

IN THE CORONERS COURT OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY OF AUSTRALIA

Rel No: D0231/2025

Police No: 25 99723

CORONERS FINDINGS

Section 34 of the Coroners Act 1993

I, Elisabeth Armitage, Coroner, having investigated the death of **GÜNTER HELMUT SPERLICH** and without holding an inquest, find that the identity of the deceased was **Günter Helmut Sperlich**, born on **11 August 1946** and that his **death occurred on 6 October 2025, at Nitmiluk National Park in the Northern Territory of Australia.**

Introduction

Mr Günter Sperlich was a fit, well-travelled and experienced 79 year-old hiker from Germany. Despite his previous hiking experience, he was not acclimatised to the tropical heat of the Top End and he passed away from environmental heat exposure while undertaking a moderate hike in Nitmiluk National Park.

It is not known whether or to what extent he was aware of the heat risk, or whether he had read 'Beat the Heat' information. 'Beat the Heat' information is available in English only and the evidence indicated that Günter had limited English.

I am recommending that the 'Beat the Heat' information campaign be updated to include multi-language information.

Cause of death

1(a) Disease or condition leading directly to death: **Environmental heat exposure**

Following an autopsy on 8 October 2025, Forensic Pathologist, Dr Salona Roopan commented:

- The opinion as to the cause of death is based on the available police and medical information, and a full post-mortem examination including ancillary investigations.
- At autopsy, the decedent was fully clothed with features of early decomposition and environment-related skin changes consistent with prolonged sun exposure. There were minor abrasions over the left side of the face, chest, limbs, and back-findings consistent with minor falls or contact with rough ground during collapse. The internal examination showed mild coronary atherosclerosis, with no acute infarction or significant cardiac pathology, upper lobe pleural adhesions of the left lung (may be indicative of prior inflammation). A focal area of subarachnoid bloodstaining

over the right parieto-occipital lobe, which may represent a minor traumatic contusion or agonal artefact, but no major intracranial haemorrhage or injury was identified. There was minimal, concentrated, bloodstained urine within the bladder and autolytic and decomposition changes in the viscera which may have limited assessment of subtle pathology. Biochemical analysis of vitreous fluid showed an elevated creatinine (117 $\mu\text{mol/L}$) which may be indicative of dehydration and acute kidney injury (AKI) at the time of death. Histology also confirmed acute tubular injury, with background decomposition artefact.

- Toxicology showed doxylamine (an anti-histamine medication used to treat allergies) at a therapeutic concentration and no alcohol was detected.
- The acute kidney injury and concentrated urine are consistent with biochemical manifestations of volume depletion and hyperthermia-associated multi-organ dysfunction. The minor abrasions likely occurred during collapse, and the focal mild subarachnoid bloodstaining is not sufficient to account for death. There is no evidence of a significant natural disease process, trauma, or toxicological cause that could otherwise explain the death.
- The decedent's recent arrival from Germany to the Northern Territory in October - a period associated with rising temperatures and humidity - suggests a lack of acclimatisation to the tropical environment. Individuals who are not heat-acclimatised are more vulnerable to heat stress and their bodies are less efficient to thermoregulation through sweating and cardiovascular adaptation. When an individual becomes disoriented or wanders outdoors in high ambient temperatures, the combination of dehydration, direct heat stress, and impaired thermoregulation can rapidly lead to heat exhaustion and heat stroke.
- Older age, potential pre-existing medical comorbidities (which were unknown at this time-the decedent was from overseas), and exposure to a hot environment would have increased the decedent's susceptibility to heat stress and dehydration, particularly if water intake was limited or if the individual became confused and was unable to seek shade or assistance.
- The findings were most consistent with death due to environmental heat exposure (heat-related illness), occurring in an older individual.

Police investigation

A coronial investigation by police found no suspicious circumstances surrounding this death.

Background

Günter was born in and resided in Germany. He was married and had one daughter and one granddaughter. He was a retired builder and landscaper and seasoned traveler. He was a fit and an experienced hiker and had recently completed a long distance hike along the Silk Road. He had no known health conditions and he did not take any regular medication.

He was a much-loved husband and family man.

Circumstances

Günter and his wife were on a three month campervan tour of Australia. They were travelling in a group of 22 travelers led by SeaBridge Tours. The tour involved the group travelling together in campervans to set locations. However, the participants were free to explore each location independently.

On 6 October 2025, the group was camping at Nitmiluk National Park. At around 7.30am Günter decided to walk to Butterfly Gorge (11.8km return) on his own. In his backpack he carried 1 litre of water, a first aid kit, his mobile phone and some cookies. He carried a set of walking poles.

