka lost a few businesses... accommodation, because they never paid because they have a 120 day billing time and you can't hold that.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

No.

Glenys Somers:

And they think it's great. I think Tennant Creek's starting to feel that now.

Michael Somers:

Another concern on the springs aspect is the seismic activity with fracking. Now obviously the whole Tindall Basin and the springs, they're all on a limestone plateau and with fracking, my understanding of the way fracking works, is they rupture the ground which causes seismic activity within the ground. And knowing other areas where they've had that sort of a situation, you do get your old style caves and tunnels where the water flows have a tendency to collapse and then end up coming up somewhere else, if they do come up at all. So if fracking is somewhere within the areas of those water sources I feel that it will be detrimental to it. If the springs shut up, well a major part of the problem is the fact that the Roper River for the whole of the wet season is spring fed. So if something happens with the springs in the dry season ...

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

In the dry season.

Michael Somers:

Sorry. It is spring fed so if something does happen to the springs that feed it and they draw a lot of the water from that aquifer, well then the Roper River will become a dry river bed like the Finke River is in the dry season. That destroys a very, very big industry within the Gulf for the fishing and the tourism and a lot of other industries that rely on the Roper River flowing all year round.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Thank you. Yes. Yes, Professor Priestly.

Professor
Brian Priestly:

I understand your concerns about water security. You expressed those quite elegantly. I wonder if you would find it acceptable if it could be shown that the level of contamination of an aquifer does not exceed applicable water quality standards, health-based water quality standards for the chemicals released?



Glenys Somers: They say that the chemicals are the same as what you have under your kitchen sink. Now were you to put all those in a bottle of water and shook it all up and you drank it, would you be satisfied?

Professor
Brian Priestly: If it met water quality standard, that's the point that I'm trying to make.

Glenys Somers: Yeah, but see I can't even go to the other cities and drink their water. I get very ill.

Michael Somers: Tap water.

Glenys Somers: Tap water.

Michael Somers: I'm a plumber by trade.

Glenys Somers: Yeah, he does a double filter by a double filter for me.

Michael Somers: I've been in the water industry for a long, long time as far as water quality goes and other bits and pieces. If I could be proved 100% that the water quality was going to be as good going back into the system than what the water is already in the ground, yeah I'd be quite satisfied. But it's the other chemicals and stuff that they've put in to do the drilling and everything else to start with, and going by what I've been told by other sources and people that are in the industry or retired from the industry from a long time ago, they didn't seem to care too much about what they were doing or what was going on back in the day. And these are people that were related with all of the offshore drilling on the top of WA on the Northern Territory. And there's a few bodies I know that were involved in all of that and just their general practise of what they used to do out in the field is very concerning about how that come about and what they do.

A lot of them are doing the fracturing side of things, and if they're standing on the surface and they're so far down underground and they can feel the quakes on the surface, it tells me there's a lot of ground movement going on there. It has to be detrimental somewhere along the line and all the way up.

Glenys Somers: Also the gas industry. Now if we can sustain ourselves without that, why do we need it? What's the point in wrecking it for today? Why can't we save things for a hundred years down the track when everybody else has run out? We're just selling everything off to foreign companies that don't pay tax anymore. No one pays tax anymore.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: I pay a little tax.

Professor
Brian Priestly: As I do.

Michael Somers: I know we do. Small business do.



Glenys Somers: Yeah, but big business are just walking away with it because they've set themselves up overseas. And it's just happening all the time. You know BHPs just done it, and that's a big company. The little guy, which is us, we have to foot the bill to fix it all when it's all wrong. And it does go wrong. You only have to look around the world, everywhere you read now there's something. We get them from the people from overseas. They've signed our cards and they've put on our petitions. I think we got the most petitions in the whole region at our park. I think we were getting 20 sheets a day, people writing in there and saying what country they were from and why they didn't like it and what was happening in their country, which was all presented to the government. But I don't think they're listening.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: There is a moratorium in place.

Michael Somers: Yeah.

Glenys Somers: Yeah, I know.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: So I think they did listen to them at least a little bit.

Glenys Somers: Yeah, I know.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Yes, Professor Hart.

Professor
Barry Hart AM: Could I just follow up the ground water question?

Glenys Somers: Yeah.

