

Destruction of the Leard and threat to the Pilliga concerns everyone

Old growth box gum woodlands provide a multitude of hollows that take as long as 100 years to form and provide homes for many bird, marsupial, reptile and bat species.

LEARD STATE FOREST has been the largest area of intact remnant vegetation remaining in the northern Liverpool Plains. Part of this forest is nationally-listed and critically endangered box-gum woodland, of which only 0.1% remains where once it existed through much of the eastern states.

White Box, Yellow Box, Blakeley's Red Gum Woodland is listed as a 'Critically Endangered Ecological Community (CEEC)' at a national level.



The extensive and intact Leard woodland/forest area is highly significant as a sanctuary of very high biodiversity – a common estimate is that it is home to 396 species of plants and animals and provides habitat for 34 threatened species and several endangered ecological communities. White Box woodland is koala habitat.

But now it is being destroyed for three open cut coal mines owned respectively by



Australia's newest multi-national coal venture, Whitehaven, and Japanese corporation Idemitsu. Their mines are coming towards each other from either end of the forest, clear-felling the centre for open cut coal pits.

Together Boggabri Coal (Idemitsu), Maules Creek and Tarrawonga mines (Whitehaven) are being allowed to destroy about 1/3 of Leard State Forest, including 1,082ha of the box woodland. (500 hectares were up for clearing by Whitehaven in 2016 with 800 hectares cleared previously. One hectare is about the size of a foot-ball field).

New coal trains up to 80 cars long take the coal through the Hunter Valley to Newcastle and ships bound for Japan and Korea.

This world class ecological vandalism has enjoyed the blessing of both

major political parties state and federal, and massive loans to Whitehaven from Australia's four major banks, just renewed, as well as from overseas hedge funds – reflecting banking system that has returned to risky loans since the 2008 GFC, as coal increasingly is analysed as a bad bet.

In the nearby Pilliga forest between Gunnedah and Narrabri a fossil fuel project of a different kind, Santos' 850 planned coal seam gas wells, threaten equally to fragment and pollute a unique forest and the groundwater of the Great Artesian Basin.

A theory is that the companies are first targeting public land, public forests and buying out nearby agricultural landholders, to minimise protest (which is not exactly how it's panned out). Court challenges and civil disobedience campaigns have marked the three years of Whitehaven's start up in the forest. Nevertheless major extraction of coal started last year.

Nearby Pilliga forest vegetation.



Koala populations in north western NSW have been crashing due to high temperatures and drought followed by stress-induced disease. Ecologists who are trying to save the animals and their habitat told the Bulletin this is the face of climate change.

As the Bulletin recently visited Gunnedah and Narrabri and the nearby Leard and Pilliga forests that have been home to koalas, the great irony was clear that the open cut coal mines and the proposed coal seam gas fields in these forests, were and will be direct contributors to climate change and the renewed loss of Australia's koalas. Along with them go other 'at risk' species particularly birds on the 'endangered' cliff.

It's true the Leard was designated by politicians in NSW in the early 2000s as a potential mining resource but only for an underground mine – which still would have turned the site into an industrial zone.

That was before self-made and now bankrupt mining mogul Nathan Tinkler and his Aston Resources got involved with their National party allies (see story inside) and through some unclear dealings got the green light for the present open cut mine called Maules Creek after the nearby community. Aston is still a major shareholder of Whitehaven following a merger.

Selling the countryside has not changed

Climate change action pledges notwithstanding, NSW and federal politicians continue to facilitate the onslaught into farmland and public reserve land for coal and gas, turning the bush and farms into an overnight industrial site. (Not far to the south near Breeza is the proposed Shenhua mine in escarpment that is prime koala habitat next to Australia's best farming soils). Indigenous sacred sites are also being brushed aside.

— Written and compiled, Maria Taylor. Design and layout, Sue Van Homrigh.

