

colong bulletin

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Smokescreen

IAN BROWN, 19 NOV 2019

AS I write, the toll from the tragic NSW bush fires already stands at six lives, 476 houses and 1,650,000 hectares. A lightning fire in Wollemi National Park has grown to 140,000 hectares. Key koala populations have been decimated and ancient rainforests burnt (at least their edges and at ground level). Over a dozen wilderness areas have been significantly impacted.

The afterburn and blame game started even quicker than usual, because this time the politics of climate change is the mammoth in the room. Conservative heroes from the National Party are appalled that people dare mention such an irrelevance and have tried to shut down the discussion. They and their ilk are terrified of debating the climate because their only answer is denial.

Instead, they are attacking national parks and trying to blame the 'greenies' for stopping off-season burning, in some kind of conspiracy. Robert Borsak has even said he'll introduce

legislation to allow farmers to burn off neighbouring national parks! Thankfully Environment Minister Matt Kean has been standing firm against these outbursts of stupidity.

All environment groups, including the Colong Foundation and National Parks Association, support responsible, science-based, well-planned burning as a useful measure and part of broader strategies to mitigate fire impacts on communities and ecosystems. This position is unsurprisingly similar to that of the RFS, NPWS, fire researchers and other experts, who also know that more burning is not a silver bullet, and that targets are a blunt instrument. Unfortunately a media focus on the burning debate has distracted from other vital issues like town planning, property management, rapid suppression and arson. Two articles by different researchers pointed out that 83% or 85% of all fires are caused by people.

A couple of long-time RFS members from the hard-hit village of Wyaliba have exposed the fallacy of the 'not enough burning' argument. They said

that with Forestry and NPWS they have undertaken many burns over the past few years, and they had an actual wildfire in September. None of it stopped a November fire burning down half the village's houses and killing two people.

Two large northern NSW fires together destroyed 84 houses. Both started on private land, burnt mostly private land and State Forest, with only small areas of national park. Nevertheless, it's true that most flammable bushland is in conservation reserves, so it is inevitable that conservation estate will dominate total area burnt.

The line 'no fuel no fire' plays well in the tabloids, but is simplistically akin to saying if there was no water then people wouldn't drown. Some people want to emulate the Western Australian strategy of burning large areas every year, but WA's Mediterranean climate and ecosystems are quite different from the east coast. Far from being a simple solution, more burning is complex and fraught with problems.

Professor Ross Bradstock's research shows that the costs and benefits of planned burning are exponential: you need to burn four times the area to get twice the benefit. Research also shows that the fire-suppressing benefit of burns only lasts about three years, even less in extreme conditions (the Wollemi fire has already burnt through several areas of previous planned fire). The weather windows for effective burning have always been limited, and are becoming ever more restricted. Burning close to housing is resource-intensive, complex and risky. Pushing burn envelopes will mean more fires get away and impact houses. Frequent burning makes more fire-prone vegetation. Some widespread plant communities cannot be easily burnt: tall forest/wet sclerophyll will only burn under severe conditions (and catastrophically), and heathlands burn intensely. Large-scale burning could be Armageddon for natural ecosystems

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Monthly General Meetings will be held in the Nature Conservation Council of NSW offices, Level 14, 338 Pitt Street, at 6.00pm on the third Wednesday of the month, December 18, January 15, February 19, March 18 and April 15 – members and visitors are welcome. The AGM will be held on Wednesday April 29 at 6pm.

Fire in Wollemi National Park Photo: Ian Brown



Gardens of Stone continues to receive attention

PROFESSOR PATRICK MCKEEVER, Secretary of the UNESCO International Geoscience and Geoparks Programme, visited the Gardens of Stone last October to see its pagodas. He was accompanied by Angus Robinson, Co-ordinator of the National Geotourism Strategy, who believes the area should be a key geotourism region for NSW, and *Destination Pagoda* author, Ian Brown.

While Geoparks celebrate geological heritage and other types of heritage, they operate on a much larger physical scale than the proposed state conservation area, and in any event Lithgow would never accept being part of a Geopark.

The National Geotourism Strategy is a much better fit, as Lithgow could combine its mining and industrial heritage with natural and Aboriginal cultural heritage, to present a unique tourism story. It is this diverse heritage, and uniquely attractive pagodas, that cre-

ate so many opportunities for tourism investment.

The proposed new 39,000 hectare state conservation reserve will combine professional reserve management with stunning pagoda landscapes. Reservation is expected to create over a hundred jobs and boost the town's tourism economy by half in one hit. These opportunities were brought to the industry's attention by Janine Kitson and Wiradjuri Elder Auntie Sharon Riley who presented a joint paper at the Global Eco Asia-Pacific Tourism Conference in Cairns. Lithgow Environment Group has also been active, making local representations for the *Destination Pagoda* vision at Just Transition Hub Workshops at Western Sydney University's Lithgow campus.

