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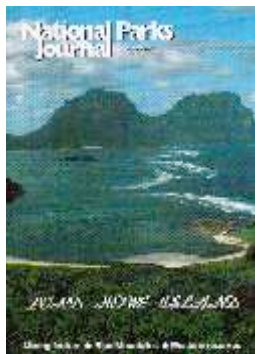
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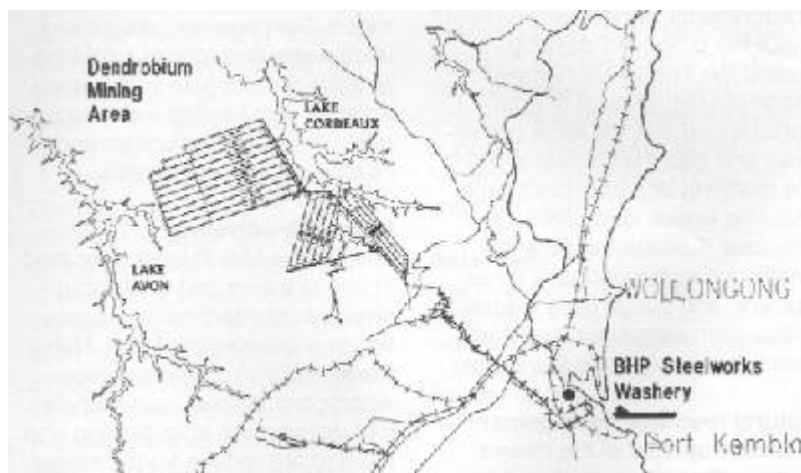
Mining muddies water

Keith Muir

Director of the Colong Foundation for Wilderness

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Colong Foundation, NPA, and the Colo Committee, along with the Confederation of Bushwalking Clubs, brought the plight of Newnes Plateau to public attention. Literally hundreds of cliffs along the Plateau have fallen due to longwall coal mining since the concerns were first raised. The declaration of the Gardens of Stone National Park over the areas unsuitable for mining was a small advance but in other areas available for mining, including Mount Airly and the upper Wollangambe River catchment, little has been achieved to safeguard the environment.

One of the new players in the Gardens of Stone area, Centennial Coal, appeared to be different. It abandoned the use of longwall mining machines in the Clarence Colliery, which enabled the possibility of partial coal extraction to be adopted for sensitive areas like cliffs and swamps. Then, in March 1999, the company announced that to continue pollution of the Wollangambe River "is not an option that is acceptable to Centennial, Department of Land and Water Conservation, Lithgow City Council, or the Environment Protection Authority". The mine had continuously polluted the river for about 25 years, so this was another welcome initiative.



Proposed Dendrobium mine, between Avon and Codreaux dams

Map adapted from the BHP EIS, 2001

It hardly seemed necessary to mention the soon-to-be-stopped pollution to the World Heritage Committee who were about to decide on the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage nomination. As a result, this pollution did not impede the success of last November's nomination.

When producing the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for expansion of the Clarence Colliery, to deep within proposed national park, it was surprising that Centennial did not propose any solution to the Wollangambe pollution problem and offered only limited surface protection.

Sydney and Blue Mountains residents anticipated that World Heritage listing would provide better protection for the Greater Blue Mountains National Park system (see also p10). Here was a test case. As it turned out, the pride shown by the community in the listing was a powerful defence for the area. It sensitised government into reviewing the Clarence expansion proposal. The extent to which the new Federal environmental laws will help in these situations remains to be seen. These laws will delegate development control for World Heritage areas to State governments and results will be highly variable to say the least.

In response to criticisms over water pollution from its colliery and proposed extensions, Managing Director of Centennial Coal, Robert Cameron, stated that "water discharged from Clarence Colliery is good quality underground water – it is not polluted water".

According to the Protection of the Environment Operations Act, however, the discharged water is pollution. Over 14 Olympic swimming pools a day of this water are discharged into the Wollangambe River. The Wollangambe is a significant wild river in the Wollemi wilderness and used by thousands of park visitors each year. The mine water creates a 'biofilm' – a very slippery jelly-like substance – on the rocks of the river bed, and for canyoneers downstream this could lead to serious accidents or even death.

Responding to community concern, the government has required a supplementary EIS that will develop a proposal for removal of the pollution from the river.

Centennial's promise of partial coal extraction also proved to be a disappointment. It may only apply to the 20% of the mining proposal covered by subsidence protection zones. If full extraction mining damages new groundwater aquifers in the remaining 80% of the proposal, the pollution flow from the mine will increase.

The problem with Gooches Crater

The mine expansion proposal is now on hold and it is unclear whether the supplementary EIS will assess mine subsidence issues. To those who know the upper Wollangambe River catchment, the current 20% level of protection is inadequate. The unique Gooches Crater area, one of the most amazing places in the Blue Mountains, is not protected. Its upland swamps, wetlands, rare plants, slot canyon, extensive pagodas (iron-banded rock pinnacles that resemble Chinese temples), the natural rock bridge and majestic old growth forest could be deprived of life-giving water and reduced to rubble by mine subsidence.

Despite three EIS reports, the Gooches Crater wonderland has not been assessed for protection. The Colong Foundation considers that the mining lease issued without the required EIS is unlawful, but this question has not been tested before the court. (We are unclear on just how much red tape the miners have cut away.) Centennial Coal should protect Gooches Crater rather than start mining and risk being stopped by determined opposition.



The swamp at Gooches Crater will be starved of water if mining proceeds underneath.

Photo: Henry Gold

The ugly truth

The problems at the Clarence mine are not an isolated example of catchment damage. BHP's proposed Dendrobium coal mine in the South Metropolitan Catchment Area above Wollongong is shaping to be a major controversy (see map). A five-volume blockbuster EIS has been prepared that is in proportion with the scale of potential impact.

Longwall coal mining has cracked and drained the reaches of the Georges River, the Nepean River and the Cataract River, and however many unknown creeks in the Southern Metropolitan Catchment Areas, but now BHP is being up front about the damage.

The Dendrobium mine proposes to use longwall mining machinery, and BHP offers no subsidence protection to limit the two-metre surface movement above the mined areas. The EIS advises that the cliff lines of the area will be mutilated (the subsidence consultants predict 10% damage). Cracking of rock slabs on creek beds will occur, rock pools will be drained, water loss from the Avon and Cordeaux dams is possible, and the potential for an inrush of water into the mine is also noted (the Gretley Mine disaster scenario that killed six miners at Wallsend near Newcastle was similar).

Soil slumping and landslides into creek beds and stored waters could degrade drinking water quality, upland swamps will be starved of water and coal gas may kill native vegetation.

BHP is not intending to avoid these extensive impacts. They only offer repair jobs to patch the catchment back together, with a range of experimental techniques. The alternative of avoiding damage to the water catchment by partial extraction of the coal, leaving pillars in the mine to avoid surface subsidence, was not considered.

The Dendrobium EIS is another example of denial of the importance of the environment by the mining industry.

BHP having rejected protection for a catchment that society considers so sensitive that all public entry is prohibited, one has to wonder why such an EIS was prepared. The mining industry must have some romantic ideas about its own worth when compared to that of Sydney's 4 million water consumers.

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