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NOTES FROM THE ECOLOGISTS

Clive Barker, independent consultant ecologist who came across the Leard two years ago while surveying inland escarpment country

This ecological community is irreplaceable, its destruction is criminal

“The remnant of this woodland at Leard is in good condition because, unusually for this ecological community, it is State Forest. White Box is not a commercial species, so grand old growth White Box with numerous hollows have been left by the Forestry Corporation. Unlike private land, this woodland has been subject to only very light, intermittent grazing, and there is



practically no history of fire. Consequently the understorey is in good condition with few weeds. Remnants of this ecological community



greater than 200 hectares are extremely rare. Almost all surviving remnants of this community exist as very small degraded fragments on private land, subject to further

degradation from grazing, burning, harvesting for firewood and fencing, and the numerous ‘edge effects’ impacting small patches. There are scarcely any examples of this community in reserves. The Grassy White Box Woodland and in fact the rest of the native vegetation communities which exists at Leard, are irreplaceable. Destroying natural ecosystems for coal is simply criminal and here it is ‘ecocide’. The NSW Department of Environment which has tried to intervene in vain has also called the Leard woodland ‘irreplaceable’. The Leard has been called a number one biodiversity hotspot, identified as such by the NSW government in the draft New England North West Strategic Regional Land Use Plan. These areas officially “cannot sustain any further loss” and are “critical to biodiversity persistence”.

Stephen Debus, ecologist, University of New England. 70 species of birds have been identified in successive surveys in the Leard.

Biggest overall threat to woodland birds

“We knew there were threatened species (in the Pilliga and Leard), a lot listed on the NSW species list as vulnerable – Little Eagle, Glossy Black Cockatoo, Little Lorikeet, Turquoise Parrot, Barking Owl, Regent Honey Eater with Brown Tree-creeper and Grey-Crowned Babbler in the Leard additionally. “Pilliga: a network of cleared sites in the forest totally fragments the habitat which allows exotics like Noisy Miners to thrive in the fragmented patches. Fire becomes a big risk too. The development would be all connected by service roads, there’s pollution of the waterways that the birds drink from.

“Leard: what they find when they knock over the trees with hollows – reptiles, mammals like squirrel gliders, bats. There was evidence of koalas in the last survey.” Found animals are supposedly relocated, somewhere [by some of the 28 ecologists that Whitehaven or NSW Planning claim to have hired to be on board and on site, although no-one remembers having met any of them when we asked].

“They (the animals) really have nowhere to go. This is the myth that a lot of developers have: oh let’s just move them to other bush or ‘offsets’ when places like Leard and Pilliga are already the best that is there, that the animals are adapted to.

“The remaining remnant of the forest and other ‘like for like’ places are already inhabited. There are no free hollows or other habitat. And some of the proposed offsets for Leard are different elevation and vegetation type. They don’t replace White Box, Yellow Box Grassy Woodland, where for example older trees provide the best blossoms for nectar and songbirds need native tussocks and fallen logs.”

“I was present at a clearing event and saw the last tree to fall. A Brown Tree-Creeper was keeping ahead of the bulldozer from tree



to tree, until the only place to land was a patch of woodchips. There was nowhere to go, facing hundreds of metres of pretty bleak landscape to the next uncleared patch. 200 metres is the limit of woodland-dependent birds. Also there is no cover and there are birds of prey waiting.”

Independent ecologist Phil Sparks has criticised the validity of the proposed offsets and says most are in non-matching environments but consultants have approved them. In 2013 there was a Supreme Court challenge to the proposed offsets that was overruled by the court.

Offsets, koalas and climate change

“When the companies’ developments have passed all the environmental tests it’s easy for the banks to greenlight. There are consultants who are willing to do that. The whole environmental assessment process is just an approval process.” Sparks is working on a project looking at the koala population in the Gunnedah Basin, with the town wanting to call itself the koala capital of the world. “There has been pretty severe decline

of koalas; the key cause is climate change, heat and drought. In 2013–2014 we’ve had record heatwaves, very dry winds. We lost 25% of the population in those two events. From 2009 we’ve seen chlamydia disease as well which could be stress related.”