On a slightly different tack, in a presentation to the Linnean Society annual symposium in Springwood, Dr Haydn Washington flagged that the Greater Blue Mountains World

Heritage Area was only listed for biological values. He said it should also be listed for its geodiversity and geoheritage, Aboriginal cultural heritage, and scenic grandeur as recommended by the World Heritage Advisory Committee. Haydn explained that its geodiversity values were slow to be recognised.

Haydn's remarks are timely as the World Heritage Committee at its last session reviewed a 'State of Conservation report for the Greater Blue Mountains', and recommended a full State of Conservation Report be considered in 2021. While this report will focus on Warragamba Dam, it will also bring more pressure to: protect geodiversity, including internationally significant pagodas; examine the transfer of mine water out of the area; and perhaps seek the addition of other areas and values to the World Heritage Area.

Throughout the year, community support for a big new Gardens of Stone reserve has been raised through presentations across Sydney by Dr Stephen Allen in Sutherland, and Janine Kitson who presented Tom Zubrycki's documentary films 'Gardens of Stone - Living Landscape' and 'Vern and Joyce Moffitt, Lithgow unionists and environmentalists' to Unions NSW at Sydney Trades Hall. Both films tell the story of unionists' and community commitment to protecting Lithgow's Gardens of Stone — and connect with Angus Robinson's geotourism ideas. In addition, Michael Holt and the Sydney Action Group held street stalls

Lithgow's Gang Gang Gallery supports Gardens of Stone

by Janine Kitson, Gardens of Stone Alliance

Sharon Howard, Director of Gang Gang Gallery at Lithgow raised the profile of the Gardens of Stone by commissioning artist Rachel Szalay to create the artwork 'Gardens of Stone' for the Environmental Defender's Office annual Gala Fundraising Dinner in September.

'Gardens of Stone' raised \$800 thanks to the generous bidding of Wolgan Valley resident Andrew Chalk of Chalk & Behrendt, Lawyers & Consultants.

The artwork captures the mystery of a pagoda landscape. The artist has likened the work to a traditional Chinese ink wash painting, yet the Indigenous message of Yindymarra Nganga-dha Walawalang Malang, "Respect, look after this stony rock place" resonates through her black and white pastel artwork.

Prolific Blue Mountains artist Rachel Szalay also has a background in theatre having performed at Belvoir Street and Sydney Theatre Company, in addition to film and television work. Her paintings were recently exhibited in the Gang Gang Gallery exhibition Industrial Lithgow. Rachel Szalay's work can be seen at www.rachelszalay.com

The Gang Gang Gallery is located at 206 Main Street, Lithgow. For more information on exhibitions visit gggallery.com.au

Sharon Howard of Gang Gang Gallery (on left) and Rachael Szalay with her artwork of Macleans Pass in the reserve proposal. Photo: Janine Kitson



and sent hundreds of pagoda postcards to NSW Parliamentarians.

To celebrate the end of a busy year, Lithgow Environment Group held a bush dance at State Mine Gully Heritage Park as a campaign fundraiser. While everyone had fun, let's

not forget the excellent teamwork shown by the Gardens of Stone Alliance (Blue Mountains Conservation Society, Lithgow Environment Group and the Colong Foundation) and others in the continuing promotion of the state conservation area proposal. ■

Please renew your support for 2020

The Colong Foundation reminds our readers that membership falls due on January 1st, 2020.

The Foundation has this set date for membership renewal as this is the most efficient way to process subscriptions (still only \$30). If you can afford it please also make a tax-deductible donation – your continuing support enables us to expand our conservation efforts.

Be assured, every dollar you contribute goes toward wilderness protection and conservation. We will expose the damage caused by coal mines and give a dam about the flooding of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. With your help we can save wilderness!

Keith Muir
Colong Foundation

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GIVE A DAM: a year in review

WILSON HARRIS

2019 WAS A busy and tumultuous year for environmental campaigns throughout NSW. No campaign felt this more acutely than GIVE A DAM. The NSW State election was followed by a federal Coalition victory that blindsided many. No one had anticipated the federal election result. Labor were counting their chickens weeks before polling day, and the environmental movement was preparing to work with a (slightly) more accommodating federal government. Nothing encapsulated the confidence in a Labor victory more than Sportsbet who paid out \$5.2 million two days before election day, to punters who had backed the ALP! However, as we know, Scott Morrison and the Coalition went on to win the unwinnable election.

Regardless of political events, 2019 has still been a hugely successful year for GIVE A DAM. The campaign's efforts have meant that the State government and their contractors have been under constant pressure, with the project and their work under intense scrutiny. To date, the environmental assessments for the dam wall raising have been delayed by over 15 months, blowing out the project's timeline.

From January until May this year, GIVE A DAM ran a concerted community campaign that coincided with the two elections. We were

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and wildlife, while providing little to no benefit on the bushland interface where burning should be targeted.

So while we should not get into this false argument about more burning, its still worth noting that NPWS carried out 137,000 hectares of burns last year, 75% of all planned burning across NSW. Strangely, there has been little comment about fuel on private land, and Forestry NSW has



On June 9th this year over 1,000 gathered in Katoomba to say 'Give a Dam' about flooding World Heritage.

extremely active, hosting over 25 screenings of 'GIVE A DAM: Flooding the Blue Mountains', which reached an estimated 2,700 people. An array of community events and forums, including candidate debates at both state and federal level,

escaped criticism. Is that the whiff of ideological witch-burning I can smell?

