



RIVERS SOS

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Dear Professor Garnaut,

I am writing to you on behalf of Rivers SOS, currently an alliance of thirty seven community groups in New South Wales. This alliance has grown exponentially in the few years since its formation, and involves people who are gravely concerned about the serious effects of current coal mining practices in this state.

The following, in brief, lists some of the impacts of the most carbon-intensive industry in Australia: coal mining and its relation to coal-fired energy production.

Longwall and open cut mining in the Hunter, and longwall mining in the Illawarra have caused severe and well documented water loss; damaged and polluted aquifers; seriously impacted on aquatic systems, on river water flow; caused toxic gas emissions; fire and anaerobic conditions; impacted on rock stability; caused upsidence and horizontal closure of valley sides and dieback of vegetation including the serious drying of upland swamps. People in the northern coalfields are also subjected to a gross level of noise and air pollution. Productivity of important enterprises is also seriously damaged: agriculture, viticulture, horse breeding, tourism, private property, public infrastructure and health are all casualties of an ill-controlled minerals industry.

The present relation of Australian mineral resources to the economy, and the power of the political rhetoric that is taken to legitimise this relation, is often in total contradiction with current political rhetoric about climate change and global warming. The reality is that despite the vast amount of scientific work indicating the seriousness of global warming, and most importantly, analyses which document the cost-effectiveness of genuinely sustainable energy technologies¹, state and federal governments continue to protect the interests of carbon -intensive mining industries regardless of the present and long -term damage they induce. At present there appears to be no sophisticated analyses or understanding of the complex relational processes that constitute 'the economy' beyond the traditional ideas built on the supposed reliability, and much believed in, fundamental concepts of nineteenth century thinking – in these terms 'progress' and 'growth' are economically sacrosanct. The problem with such abstractions is they have the capacity to legitimate anything; the current drive for the optimal development of Australian mineral resources in ways that are unsustainable is an example. In a globalised economy the question is how much of this development is 'Australian' since four multinational coal corporations own over seventy percent, and most of the profits go overseas.² Australia, given the interests of global miners, seems to be considered a vast quarry, exploitable in much the same way as 'third' world countries such as Africa and South America; all suffer the effects of uncontrolled mining.

¹ Mark Diesendorf, *Greenhouse Solutions with Sustainable Energy*, UNSW Press, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2007

² G. Pearse, *High and Dry*, Viking/Penguin Books, Australia 2007. p.p300-301. This is an important and formidable source for economic data on the mining industry.

In order to effectively collate the impacts of current mining practices in New South Wales Rivers SOS has researched and analysed the work of professional mining engineers, scientists and economists as well as collecting empirical evidence by visiting mine sites. It has also engaged legal help in reviewing the documents produced by mining corporations against the supposed protection of Part 5 and Part 3A of the *Amendment to the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act of 1979*. The legal minefields in this amendment make it difficult for any changes to be instituted given that the court is excluded as much as possible in dealing with Part 3 of the amendment.³ An example of this is the Land and Environment Court's judgement that the New South Wales planning minister's approval of the projected huge Anvil Hill mine, (now partly owned by Korean interests) should stand. This approval was upheld despite scientific and community opposition.

Rivers SOS has also analysed the abstract, and what can only be called romantic ideals, on paper, of the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries. This department states that its 'priority' is to raise the standards of environmental management. Once again it is obvious that there is a wide gap between the real and the unreal; these ideals, and the rhetoric that accompanies them are in stark contrast with what is actually happening: serious and often irreparable damage to rivers and waterways in the northern and southern coalfields in New South Wales, and the dislocation of the social fabric.