Koalas sitting up in trees are more exposed than other species to heat and dry. Sparks said koalas did amazing things seeking

shelter in gardens, homes and sheds in search of coolness and moisture. “We’ve underestimated how vulnerable native fauna are to climate change.”



How can they allow this with threatened species?

The legislated test says that the government only has to assess if there is ‘significant’ impact on a local population and decide there is no threat of extinction. This is where modern solutions like ‘somewhere else’ come in: offsets and biobanking make the decision-makers feel better and tick the boxes both state and federal.



“There are no available niches for displaced animals and most of them are going to die. Reports I saw from the first round of clearing indicated an unbelievable high number of animals, gliders, Barking Owls, bats, lizards.”

— Phil Sparks

Fleeing into the farmland

“I first met a family of kangaroos living on the edge of the Leard State Forest two years ago but they have probably lived here for generations, coming out onto the surrounding farmland to feed. They don’t know it but Whitehaven coal is going to destroy their home, nobody is going to try to relocate them, they will simply get stuck in with bulldozers. As the forest gets smaller they and every other living thing will have no choice but to flee into the surrounding farmland. *Dispatch by David Mould citizen non-violent protester.*

Mid 2015 the Gunnedah paper reported that a mob of kangaroos had been hunted out of the forest by mine activities and were subsequently shot by farmers concerned for their crops.

GREAT ARTESIAN BASIN AND THE FOSSIL FUEL PROJECTS



CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AGAINST CSG in February: Gamilaraay man Paul Spearim, with Yuin man Lyle Davis from the saltwater south coast, locked on together to protect Gamilaraay sacred lands. Meanwhile, knitting nanas and others blocking the access road into the site, holding up Santos traffic for hours, were met with a heavy police response.

A day earlier, more than 300 people defied a police roadblock to protest the construction of Santos’ controversial Leewood CSG waste water treatment facility in the Pilliga, between Narrabri and Gunnedah. They want Santos to pull out of unconventional gas in north west NSW, with 850 wells currently earmarked to fragment the forest.

AUSTRALIA is the driest inhabited continent on earth and the greatest resource the country has is the Great Artesian Basin (actually a series of interconnected basins), underlying 22% of Australia. According to the Great Artesian Basin Advisory Committee this ancient groundwater (which supports river systems and farmland further south) is rapidly being depleted.

It is only recharged at 10mm a year, and bores and gas wells are causing fractures and pollution. Therefore the recharge areas are critical and drilling in the Pilliga (Santos has a plan for 850 wells) would affect a major one. As one observer noted: “it’s like pricking a hundred holes in a balloon.”

The slow recharge, groundwater depletion and pollution also affect the

remaining farmers around the Leard coal mines. Independent reports have shown that the coal seams and the basins are hydraulically connected.

“Between 30,000 and 60,000 litres of drilling fluids are used to drill each CGS well and up to 40% stay down in the wells and are never brought back to the surface. Once these fluids have gone into a permeable rock, then it’s gone into an aquifer or water body and has contaminated it. Once the aquifers have been polluted, they can never be cleaned up. Once they have been drilled or fractured they can never be repaired.”

From: **The Plundering of Pilliga and Leard Forests and the surrounding farmlands**, by Pat Shultz, 2015. Many other aspects of this story as well as referral to documentaries and additional reading can be found in Pat’s book. Contact: Pat 0428 725 852; email leardpilliga@gmail.com

Pilliga and Leard Forest Tag Along Tours

These non-profit tours organised by Pat Shultz allow people to take in the beauty and magnitude of Leard and Pilliga Forests, while addressing the issues of coal and coal-seam gas mining in this vital recharge region for the Australian Great Artesian Basin. Learn of the impacts on vulnerable habitat, water tables, local communities and farmland and how to get involved.

TOUR DATES 2016

April: Fri 15th, Sat 16th, Sun 17th,
May: Fri 20th, Sat 21st, Sun 22nd,
June: Fri 17th, Sat 18th, Sun 19th
July: Fri 15th Sat 16th, Sun 17th

Contact: Pat 0428 725 852
Email leardpilliga@gmail.com

For more information about Leard/Pilliga
www.frontlineaction.org

WHY ARE PEOPLE WILLING TO GET ARRESTED TO STOP COAL MACHINERY?