There have been the usual calls to graze national parks (absurd) and bring back 'Aboriginal burning' (without actually knowing what it was). While Indigenous knowledge should absolutely be harnessed, the model usually invoked comes from northern Australia, where the cyclic wet/dry climate and grassy savannah woodlands are completely different from much southern vegetation.

and numerous market stalls, were hosted in and around Sydney. During this period our amazing supporters were able to letterbox drop 10,000 houses in western Sydney, and at train stations throughout Sydney and the Blue Mountains, volunteers

And the sorts of environments that may have been patchwork-burnt are unlikely to be what's now left in our national parks.

The rate of climate change has become alarming. Only history will tell if the current drought and heat are a statistical blip or here to stay, but researchers are telling us that on current track we can expect more of the same. We have to take heed, and we all need to re-assess our assumptions, including conservationists. Radical new approaches may be needed to protect both communities and

leafletted morning and night. The amazing coverage the campaign achieved at this time was largely due to GIVE A DAM's hard-working volunteer network.

In June, we held a 1000+ strong protest in Katoomba calling on the Federal Environment Minister to take heed of the World Heritage draft decision, before the next committee meeting in July. Following this action, it was the first time the Minister Ley acknowledged publicly the "concerns... [of] the World Heritage Committee" regarding the dam.

In July, Harry Burkitt and the Hon. Bob Debus represented GIVE A DAM at the 43rd session of the World Heritage Committee. Through their lobbying, an official statement declaring "the raising of the dam wall is likely to have an impact on the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the property" was made. The committee also requested the Australian Government submit the proposal and environmental assessments to the World Heritage Centre "for review prior to taking any final decision regarding the project". A huge win for the campaign, it has established a platform for GIVE A DAM to apply more pressure to the federal government to scrap the project.

Throughout the year, the campaign has also worked to expand and diversify the range of groups opposed to the dam. Following the State election campaign,

ecosystems. This might include more strategic burning, but also needs to focus on faster detection and suppression and boosting the defendability of communities.

Trouble is, NSW and federal governments are paralysed, held hostage by conservative firebrands who will wreak political havoc if climate reality is accepted. Some of the most vocal are from the National Party, supposedly representing rural interests while displaying an abiding ignorance of land management and ecology.

GIVE A DAM successfully courted the support of minor political parties, giving the campaign the numbers in the NSW Legislative Council. The formation of the NSW Upper House Inquiry into the Proposal to Raise Warragamba Dam (with a majority of no-dam MPs) was a result of this effort. During the submission process for this inquiry, an astounding 1800 submissions were made, many from environmental and economic experts as well as supporters.

This year also saw an increased media presence for GIVE A DAM, with over 30 articles and news pieces about the project on Seven, Nine and the ABC, and in The Guardian, Sydney Morning Herald and Daily Telegraph. The heightened media profile translated into a major boost to the campaign's supporter base.

Recently, GIVE A DAM successfully co-ordinated 17 international NGOs from 6 countries to write a submission to the upper house inquiry detailing abuses by the environmental consultant undertaking Warragamba Dam assessments (SMEC Engineering). The campaign against this firm continues, with ongoing protests at the offices of SMEC Engineering occurring on a regular basis*.

We are excited for what 2020 holds. With the help of our dedicated supporters, we are sure it will be just as successful as 2019. ■

Contact the GIVE A DAM team at wilson@giveadam.org.au if you would like to take part in the next protest.

Without acceptance of climate change, adaptive policies can't happen. Climate change is here now, and while we must take action to stop it (and that includes being vocal on the world stage), we also have no choice but to adapt.

This is the fight that was always coming, between radically different world views. Those clinging to old notions of human supremacy will squeal in ever greater desperation, until they are mugged by reality and consigned to the compost of history. Bring it on. ■

Feral horses, fire and drought – Guy Fawkes River National Park, October 2019

KEITH MUIR

OCTOBER 2019 WAS nineteen years since an aerial cull humanely shot 606 horses over three days in Guy Fawkes River National Park. Precursor conditions to this cull were drought, extensive bushfires, and ineffective brumby mustering which resulted in the deaths of at least four horses and the reported suffering of many others.

The Colong Foundation believes that the current combination of one of the most severe droughts on record, and the large Bees Nest wildfire, has precipitated another crisis where many horses are seeking remnant feed on unburnt river flats beside some of the last available water sources.

The Colong Foundation inspected Guy Fawkes wilderness during its closure due to fire from 22 to 24 October 2019, to report on the condition of a known horse population in the area, and the extent of damage to the national park from horse grazing.

What was observed

We observed 212 emaciated horses, 28 dead horses and 3 dying horses. Nearly all the dead horses had suffered lingering deaths, demonstrated by the deep scuff marks made by their hooves while the animals were prostrate and struggling in a flurry of agony. The three dying horses were found in great distress, one too exhausted to move, one wedged between rocks and the other scuffing the earth.

