



Undermining the future

Mining leaves scars on real places and real people. Four stories from different parts of Australia about people whose lives and communities have got a raw deal from mining.



**AUSTRALIAN
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Jack Green, McArthur River

Jack 'Wongili' Green's struggle with mining giant Glencore continues
Photo: Courtney Jackson

'We've been here a long time and this land is important to us'

"That hole hurt me and my people a lot, the mine's poisoned our river, killed our fish and polluted our sacred country"

A thousand kilometres south-east of Darwin, the McArthur River brings life to the harsh, vast, stunningly diverse country that has been home to the Mumbarliya, Wurdaliya, Rumburriya and Wuryarliya clans for millennia.

In the wet season the river and its tributaries overflow, putting large sections of the region underwater and connecting it to the Gulf of Carpentaria. The river provides sanctuary for an incredible array of birdlife throughout the dry season, when the red earth is scorched and much of the other wildlife has retreated.

Twenty years ago this country changed. Global mining giant Glencore opened one of the world's largest underground zinc mines. In 2006, Glencore expanded, digging an open-cut mine that ploughed through the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming Site, which was of deep spiritual significance to local clan groups.

"The Rainbow Serpent carved this land and the songlines and sacred sites here tell stories of the dreamtime," says Jack 'Wongili' Green, a local elder and outspoken leader of the campaign to close down Glencore's mine.

“Jack was chosen as this year’s Peter Rawlinson Award winner for his commitment to country and his dedication and resolve in the face of the immense challenges he and his people have had to overcome.”

“That hole hurt me and my people a lot, the mine’s poisoned our river, killed our fish and polluted our sacred country,” Jack says. “We’ve been here a long time and this land is important to us, it’s important to all Australians.”

Jack Green has travelled around Australia speaking at conferences and telling the story of the local peoples’ struggle to protect their land.

David Morris from Environmental Defenders Office, Northern Territory, was so impressed he nominated Jack for ACF’s Peter Rawlinson Award for outstanding contributions to conservation.

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Glencore’s McArthur River mine continues to be the focus of national media scrutiny with ongoing environmental disasters, including the spontaneous combustion of its waste facility, which sent a plume of toxic iron-sulfide over the surrounding country in 2013.

In May 2016 Indigenous residents from the area [protested](#) outside Glencore’s Sydney headquarters, calling on the company to close the mine and rehabilitate the site.

Traditional Owners now fear Glencore will close the mine and “leave us here stranded with all this pollution and damage”.

“We just need a fair answer about the damage they’ve left here,” [Asman Rory told Guardian Australia](#). “It’s about cleaning up in a right and proper way or giving us some proper answers.”





Kaye Osborn, Wollongong

Kaye Osborn lives a block from the Russell Vale coal mine
Photo: Shannon Tonkin/Fairfax Media

Local residents resist push to mine coal underneath water catchment

“Will the company be in the financial position to honour its obligations to fix up the site and remediate the land?”

Kaye Osborn lives a block from the Russell Vale coal mine, in a suburb of Wollongong, NSW. She and her neighbours have lived for years with fine coal dust in the air, in their washing, in their hair. They’ve seen local creeks “run black”. And they’ve lived with the uncertain health effects.

Kaye tells a story about a local elderly woman who went to the doctor with a lung complaint. Examining chest x-rays with the woman’s daughter, the doctor said, “oh, your mother is a smoker.” “No, she’s never smoked,” the woman replied. “Well, she must have lived with a smoker and been passive smoking.” “No, never,” the daughter said. They ran the x-ray again and got the same results.

“So this woman, who has lived by the colliery for much of her life, has the lungs of a smoker, although she’s never smoked or lived with a person who smokes,” Kaye says.

In 2010 Kaye and other local residents found out the Russell Vale mine was planning to expand. The company wants to dig coal, using underground longwall mining methods, within the Cataract Reservoir catchment – home to threatened species like the Southern Brown Bandicoot and the Giant Burrowing Frog and a part of the drinking water supply for Greater Sydney.

“It’s amazing, but if you or I walked into the water catchment special area we could be fined \$44,000. However, it is perfectly acceptable, apparently, for mining companies to mine beneath the water catchment.”

“A longwall shearer, which is kind of like a big wheel with blades on it, goes through the seam of coal and gouges out the coal,” Kaye explains.

“Once that longwall (shearer) has gone through the seam of coal the ground actually collapses behind it and fills the void that has been left by the longwall mining machine.”

These longwalls can be up to 300 metres wide.