It has to be seen as extraordinary that despite scientific evidence and warnings about the acceleration of global warming, the New South Wales government continues to approve the construction of new mines. Its intention to build *at least two more coal-fired power stations* which mean an enormous increase in CO₂ emissions, is also almost beyond belief given present conditions. According to Pearse, mining policies such as these will continue to 'expand energy consumption and attract energy-intensive industries to Australia.'⁴ These projects are legitimised by the spin that they are essential for the 'economic well-being' of the people of New South Wales. The fact that this well-being' is tied to an increase in the production of coal-fired energy is not mentioned and opponents are designated 'stone-agers'. This mind-set is so intransigent that it cannot, or does not dare, question what this 'economy' or its relation to 'well-being' entails: that it must degrade the environment on which it depends.

It has never been difficult, even apart from the above examples, to recognise that Australian governments are pro-mining, dazzled by the increase in mining royalties and the relation of this to societal demands and thus political survival. The danger is that political power, a complex issue at best, is presently able to override both scientific and community opposition to the increasing damage to the Australian environment by the mostly external corporate interests.⁵

In detailed research analyses, Diesendorf and Pearse argue that both state and federal governments are presently controlled by the 'greenhouse mafia'; the big greenhouse gas emitters. The seriousness of this situation calls for economic analyses which can go beyond the idea that there is an absolute thing called the 'Australian economy', and

³ D.Farrier, Institute for Conservation, Biology and Law, University of Wollongong, in a paper given in the Campbelltown Art Centre, August, 2007

⁴ G.Pearse, *ibid.* p.168

⁵ Farrier states that environmental decisions are now often taken away from the court and handed to politicians.

incorporate an assessment of the real level of economic interests and ownership of 'Australian' industry, since this ownership profoundly contaminates Australian politics and policies.⁶

It is argued here that there are important critical questions to be asked about the adequacy of the knowledge bases of current thinking. Abstract concepts which are presumed to be self-evident (the 'economy'), mathematical models (self-regulating competitive markets), and utopian visions ('clean' coal)⁷ are all based on the idea that abstract models can be used to deal with, and solve, the problems which emerge from current practices. None of these are adequate in terms of finding solutions to twenty first century problems, since their terms of reference rely on the conceptual framework of past thinking.

An increase in community anger is being generated by the refusal of the New South Wales government to take into account the serious damage being done by its continuing approval of carbon dioxide intensive industries. Despite the vast amount of research work done, delegations to politicians, letters, media coverage and community demonstrations against present mining practices, nothing has changed. Governmental inaction raises questions about whether twentieth century political structures have the capacity to deal with the inherently complex contradictions of capitalist processes. It is interesting that the state of California is presently taking the American Environmental Protection Authority to court over its recent decision to block rules curbing greenhouse gas emissions. The important point here is that the American federal government was involved in the EPA's decision. Political interference such as this, and the inadequacies in current environmental legislation can be found operating in the decisions made by Australian courts.⁸

A DVD produced by Rivers SOS, and launched in the New South Wales Parliament House theatre in November 2006 is included here, and a few of the documents from concerned community groups. An update of the DVD is presently being made. Rivers SOS alliance asks if it would be possible for you to receive a delegation to discuss some of the above problems, which are obviously connected to the complex processes which are involved in the thing we call the economy.

With best wishes,



(Kathe Robinson, for Rivers SOS)

⁶ G.Pearse, op.cit p.p 18, 32 . Pearse argues, that it is important that we don't mistake the economic interests of the big polluters for the national interest.fP.305

⁷ It is interesting that despite the importance of the Stern Report, it does not include the economic and environmental damage being done by the way coal is mined. 'Clean coal' is yet another rhetorical flourish which attempts to cover up the fact that coal can never be clean- it is dirty at every level. Of interest here is the fact that the big corporations have provided \$300 million to promote this utopian vision.

⁸ Although Peter Gray, in November 2006, took Centennial coal and the state government to court over the future greenhouse gas emissions coming from the projected Anvil Hill mine and won, this did not negate the government's decision regarding the approval for this mine, and nothing has changed.