The effects of severe drought have caused blackberry bushes, some rainforest shrubs and large River Oaks to die. The Sara River and all Guy Fawkes tributary creeks have dried up, but Guy Fawkes River still flowed sluggishly and supported frogs, tortoises and platypuses, as well as a large population of starving horses.

The effects of drought on feral horses in the Guy Fawkes wilderness is a signal lesson on apparently humane but



Deep hoof scrapings indicate long suffering. Photo: K. Muir

ineffective controls outlined in the 2006 horse management plan.

Many large river flats and the footslopes leading to them are effectively bare of grass and other ground vegetation, apart from some remnant native grass roots that the horses had picked at. Weeds, including toxic lantana, are either heavily browsed or dead. Any bush remotely palatable has been eaten to a browse line which a horse could reach while craning its neck. Large areas of sheet soil erosion were observed on the lower Guy Fawkes and Sara rivers. Large gully erosion was observed on Kittys Creek along with sheet erosion.

These impacts are in accordance with the November 2018 determination by an independent scientific panel on threatened species, that listed feral horse populations as a 'key threatening process' pushing native species at risk closer to extinction. The state of the lower Guy Fawkes valley can only be described as ruinous and in need of complete destocking.

Effective and humane aerial shooting is imperative

The result of listing horses as 'local heritage', while not applying effective, humane control methods, continues to cause great suffering to the emaciated and starving feral horse population in Guy Fawkes National Park. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service has been bullied and frustrated by the horse lobby,

and forced by politicians into ineffective horse control measures that permit ecological harm.

Whatever the reasons or motives for current management, the suffering of starving horses and destruction of this national park through overgrazing must stop as soon as possible. New England district farmers have destocked their land due to the drought. The park's managers have been prevented from equivalent responsible horse management by an emotive and misconstrued policy that prevents humane culling through aerial shooting, which is the only effective means of destocking wilderness.

If the NSW Government does not act and the drought continues, their inaction will be responsible for delivering slow, agonizing deaths to hundreds of blameless feral horses in the Guy Fawkes wilderness. We must act with compassion and humanity, and urgently cull starving horses to put an end to their agony and help save this national park's delicate ecology.

Both the Australian Veterinarian Association and the RSPCA provide information on feral horse control methods developed by the NSW Department of Primary Industries, with support from the Australian Government – these are available on the PestSmart website. Methods include RSPCA protocols for aerial shooting, which PestSmart states '*can be a humane method of destroying feral*

horses when it is carried out by experienced and skilled shooters and pilots; the animal can be clearly seen and is within range; the correct firearm, ammunition and shot placement is used; and wounded animals are promptly located and killed.'

October 2000 Guy Fawkes River National Park horse cull

The 100,000 hectare Guy Fawkes wilderness surrounding the Guy Fawkes River, and its major tributaries, the Aberfoyle and Sara Rivers, forms a large gorge network north from Ebor village at the western edge of the Dorrigo Plateau.

Thirty-one threatened plants and two dozen threatened animals live in this wilderness, including the koala.

From 1992 until the cull in 2000, only 156 horses were captured and removed from the park by local horsemen and NPWS staff using mustering and trapping techniques, and several horses were killed and injured in the process (English 2000).

It was alleged that local landholders had been illegally running horses in the park and using it as a breeding ground for brumbies (*Daily Telegraph*, 1.11.00). Feral horse mustering efforts failed as hundreds of horses remained in the park. As wildfires and drought had stripped fragile gorge soil cover, the horses were starving and so the National Parks and Wildlife Service planned an immediate aerial cull. A total of 606 horses were shot that would have otherwise have further wrecked the environment and suffered cruel and lingering deaths by starvation.

The cull was vindicated by Dr English of Sydney University who found it effective, efficient and humane. Shooting horses from helicopter is far less stressful and dangerous than trapping and removal, yet highly critical media attention that followed this cull triggered a ban on aerial shooting by then Environment Minister, Bob Debus.

The subsequent 2006 Guy Fawkes horse management plan re-adopted the failed mustering and trapping techniques. Since 2006, the plan's objectives have not been achieved – the natural values of Guy Fawkes River National Park are not being conserved because horses have not been removed in sufficient numbers.

In the Guy Fawkes gorge country there are no effective means to chase horses across the rugged wilderness into yards, then halter and lead them unwillingly behind stock horses up steep ridges to a second set of yards. The horses may then be trucked long distances to an abattoir for slaughter, or rehomed. Even if this process could be done for horses within wilderness areas, and it is impracticable to do so, it will continue to cause a proportion of horses to be injured and killed, and all horses removed in this manner will be very distressed by the experience. It would also be an extremely dangerous task for the people engaged in such a remote area muster. Horse management based on mustering in wilderness is unworkable and ultimately inhumane.