“We went along to an information session provided by the mine. We had a lot of questions and got very few answers. It was from there we started to feel very, very concerned about this matter. And it was on two fronts. One was for our local neighbourhood, because Russell Vale colliery is in an area which is a very densely populated area, so we were concerned about things like particulate pollution, contamination of the creek – and concern for our neighbours around the colliery. Secondly, we were concerned because the longwall mining expansion was to go under the Sydney water catchment.

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What followed was years of public meetings, petitions and protests of many kinds. On one occasion, close to Christmas, the locals sang carols outside the colliery. Unfortunately, all they got from the company that Christmas was a lump of coal – and a continuation of the expansion plans.

Kaye and others formed [Illawarra Residents for Responsible Mining](#) with the aim of putting “the health and wellbeing of ordinary people and of the environment ahead of corporate mining interests.” On one occasion Kaye was on [ABC news](#) when she presented the NSW Planning Assessment Commission with a glass jar of coal-polluted water from a local creek.

Kaye is astonished the longwall expansion is still on the cards.

“I’m naïve I guess. I thought people will see this is just absolutely crazy: 4.5 million people of greater Sydney rely on this water catchment. I thought it would never be approved, I thought that (the early protests) would be the end of it all. But, no. That was 2010 and here we are in 2016 and that expansion is still being considered.”

The company that runs the mine is facing financial difficulties, raising serious concerns about the eventual rehabilitation of the area.

“Will the company be in the financial position to actually honour its obligations to fix up the site and remediate the land? It’s a very good question and something I have concerns about.

“If the expansion goes ahead there will be a really significant increase in the amount of water which is flowing down through the mine,” Kaye says. Kaye and others formed Illawarra Residents for Responsible Mining with the aim of putting “the health and wellbeing of ordinary people and of the environment ahead of corporate mining interests.” On one occasion Kaye was on ABC news when she presented the NSW Planning Assessment Commission with a glass jar of coal-polluted water from a local creek.

“If the company were to close down and the mine were to no longer operate, who would be responsible for treating that water? It’s not just a matter of planning for another year... this will go for decades. It’s highly likely that water will continue to flow out for centuries. Who’s responsible in 20 years’ time, in 50 years’ time, in 200 years’ time for treating that water?”



Yvonne Margarula, Kakadu

Yvonne Margarula worries about the impact of the Ranger uranium mine on Kakadu Photo: Glenn Campbell

Traditional owners demand full clean-up of Kakadu uranium mine

“The mine, with its enormous tailings dam and processing mill, has rendered significant parts of Mirarr country unrecognisable today.”

Think of Kakadu National Park. Sandstone escarpments lit from within by afternoon sunlight. Lush wetlands alive with birdlife. Abundant wildlife. Crocodile and barramundi, ancient landscapes and rock art galleries. This is an extraordinary place with natural and cultural values of universal significance recognised as World Heritage. Kakadu attracts more than 200,000 visitors from around the world every year.

The Mirarr people, whose traditional lands encompass large parts of the north and east of Kakadu National Park, are also the Traditional Owners of the Ranger and Jabiluka uranium deposits, both wholly surrounded by the national park.

Mining was imposed on the Mirarr almost four decades ago. The Mirarr right of veto was explicitly removed from the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* in 1976, clearing the way for the massive Ranger uranium mine.

At the time then Senior Traditional Owner, Toby Gangale, was concerned about the potential impact on his country. After visiting the contaminated and abandoned Rum Jungle uranium mine site he spoke of the importance of proper rehabilitation. “I thought what they’d do is that after they dig

“When we heard that (Australian uranium was in the Fukushima reactors) we all felt no good inside”

it they’d cover it up again. But I’ve been to Rum Jungle where a uranium mine used to be.”

The open pit and toxic water that worried Toby remain at the Rum Jungle site to this day, a stark reminder of the long lived nature of untreated mining waste.

The open cut pits at Ranger tore deep gashes in the landscape. Regular excavation blasting closed the roads and shook the country. Seeing their land carved up is painful for the Mirarr. In the mid-1980s Toby passed the role of Senior Traditional Owner to his daughter Yvonne Margarula. Yvonne leads the Mirarr and speaks for her country. “Our land has suffered, we lost billabongs and rivers,” she says.

The mine, with its enormous tailings dam and processing mill, has rendered significant parts of Mirarr country unrecognisable today. Multiple leaks and spills over the decades have caused Mirarr living just downstream from Ranger to fear for the health of the waterways. “We have learned that high levels of pollution from Ranger went into Kakadu,” Yvonne Margarula says. “We are worried because of the mine, we use the water for fishing, swimming and drinking.”

But the consequences of mining go further than this; social impacts have also been dramatic. “With the mine came Jabiru town and more alcohol,” Yvonne says.

