

Major safety questions emerge after fatal accident at Australia's Dreamworld theme park

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Major questions over safety and maintenance have emerged just days after a fatal accident at the Dreamworld theme park on Queensland's Gold Coast claimed four lives. Press accounts, witness testimony and previously suppressed safety reports have all pointed to a culture of official cover-ups and intimidation against workers who spoke out, which may have contributed to the tragic incident.

Three of the victims, Roozbeh Araghi, 38, Luke Dorsett, 35, and Kate Goodchild, 32, had been on holidays from Canberra. Cindy Low, a 42-year-old from Sydney also lost her life. The theme park has been a popular destination for Australian and international tourists and holidaymakers.

The accident occurred on the Thunder River Rapids ride on Tuesday. An apparent malfunction caused the raft that the victims were travelling on to collide with another, stationary raft. As a result, their raft flipped back onto the conveyor belt. Two of the adults were thrown from the ride and another two were caught in the moving belt. All four were pronounced dead at the scene.

Two young children, who had been on the vessel, scrambled to safety and survived. They are thought to have seen the death of their parents. Witnesses reported deeply distressing scenes in the incident's aftermath.

The park, owned by Ardent Leisure, had been set to reopen today for a "memorial day." That was cancelled after a public backlash. The park remains a crime scene and the tragedy will be the subject of a coronial inquest. Representatives from the law firm Maurice Blackburn have foreshadowed that the incident could result in substantial lawsuits.

The police investigation is still seeking to determine the cause of the accident. However, Jon Armstrong, who worked as an operator on Thunder River Rapids in 1987 when it first opened has said that the ride may have had a "potentially fatal flaw." He told Sky News that the ride did not have an automatic shutdown mechanism if one raft became stuck on the conveyor belt, causing those behind to collide with it and

potentially flip over.

According to *news.com.au* the ride had malfunctioned twice on Tuesday before the fatal accident. One park-goer who was on Thunder River Rapids earlier in the day told the news outlet that he had concerns about the Velcro straps that are used as seat belts on the ride.

Jade Dunlop, who went to the park in July, told ABC Radio that staff had dismissed her concerns after the raft that she was travelling on collided with stationary rafts in front of it. According to Dunlop, staff told her that "All the empty rides get stuck there." Another man said that he was on the ride last month when the water pump stopped working and his raft was stuck in the same spot as the recent accident.

Parkz, a theme park news site, reported that the ride has fewer wooden slats supporting the rafts than on most similar rides and that many of them were removed during modifications.

The questions over Thunder River Rapids have emerged amid indications of other safety issues at Dreamworld. At least two other serious accidents have occurred this year.

In January, a young child was caught by the foot and the neck in an improvised partition that staff had erected on one ride. Paul Hastings, a senior inspector of Work Health and Safety Queensland verified aspects of the complaint about the incident but did not issue a safety notice or audit.

In April, a 19-year-old was thrown from the park's log ride. He was run over by two other boats, and almost drowned, suffering serious head and neck injuries and acute respiratory failure. On Thursday, the *Brisbane Times* reported that court documents showed the park had faced almost \$2 million in lawsuits over a string of incidents and injuries since 2010.

Ben Swan, the Queensland secretary of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), which covers a number of the park's staff, has responded to the tragedy by stating that "this accident will not come as a surprise to Dreamworld management."

Swan claimed that the union had been complaining about safety practices at the park for a year and a half. “We did hold some very grave concerns about safety of equipment and the operation of equipment and as [of] about three weeks ago we were still raising issues with the company about safety,” he said. Swan stated that the union’s complaints had met with “resistance” from the company, and that workers who spoke out were “intimidated.”

An anonymous complaint to Workplace Health and Safety Queensland in August 2014 stated, “Unfortunately employees at Dreamworld are too frightened to raise these issues themselves for fear of reprisals from management. In my opinion Dreamworld target employees who speak up.”

The AWU claims that over an 18-month period, it sought access to safety reports to Workplace Health and Safety Queensland in a “Right to Information” claim, but was blocked by Dreamworld, along with the Queensland Department of Justice and the state’s attorney-general. According to the *Guardian*, the union gained access to some of the documents last year.

The AWU has not explained why it never publicly exposed the safety practices at the park or took any action against them.

On Wednesday, the day after the accident, the safety regulator released the documents in an apparent act of damage control. The documents reveal that in 2012, a private inspector found that air compressors on 13 rides were “not fit for service.” Air compressors can potentially explode and cause serious injury if not adequately maintained.

In an email to Workplace Health and Safety Queensland, the inspector reported that he had issued “corrective actions” for the air compressors, but that Dreamworld’s engineer had stated that the park was exempt from registration requirements.

The inspector wrote that, “The engineering department at Dreamworld did not produce any evidence of having a quality management system in place or any previous vessel inspection reports.” When Dreamworld refused to correspond with him further, he appealed to Workplace Health and Safety Queensland to intervene. They declared that licenses were not necessary for each of the compressors.

An anonymous report from October 2012 stated that, “Several rides and water slides are in dire need of fixing, rust visible and falling into pools and major leaks, cracks, chips on slides. Tape is used to cover rides, Queensland licence stickers out of date at rides.”

One document, from August 2012, detailed a dangerous incident on the Cyclone rollercoaster. When the ride stalled, one employee instructed patrons that they would need to evacuate. Tradesmen seeking to fix the ride reset the

“variable speed drive” and the roller coaster unexpectedly restarted. Some of those on board had removed their secondary restraints, which function as back-up seatbelts.

Broader questions have been raised about the safety certification process for theme parks. It is not legally required that government officials directly inspect rides. Instead, the companies are supposedly investigated privately. They hire an accredited engineer, whose report is then subjected to a “desk audit” by a representative of Workplace Health and Safety Queensland. These practices, which could be described as “self-certification,” have led to widely documented safety problems in the building industry and elsewhere (see: “Australia: Bankstown fire points to safety de-regulation”).

Ardent Leisure’s shares fell by as much as 22 percent on Tuesday. Reports that the company’s CEO, Deborah Thomas, was in line for a bonus of \$850,000 sparked widespread anger. Despite the many revelations that have emerged since the accident, the company continues to insist that there was nothing wrong with its safety practices. Ardent Leisure owns a portfolio of 100 assets in Australia, New Zealand and the US. In August, the company registered a net profit of \$42.4 million, up 32 percent, and outlined plans for a further expansion in the US market.

While assorted politicians have responded to the latest tragedy with crocodile tears, their prime concern is the stability of the Gold Coast tourist industry, worth up to \$4 billion a year.

Gold Coast mayor Tom Tate declared, “We’re going to have to help the family of Dreamworld” the day after the accident. Labor premier Anastacia Palaszczuk cynically stated that “the Gold Coast is safe,” and pathetically pleaded with tourists, “please don’t alter your holiday plans.”



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