As predicted by the Colong Foundation, the Guy Fawkes' management plan to trap and remove horses has been ineffective. Numbers are not reducing faster than the horses can breed – there are now perhaps two thousand horses in the park. The heavy grazing of the national park by feral horses has not, however, reduced wildfire risk. The Bees Nest wildfire raged for weeks and burnt 114,000 hectares. These facts accord with a substantial body of peer reviewed science compiled by the Ecological Society of Australia into alpine grazing in Victoria, which has also not reduced fire risk.

NSW environment groups have for twenty years maintained that the government must restore

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Snowy 2.0 attack on Kosciuszko National Park

THE EXPLORATION STAGE of the Snowy 2.0 project in Kosciuszko National Park was approved in February 2019, and since then the main proposal for civil and hydro-electrical engineering works has been released.

The Snowy 2.0 pump-storage proposal in the top third of Kosciuszko National Park plans to connect, by a long tunnel, Talbingo dam on the Tumut catchment with Tantangara dam on the Murrumbidgee River catchment. Initially the proposal was to cost two billion, but this quickly grew to estimates of between \$3 and \$4.5 billion, then to a \$5.1 billion contract with Snowy Hydro. The project's final cost is likely to be around \$8 billion, even without its expensive connection to multi-billion dollar powerline upgrades, which Snowy Hydro alleges aren't part of the project, as the system will be used by other generators.

If interest rates remain very low for decades, Snowy 2.0 might produce a small, much delayed economic return, at tremendous cost, with unavoidable and significant environmental impacts on Kosciuszko National Park.

Snowy 2.0 is a textbook example of a 'Captain's call' made opportunistically in March 2017 by former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull as his signature project on climate change.

Snowy-Hydro's cachet cloaks the project in nation-building respectability, and so the community is unable to see Snowy 2.0 for the 27-kilometre trunk 'white elephant' that it is.

Usually pump-storage schemes are connected by up to

Feral horses

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humane and effective aerial culling of feral horses in national parks to protect natural heritage values. The current extreme Guy Fawkes' situation vindicates this position and NPWS actions in 2000 to aerially cull the horses using RSPCA approved protocols. ■



four kilometres of water pipes or tunnels, but not Snowy 2.0. The length of tunnelling through hard rock makes Snowy 2.0 an exceptionally difficult and damaging pump-storage proposal, pushing costs and impacts beyond common sense limits.

If approved, it will have major environmental impacts on Kosciuszko National Park, including: a new road through eight kilometres of old growth forest on Marica plateau down to Lobs Hole; the dispersal of pest species including the redfin perch from the Murray to the Murrumbidgee river systems; six million tonnes of hard rock dumped over three large areas within the national park; and a further eight million tonnes dumped in water reservoirs.

The rock waste proposed to be dumped in large piles at Lobs Hole, Tantangara and Marica will produce visual scarring, as will the greater variability of water levels in Tantangara Dam, the bulldozing of new roads and transmission line easements. In addition, groundwater loss along the length of the tunnel will change the Eucumbene River headwaters to an ephemeral stream, causing significant loss of aquatic life.

The linear nature of the proposed works will cause significantly greater aesthetic and ecological impacts on the national park than if the proposal was more compact. Infrastructure will be seen

from many points within the northern third of the national park. Smaller animals, such as the Smoky Mouse, will not cross the cleared easements and barren wastes that the proposal will create. Park visitors too will be denied access, not just to Lobs Hole, but also at Marica and around Tantangara Dam. The scheme's significant linear impacts have been brushed aside, rather than minimised through active consideration of alternative engineering options.

The EIS reports the proposal will destroy 992 hectares of threatened species habitat (threatened ecological communities and threatened flora and fauna), the largest ever such loss in a national

park. The biodiversity offset will be over a quarter of a billion dollars, although Snowy Hydro is attempting to reduce this cost, undervaluing the national park and perverting the intent of the offset scheme by seeking credits for rehabilitation.

Yet for all this costly damage, Snowy 2.0 is not an efficient, closed pump-storage system as claimed. Talbingo Dam already serves a pump-storage function with high water needs within the existing hydro scheme – the 1800MW Tumut 3 system, the seventh largest such scheme in the world. This competing need and the smaller size of Talbingo reservoir relative to Tantangara, reduces

the proposed operational performance and economic viability of Snowy 2.0.

A rational, independent assessment of the Snowy 2.0 proposal should see it rejected. The consolidated tax profit for Snowy Hydro's generation of 4,349GWh last financial year was just \$210.2 million. Even if Snowy 2.0 could generate 350GWh a year, it would only represent a small increase in profit for this modest output.

That Snowy 2.0 is the biggest, most expensive energy storage proposal in Australia and the fifth biggest in the world seems to be a key factor in its genesis. The proposal will misspend billions of dollars and much of the political capital Australia needs for less damaging projects such as the expansion of batteries and other pump-storage schemes to back up wind power and solar energy.