The risk that uranium exported from Mirarr country may cause damage elsewhere also weighs heavily on the Mirarr. Following the Fukushima nuclear disaster it was confirmed that Australian uranium was in each of the failed reactors. “When we heard that story we all felt no good inside,” Yvonne says.

Mining at Ranger has ended and processing is due to end within the next few years. Now comes the big test for mining company Energy Resources of Australia (ERA) and its parent Rio Tinto as the focus shifts from exporting yellowcake and ‘progressive rehabilitation’ to a concerted and final clean up. The Ranger area must be rehabilitated to such an extent that it is fit for inclusion in Kakadu National Park, an unprecedented undertaking for any uranium mine site.

The Mirarr have long been concerned about ERA’s ability to meet the ultimate cost of rehabilitating Ranger. Mirarr have repeatedly sought assurances from ERA and Rio Tinto that adequate funds will be available to properly rehabilitate the area and make sure Kakadu is not left with a toxic legacy. Rio Tinto’s recent commitment to provide ERA with a conditional line of credit for rehabilitation costs was welcomed by Mirarr. In response to the announcement Yvonne says, “We want to see ERA do a complete job and clean up the Ranger mine so it can be put into Kakadu National Park. We have been wanting this all for many years.”



Wendy Farmer, Latrobe Valley

Wendy Farmer and the Voices of the Valley group have sparked two public inquiries into the Hazelwood coal mine fire. Photo: TBC

When a coal mine sparks a public health disaster

“We saw little animals starting to die. Then we saw people getting sicker. Then we saw people dying.”

During the 45-day Hazelwood mine fire crisis in 2014, Wendy Farmer’s husband, came home sick from working at the mine.

“He was off the job for 48 hours with high carbon monoxide levels,” Wendy says. “He got really sick. His body was aching, just feeling terrible.”

As the days went on and the blanket of coal smoke continued to choke the residents of Morwell and the Latrobe Valley, people started to share their stories and wonder why their predicament wasn’t being taken seriously by the wider world.

“Everybody was feeling something. No matter where you were people would be saying ‘I’ve got sore eyes’, ‘I’ve got headaches’, ‘my kids have got blood noses’, ‘I feel so lethargic’.

“We saw little animals starting to die. Then we saw people getting sicker. Then we saw people dying.”

Wendy’s daughter Naomi came from Melbourne to visit. She was shocked at what was going on. “Mum, we have to do something.” That was the start. Naomi wrote a story for Red Flag, headlined [‘Disaster in the Valley’](#).

“They say coal is good for humanity. Well, we have three large mines and four power stations, yet we have the highest unemployment in Victoria”

“A public health disaster is unfolding in Victoria’s Latrobe Valley,” the piece began. “The brown coal mine connected to Hazelwood power station has been burning since 9 February, and fire authorities are at a loss as to how to put it out.”

Wendy and other concerned Latrobe Valley residents shared the story on social media and started collecting stories, evidence and data about the damage the coal mine fire was doing to their community. [Voices of the Valley](#) was born.

Using Facebook as their primary tool for disseminating information, Voices of the Valley organised public meetings, petitions, rallies. Their efforts resulted in two major public inquiries.

Wendy believes the findings from the Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry provide an opportunity for things to change in the Latrobe Valley, an area that has provided power to the state for 90 years, but for its efforts, has been left with high rates of unemployment, social problems, cancer and heart disease.

“They say coal is good for humanity,” Wendy said. “Well, we have three large mines and four power stations, yet we have the highest unemployment in Victoria.”

Wendy believes the market will dictate when the Hazelwood power station closes. Her aim is not necessarily to hasten its demise, but to make sure the government prepares the Latrobe Valley well for the transition to a better future.

“We have the skills, we’ve got the population, we’ve got a lot of clever people here. They know how electricity works... We could be the state’s energy innovation centre.”

Last year Engie, the company part-owned by the French government which owns 72 per cent of Hazelwood, announced it would not invest in new coal plants. And in May 2016 the French government signaled Engie would [close or sell Hazelwood](#) as part of an ‘exit plan’ from coal.

What should happen to the Hazelwood mine site? Wendy says stabilising the area is the first thing that needs to happen. Eventually, she says, “it should be given back to the community, not locked away.”







The Australian Conservation Foundation is Australia's national environment organisation. We are a quarter of a million people strong. We are proudly independent, non-partisan and funded by donations from Australians.



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Cover: ACF campaigner Dave Sweeney at the site of the abandoned Mary Kathleen uranium mine in north west Queensland. Photo: Andrew Picone
Back cover: Jack Ritchie at an elevated swamp near Wollongong.
Photo: Ali Sanderson