When he had not returned at about 1pm as expected, his wife reported him missing to the tour group guide and to the Parks and Wildlife Rangers.

Park Rangers searched on foot but did not locate Günter. They then used a helicopter in an effort to locate him.

At about 5.00pm, his body was located by hikers. He was found lying on his back, over a small pile of rocks on the edge of the track approximately 5-6kms from the Ranger Station on the Butterfly Gorge track. His backpack was partially underneath him and the strap was around his arm. His phone was on the ground beside him. His cap was under his head, his sunglasses and watch were on, and his hearing aids were in place. A trail map was in his back pocket. Rigor Mortis and lividity had set in and it was clear that he was deceased.

A crime scene was declared and NT Police guarded him overnight until he was extracted by helicopter the following morning.

On Monday 6 October 2025, the temperature in Nitmiluk National Park was between a low of 22°C and a high of 38°C with humidity reaching a high of 73%. When he left the campground at about 7:30am the temperature was about 26°C. At the time when he should have reached Butterfly Gorge the temperature was about 35°C.

In October, the temperature rises rapidly and it is historically the hottest month, with average daytime highs reaching 38°C to 40°C. The rocky plateau areas can be up to 10°C hotter than the gorge floor.

There is a sign in the foyer of the Nitmiluk National Park Information Centre which warns of extreme temperatures and heat, and the precautions that should be taken. 'Beat The Heat' information pamphlets are also available to visitors in the foyer of the Information Centre. All the information is in English only. There are no multilanguage signs or pamphlets. It is not known whether the deceased received any information about heat mitigation.

To access the track to Butterfly Gorge, there is no need to enter the Information Centre. There are no similar high visibility 'Beat the Heat' warning signs at the start of the tracks or at the entry or exits of the campground, where the deceased was staying.

At the starting point of the Baruwei Loop and Southern Walk walking trails, there is an information board for hikers, outlining routes, water refill locations, and comfort points. The board has a list of items that walkers should carry which includes 3 litres of water, energy snacks, a first aid kit and a broad brimmed hat. The information on safety aspects is printed in small lettering and is in English. There is no information in multi languages.

Günter and his wife had limited English skills.

The 11.8 kilometre return trail that Günter was walking is estimated to take 4.5 hours to complete. It has a Grade 3 moderate trail rating. As the deceased was an experienced hiker and fit, the terrain would not have been challenging for him.

The deceased was found with his 1 litre water bottle containing about 250ml of water. Assuming the water bottle was full when he left the campground, this suggests that he was drinking along the trail. Cookies and a basic first aid kit were found in his backpack. He was wearing appropriate hiking clothing except he had chosen a cap rather than a broad brimmed hat.

The Chief Executive Officer Parks and Wildlife Commission was provided a draft of these findings, the proposed recommendation and the opportunity to respond. No further information or submissions were received.

Recommendations

Police spoke with Mr Arun George, Chief Executive Officer of Nitmiluk Tours and Cicada Lodge. Improvements to 'Beat the Heat' signage and safety warnings were discussed.

Consistent with those discussions I make the following recommendation:

1. I recommend to the **National Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission**, in consultation with the Jawoyn Association Aboriginal Corporation, that:
 - a. The 'Beat the Heat' campaign be updated by including QR codes, a multi-language portal, or similar, so that non-English speaking residents and travelers can access the 'Beat the Heat' safety information on their phone and in their own language.
 - b. Additional "Beat the Heat" signage be posted around the Nitmiluk campground, carpark and at the entrance to the walking tracks.
 - c. The existing safety information on track signage be visually emphasised.
 - d. A scannable QR code with multi language options be added to all safety warnings and trail signage so that non-English speaking visitors can access safety information in their own language via their mobile phone.
 - e. Signage in multiple commonly spoken languages be erected in the Information Centre, campground and at the start of walking trails to alert visitors to access the 'Beat the Heat' QR safety code.

Decision not to hold an inquest

Under section 16(1) of the *Coroners Act 1993* I decided not to hold an inquest because the investigations into the death disclosed:

- The time, place and cause of death;
- The relevant circumstances concerning the death;
- I do not consider that the holding of an inquest would elicit any information additional to that disclosed in the investigation to date; and
- The circumstances do not require a mandatory inquest because:
 - The deceased was not, immediately before death, a person held in care or custody; and
 - The death was not caused or contributed to by injuries sustained while the deceased was held in custody; and
 - The identity of the deceased is known.