Thousands of alternative power storage opportunities exist outside national parks – these have been identified by an Australian National University (ANU) audit of potential pump hydro-energy storage sites across eastern Australia. Other less damaging alternatives could also be developed within the Snowy Hydro scheme. Unfortunately none it seems were big enough to capture our politicians' imagination. ■

Broad support for Colong policy and motions

THE FOLLOWING SUMMARISES motions and policy introduced by the Colong Foundation and passed at this year's Nature Conservation Council of NSW (NCC) Annual Conference held on Saturday November 2nd.

As a result, the Nature Conservation Council will request that:

■ The NSW Government support and fund Destination Pagoda, a reserve establishment and visitor management plan for a 39,000 hectare world-class tourism and conservation reserve on Lithgow's doorstep, that will

benefit workers, community and the environment.

■ The NSW and Commonwealth Governments support the 'Nature Needs Half' vision, where half of all lands are reserved or dedicated by other effective means for nature conservation.

■ Carbon sequestration plantations only be established in national parks at ecologically suitable densities, and be comprised of 'local provenance' species, as part of a restoration program after an open and transparent planning process, and plantations already established meet the nature conservation objects

and management principles of the National Parks and Wildlife Act.

■ Pack camping be allowed to continue in Ben Boyd National Park and that the Minister for the Environment be reminded of NCC policy opposing new accommodation infrastructure in national parks.

■ An open public inquiry into wildlife sanctuaries be instigated and moratorium established on the development of new wildlife sanctuaries in national parks.

■ Protest activities be supported as a democratic means of environment policy reform.

Old growth forests in two states

ON NOVEMBER 7TH, the Victorian Government announced a plan to transition the state's timber industry aiming to phase out native forest logging by 2030, and immediately protect 186,000 hectares of native forest, including 90,000 hectares of old growth, to protect the vulnerable greater glider and other threatened species.

Existing agreements will be extended to 2024 when timber mills will have to bid for reduced supplies, with a \$120 million assistance package for businesses to leave the industry and workers to be

made redundant. There will be an extra 50,000 hectares of replacement hardwood plantations by 2030, enabling a smooth transition.

Unsurprisingly, the Federal Agriculture Minister Bridget McKenzie, Victorian Opposition Leader Michael O'Brien and the CFMMEU all condemned the decision, while NSW environment groups called on the NSW Government to follow suit. Despite Victorian evidence that hardwood timber sourced from well-managed plantations will enable regional economies to thrive, NSW is planning to log

its old growth forests.

The NSW Government is remapping old growth using a new process which will give the timber industry access to areas of identified old growth and high conservation value public forests that have been off-limits for decades. This is part of the push to facilitate increased logging intensity, that has already seen clearfelling introduced to the North Coast, weakened protections for threatened species, and reduced stream buffers. Bigger, older trees with more flowers and seed, that attract a greater diversity

of insects, and therefore more birds and mammals, and provide more nesting hollows and roosting sites, will be targeted. In NSW at least 46 mammals, 81 birds, 31 reptiles and 16 frogs are dependent on tree hollows for shelter and nests that take over a century to develop.

The Natural Resources Commission has been asked to 'remap and rezone' old growth and rainforest to make up a wood supply shortfall. A pilot study of 13 areas found that remapping could open 78% of protected old growth forest to logging. This puts at

least 14,600 hectares of high-value wildlife habitat in public forests on the chopping block, on top of 29,000 hectares of old growth forests on private land that was previously protected and is now being logged.

Logging old growth forests requires the revocation of informal reserves that the State and Commonwealth Governments agreed were part of the reserve system but not large enough to become part of a national park, or which provided important corridors for plants and animals between national parks.

The NSW Government still needs to verify the north coast timber shortfall. Rob Stokes, the Planning and Public Spaces Minister, said the government would consider "the NRC's proposed methods for reassessing old growth forests after we receive updated wood supply modelling from the Forestry Corporation of NSW."

Under the new system, the maximum size of legal, clearfelling patches on the NSW north coast has already leapt from 0.25 hectares to 45 hectares.

The NSW Government also has a mistaken belief that burning forest biomass is green, renewable energy – the Federal Government even provides subsidies to companies that do this. NSW plans to allow the production of a million tonnes per annum of wood pellets from the north-east forests to burn for electricity, in Australia or overseas.

The North East Forest Alliance considers burning native forests for electricity is the most significant threat to the future of Australia's forests, and their essential role in mitigating climate change. Burning forest biomass for electricity emits more carbon per unit of energy produced than burning coal. The associated intensive logging creates a carbon debt that will take decades or even centuries to repay, and regrowth forests are never allowed to recover to previous levels. In reality, forest biomass burning is an

Camping ban part of Light to Light bid for iconic walk status

KEITH MUIR

THE COVERING LETTER accompanying proposed amendments to Ben Boyd National Park's plan of management, received by the Colong Foundation a few months ago, contained a surprise announcement that 'pack camping along the Light to Light Walk will no longer be allowed.' The justifications for terminating public camping seem to be excuses to allow a new commercial operator access to a significant share of the visitor market.

The Colong Foundation urgently wrote to Energy and Environment Minister Matt Kean, requesting that the public be permitted to continue camping along the Light to Light Walk through the park (and not just beside particular car camper sites as proposed).