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NSW Rivers of Shame

- Seven major rivers and numerous creeks in NSW, named below, have been permanently damaged by mining operations allowed to go too close to, or under, river beds. Also some rivers are used as channels for saline and acid waste water pumped out from mines.
- Many more are under threat right now. Rivers SOS is concerned that Minister for Primary Industries, Ian Macdonald, will continue to give Government approval for mining operations which will wreck several more of our rivers. Minister for Planning, Frank Sartor, and Environment Minister Bob Debus are also involved in these decisions, as are a range of relevant government agencies (EPA, Fisheries, DPI, Department of Natural Resources, Sydney Catchment Authority, Dam Safety Committee) on the Interagency Review Committee. This group gives recommendations concerning mine plans to Ian Macdonald, but has no further say in his final decision.
- **This damage involves multiple cracking of river bedrock, ranging from hairline cracks to cracks up to several centimetres wide, causing serious water loss and pollution as ecotoxic chemicals are leached from the fractured rocks. Aquifers may often be breached. Satisfactory remediation is not possible. In addition, rockfalls along mined river gorges are frequent. This loss cannot be legitimised in a country which is now suffering the effects of careless and uncontrolled use of water resources, and the effects (not unconnected) of global warming.**
- The rapidly rising price of coal and the royalties gained from expanding mines for a cash-strapped government make it all too tempting for the Iemma Government to sacrifice natural heritage for the sake of short term gains

- Rivers SOS is a coalition of 32 groups which have joined together with the sole aim of campaigning for the NSW Government to mandate a safety zone of at least 1 km round all rivers in NSW, to protect them from damage being caused by mining operations. Such a safety zone is surely not much to ask, given the huge profits being made from our coal.
- The following rivers/creeks have been damaged by, or are under threat from, mining - mostly coal mines, either underground or open cut. The areas below are divided according to the location of NSW's five major coalfields:

Southern Coalfield:

Lower Cataract River, Upper Georges River: very badly cracked, drained and polluted.

Stokes Creek, Bargo River, Upper Nepean River, Flying Fox Creek, Wongawilli Creek, Native Dog Creek, Waratah Rivulet: cracked, polluted.

Upper Georges River and Upper Nepean River: acting as conduits for polluted and saline wastewater pumped out from 3 mines

Camp Gully Creek, Hastings River: coal wash reject leaches into creek from collapsed waste dump, then into river; creek and river often turn black.

Upper Cataract River (part of Sydney's water supply), Upper Nepean River, Upper Georges River, Bargo River, Mallaty Creek, Ousedale Creek, Leafs Gully Creek, Lily Pond Gully Creek and 3 unnamed creeks: all under immediate threat from mine plans now seeking approval and going far too close to these river/creek beds in all cases.

Western Coalfield

Goulburn River: has already been diverted into an 8 km manmade channel to facilitate mining operations and is now under threat from further operations that will damage the beauty spot known as The Drip in the Goulburn River Gorge.

Farmers Creek: cracked, had to be paved with cement where it runs through Lithgow

Cox's River: base flows impacted by mining, hanging swamps damaged

Moolarben Creek, Cumbo Creek, Wilpinjong Creek: under threat. Wilpinjong may cease to flow altogether. Cumbo Creek and other unnamed watercourses to be "re-located."

Newcastle Coalfield

Hunter River: salinity due to multiple mines in catchment.

Bowman's Creek: flow disappeared due to cracking

Glennies Creek, Eui Creek, Wambo Creek, Fishery Creek, Black Creek,

Foy Brook: cracked and polluted

Pages River: pristine, now under threat

Kingdon Ponds: under threat

Gloucester Basin Coalfield

Avon River: cracked, polluted, under threat from future plans for gas production

Manning River, Gloucester River, Barrington River, Copeland Creek: threat from exploration and future licences for ruby and sapphire mines. Swamp near headwaters of Manning River already impacted by ruby mine on Packer property.

Gunnedah Coalfield

Mooki River: threat from BHP Billiton's new Caroon development

Upper Namoi River: upper Namoi region groundwater, used by farmers,

also threatened by the above.

The above information is compiled from local groups in the NSW Rivers SOS Coalition.

See our website : www.riverssos.com

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