Professor
Barry Hart AM: Not from a quality point of view but from a quantity point of view.

Glenys Somers: Yeah.

Professor
Barry Hart AM: Your concern is one obviously we are concerned. Yes certainly, but I'm just talking here about the quantity coming through.

Glenys Somers: Yeah.

Professor
Barry Hart AM: It's certainly one of the high areas, high risk areas for us.

Glenys Somers: Yeah.



- Professor
Barry Hart AM: We need to work that through. And the whole business, you've focused on the hot springs and the Roper itself.
- Glenys Somers: Yeah.
- Professor
Barry Hart AM: They to us, they represent what I call ground water dependent ecosystems.
- Glenys Somers: Yeah.
- Professor
Barry Hart AM: They're dependent on the springs, the ground water. So could I put it to you, what would it take to ease your concerns that that's a key issue?
- Glenys Somers: Well when I...
- Michael Somers: To ease our concerns on how much water might be drawn off us?
- Professor
Barry Hart AM: Yeah. Yeah, that it's ...
- Michael Somers: Well, proper regulation in government control on how much water is allocated to be drawn off. From our understanding with mining industry, they don't have any quotas that they have to stand by, whereas all the other industries within the region have metered systems on their bores so they have a quota that they can draw on. Possibly if mining had to metre the amount of water they used as well and they couldn't just take it out freehold without any worries, it would be a bit of a different system. But you're also governed by wet season, rainfall that you can get. Obviously a wet season you get the rainfall today, it doesn't come into effect next year.
- Professor
Barry Hart AM: Absolutely not.
- Michael Somers: It comes into effect in years to come. It takes a while to get down there. But I think there needs to be some sort of a total water usage within the aquifer that's sustainable by everybody concerned, not just the industry itself.
- Professor
Barry Hart AM: Thank you, that's good.
- Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: No, I think that's an excellent point that, I think you're quite right and everybody sitting at this table would agree that there does have to be proper water usage regulated at that regional level.
- Michael Somers: Yeah, it's everybody's concern not just one body.



Glenys Somers: They all interact through the whole territory even down past Elliot and that. They're all connected to us because that all feeds the Roper too. Because when that floods that all floods in further down, comes sort of down and around and back in. And they're all interconnected. I don't how you could say it might be a creek today but then it's a raging river tomorrow when it rains.

Michael Somers: Another thing was pointed out to us a few weeks ago was we've been told that certain areas that are supposed to be like sanctuary zones where they're not supposed to be any drilling or testing or whatever, which would be water courses, water supplies and tourism type areas. Now, what sort of distance would they be looking at to stay away from those particular areas, especially when you consider how far they can drill horizontally underground? One figure that was mentioned to us as far as say like for the springs itself would be 200 kilometres away. That's a big area to be staying away from, but whether that's factual or not I don't know. I suppose it come out from some report that someone was on the radio about. They were saying that they should be staying within no closer than 200 kilometres to any of those resources.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Do you recall where you heard that?

Michael Somers: No, it was just on the radio one day when it was on while I was working away.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Fair enough. Any further questions? Again, thank you very much Mr. and Mrs. Somers for coming here today, presenting to us and giving us important firsthand accounts and firsthand information of what you do and your activities and how this industry might impact upon you directly.

Glenys Somers: Yeah.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: It's very important. Thank you.

Glenys Somers: There's one other thing.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper: Yeah.

Glenys Somers: No one's going to pay compensation for anybody when it all goes wrong so basically that's one issue that's really scary. Because you look at the cattle stations, they've invested a lot of money. We've invested a lot of money. There are businesses through the whole region, through the whole territory. That's why you live up here. You don't do it for the money, you do it for the... part of the lifestyle because we don't like the rat race. No one else does, that's why you live up here. But you pay a price for it. You don't get fresh food. You don't get a lot of things that city people get. And that's the



thing, you have to start growing your own and you just have a little supply that keeps you going. I don't whether any of you have gone to Woolies, it's not always there. One supermarket for a thousand kilometre radius.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Noted.

Glenys Somers:

Yeah, okay.

Michael Somers:

thank you for our opportunity.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Again, thank you very much for coming.

Glenys Somers:

Yeah.

Hon. Justice
Rachel Pepper:

Thank you.

Michael Somers:

Thank you.