The Foundation asked Minister Kean to set ground rules to prevent commercial operations in national parks from denying free public access to walking tracks or other basic facilities, and to popular destinations such as beaches. As if to underscore this last point, a recent petition calling on the state government to scrap plans to redevelop Killalea State Park amassed thousands of signatures in just three days (*Illawarra Mercury*, 28 October, 2019). The multi-million dollar proposal for 15 luxury cabins, a function centre and 53 serviced campsites is being considered for a surfing beach that was gifted to the people of NSW years ago. Obviously establishing monopolies over such publicly-owned, iconic park attractions can be profitable, but selling 'the Farm', a very popular surfing spot



Resort accommodation proposal at Hegartys Bay indicated by numbers 1 to 5 will displace the small existing camp site located at 6 on this figure. Minister Kean advised that existing campers must go because they are a management problem.

near Wollongong, when someone gave it back to the people is morally wrong.

The usual justification for exclusive commercial use is that it will provide better facilities, but in the case of Ben Boyd National Park this will change the character of the experience from nature-focused recreation to more visitor-focused forms which are inappropriate in national parks, places set aside for nature.

The proposed camping platforms and built accommodation are not justified as existing, grassy public campsites are not subject to overuse. Current commercial operators will be disadvantaged, and built accommodation is already provided in the two lighthouse precincts as appropriate, adaptive reuse of heritage buildings. Further, the proposals are hostile to the

park's overall strategy of maintaining 'remoteness' and the region's tourism branding as a part of the Wilderness Coast. Current pack campers, including local school children, are to be confined to bookable and rentable camp platforms, or to inferior camp sites at Saltwater Creek and Bittangabee Bay.

The proposed amendments also seek realignment of the Light to Light walking track in ways that will damage coastal vegetation communities, including allowing wind and salt to get under coastal shrub and tree canopies, causing dieback. The claimed environmental benefits of avoiding heathlands will be cancelled by environmental damage and the loss of generally stable, traditional Aboriginal and historical walking routes, the traditional tracks having been used for millennia, including the track through heathlands from Green Cape to Bittangabee Bay slated for realignment. This realignment for wow-factor vantage points along the coast disrespects heritage and nature.

The costly user-pays visitor scheme will drive existing visitors from this park. The NSW Government and NPWS seems desperate to join the 'iconic walks club', and facts or genuine analysis have had little to do with these walk proposals. As predicted by the Colong Foundation's submission in 2010 on what is now the current plan of management, the 'self-reliant visitor will be restricted and displaced by commercial operations ... Commercial interests will tend to benefit from any increase in regulation to the disadvantage of the self-reliant visitor who will tend to be displaced from the best camp sites by the profit making operations.' ■

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Mining in catchments report finds on-going damage acceptable

KEITH MUIR

AN INDEPENDENT EXPERT Panel report released on October 31st into longwall coal mining in catchment areas supported the continuation of mining, despite confirming on-going damage to these Special Areas that supply a third of Sydney's drinking water. The Woronora and Metropolitan Special Area catchments south of Sydney were once pristine, with water naturally filtered through swamps and streams, but they are now increasingly degraded. It seems that the report's recommendations will result in few additional controls to further limit mining damage to these precious areas. Essentially, the report agrees with the mining companies that the extent of impacts are not significant enough to warrant change – damaging mining operations can continue with impunity.

Longwall mining damage to Sydney's water catchments is very significant however, and occurs largely out of sight, behind locked gates where trespassers can be heavily fined. The independent report does not assist readers by providing any graphic images of dry stream beds, dead or collapsed swamps, or dry waterfalls and cliff falls, all of which have been extensively

Old growth forests

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unsustainable substitute for the collapse of native forest woodchip exports.

The contrast between NSW and Victoria's forest policy could not be more stark. Victoria has decided to protect its native forests and establish hardwood plantations, while NSW is going back to the past, converting native forests to virtual plantations through the expansion of clearfelling and the logging of old growth reserves. ■

recorded in these catchments. Maps and tabulation of environmental damage are also absent. The report does not provide an adequate data base for further regulation. Its focus was specifically in relation to the volume of stored water, rather than how much flows down streams.

Protection zones for swamps and streams are not proposed, instead the inquiry reports on the operation of 'Risk Management Zones' within which the risk of damage is currently 'managed' for sensitive features such as those described above. The inquiry did find it remarkable that an EIS for one mine found only one significant landscape feature in a project area extending over 220 square kilometres. None of its other 46 streams classed as 3rd order and above, none of the 226 upland swamps, none of the 634 cliffs (including Appin Falls) and none of the 632 Aboriginal Heritage Sites were deemed to be significant! The obvious conclusion is that Risk Management Zones are meaningless, but there are no recommendations to fix this problem.

Underground coal mining with its risk management zones offers almost no protection for water resources and important heritage values inside catchments. The report supports continuation of mining despite identifying 'permanent diversion of catchment water into mine workings'; unreliable predictions of mining impacts on groundwater and surface water; contamination of drinking water with metals leached from rocks fractured by mining; and significant, and very likely irreversible, changes to nationally threatened upland swamps.

The report recommends more studies. This is advice any Government wishing to take no conclusive action desires to receive, especially when there is ample information to make precautionary decisions to protect essential drinking

water supplies for five million people.

Upland swamps must be recommended for protection, and just because there is no data on the capacity of swamps to store and cleanse drinking water, they do provide these functions. Until proved unimportant, swamps must be protected.

This plight of swamps in these catchments illustrates how mining companies have inverted the precautionary principle to enable coal mining to continue in these pristine areas until there's overwhelming evidence of swamp damage causing a loss of water supply. The independent expert report does not challenge this paradigm where the onus is on the regulator to prove damage.

Compensation for environmental impacts on these rare swamps assumes that there are adequate swamp substitutes, when in fact ecological replacements for most damaged swamps are almost non-existent. Swamp offsets and perverse Risk Management Zones are convenient substitutes for effective environmental protection zones where mining should be prohibited. This is extremist pro-mining policy dressed up as environment protection.

Water loss comparisons

The Independent Expert Panel for Mining in the Catchment was established in February 2018 to provide advice on mining operations in the Greater Sydney Water Catchment Special Areas, with a focus on risks to water resources and cumulative impacts.

The panel compared water losses from mining with those from the water supply system, including leaking water mains and evaporation for reservoirs. There was no comparison however, with the giant water treatment factory established by Veolia in the Western Coalfield. By 2020 this plant

will treat over 40ML/day of Springvale mine water. There are worrying signs that mining in the Southern Coalfield can cause leaks just as bad as those in the Western Coalfield. Dendrobium mine water flows are now about 7.5ML/day and these respond to rainfall. This interaction establishes a hydraulic connection between coal mining and the catchment and suggests that mining intensity must be reduced to stop water losses, but the independent report makes no such recommendation.

It is odd that an industry now under scrutiny due to climate change does not act to lower the intensity of its operations in Sydney's drinking water catchments, but chooses to continue to maximise coal yield to benefit its shareholders – a risky political strategy. The Colong Foundation is disappointed that the expert panel has failed to censure Dendrobium mine's operations.

Mining must be constrained to limit damage to drinking water supplies. A modest protectionist approach from this independent inquiry would have better fitted with our climate changing world – the expert panel has failed

Sydney by not taking this stance.

In the panel's defence, the Colong Foundation understands that it was hamstrung by narrow terms of reference, not allowing adequate consideration of the full range of ecological impacts caused by mining in catchments, apart from damage to swamps. Whose fault is this? The blame can only be sheeted home to the NSW Government and its relationship with the coal mining industry.

The onus must be placed on the industry to prove mining does not damage the catchment, rather than relying on regulators, scientists and concerned citizens. The precautionary principle has to be applied throughout catchment protection zones to ensure water security from future loss and damage and to protect remaining areas of pristine catchment.

The State Government should acknowledge that the capacity of our catchments to collect, transmit and hold pure drinking water, is far more important than any coal revenue. Mine regulation must prevent surface rocks being fractured by lowering mining intensity. ■

Collapsed and bone dry – the loss of waterfalls such as this one is due to longwall mining but the independent panel on mining in catchments did not report on rock falls due its narrow terms of reference. Photo: K. Muir



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ABOUT THE COLONG FOUNDATION

The Colong Foundation, the successor to Myles Dunphy's National Parks and Primitive Areas Council, is Australia's longest-serving community advocate for wilderness. Its proposal for a Wilderness Act was accepted in 1987. To supplement this legislation, our Red Index audits NSW wilderness areas, identifies threats and formulates site specific protection remedies. There are now 2,100,000 ha of protected wilderness in NSW. However, many beautiful and environmentally highly significant wilderness areas are not protected, such as the Pilliga and Goonoo on the north west slopes, the Deua Valley on the South Coast and the Tabletop and Main Range in the Snowy Mountains.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness has had a long and successful history. From its foundation in 1968 until 1975 it was the fighting force that prevented limestone mining and the destruction of native forest for pine plantations in the southern Blue Mountains. The Foundation not only played a leading role in realising Myles Dunphy's plan for a Greater Blue Mountains National Park, it pushed for its World Heritage listing, as well as the reservation of a Border Ranges National Park and Kakadu National Park. It has initiated successful campaigns for the protection of over a million hectares of wilderness in NSW. The realisation of Myles Dunphy's vision of a comprehensive system of national parks with protected wilderness areas remains the primary objective of the Colong Foundation.

Now, more than ever, the Foundation needs your support. Well financed and powerful rural interests, miners, loggers, resort developers, as well as four wheel drive enthusiasts, horse riders and others, have greatly increased the threats facing Australia's wild places.

Only with your help, through continued membership and donations, can the Foundation continue its campaigns for the preservation of the natural environment and effective nature-based national park management, and by concentrating on wilderness, these rare areas can be kept safe from development and misuse.

THE COLONG FOUNDATION

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