ANNETTE SCHNEIDER from Burra is a horsewoman and artist and lives on a small farm. She said: “I’m a 55-year-old farmer and mother. I often have difficulty concentrating on everyday life and local problems because the science I have read has made me aware of what a mess we have made of the planet with coal-based industry.

“I get depressed at the thought that my children may never reach my own age because of the effect of climate change. The cure for depression is action.

“The science is in and there is no doubt that if we don’t stop expanding the coal industry we will destroy all complex life on



Annette and her dog Flac outside the Whitehaven mine gate prior to 2016 clearing starting. On 27 February we heard that Annette “locked on for over five hours stopping a Whitehaven bulldozer in the Leard State Forest. Currently in Narrabri Police Station.”

She is one of 350 people who have been arrested over a three-year period including footballer David Pocock and people from many walks of life including religious leaders.

Earth. My current comfort is not worth destroying the future of all I love. I am fighting the corruption of Whitehaven Coal because they are killing the forests and oceans. They are destroying our food, water and the air we breathe.”



CLIFF WALLACE of Wandoo near Maules Creek, one of the remaining farmers after the mines bought up 80 properties in the region, says he has been fighting local political corruption for 25 years and says that National Party Leader Barnaby Joyce “sold us out”.



On his farm he provided a camp for non-locals protesting the mine until the local council said he could not accommodate campers on his 400 hectares of extensively re-treed grazing and cropping land.

Once the mines have lowered the ground-

water table sufficiently so that it impacts on their supply, they will take Wallace’s water allocation. “The mine gets first go at water versus the town or farming,” he says. A major pollution event is also just around the corner, he believes, from the local creeks affected by the mine that flow into the Namoi catchment.

He sees the great irony as he reflects on the landscape destruction. “None of these mines are making money. They are just chasing the easy bits as our coal is close to the surface.”

“I’m glad I have no kids, wife or aged parent to be picked on (for opposing the mine and town jobs).” Other farmers who have and did “have suffered terribly”.

Dr Kerry Clarke, University of New England, who is on Whitehaven’s Community Consultative Committee told us that concerns include hugely increased fire risk thanks to the mines and coal seam gas operations and possibly spontaneous combustion in coal with less people around to volunteer for the RFS.

The fossil fuel operations have divided the communities (Boggabri, Gunnedah, Narrabri) and with most of the nearby farms around Maules Creek bought up by the mining companies, remaining farmers are feeling defeated. They are now just considered ‘collateral damage’ by the companies.

Nationals, Liberals, Labor — mining has good mates (and it worked for Whitehaven)

AUSTRALIAN politics has a revolving door fuelled by money and self-interest.

“Into it go former politicians and their staffers and out pop even more highly paid mining company executives and fossil fuel lobbyists,” writes Greens Senator Larissa Waters in a recent piece that named a lengthy list of politicians and their advisers who keep the fossil fuel status quo in favour.

“The revolving door in part explains why there has never been a coal mine or gas project refused under our federal laws.”

Massive political donations make up another reason for the tick-and-flick approach.

“For every dollar of their \$3.7m contribution to the election war chests of the big parties (federally and more at state level), they get more than \$2,000 back from the taxpayer purse,” writes Waters.

Subsidies and tax breaks totalled \$14 billion over four years, according to the Greens.

Some examples of the revolving door

Former politicians and familiar companies

- Former Nationals leader and deputy prime minister **John Anderson** became chairman of Eastern Star Gas, the company behind the Narrabri Gas Project (now owned by Santos).
- Former Nationals leader and deputy prime minister **Mark Vaile** became a director and then chairman of Whitehaven coal.
- Former Labor resources minister **Martin Ferguson** became chairman of the APPEA Advisory Board (oil and gas lobby) just six months after leaving office.
- Craig Emerson**, former federal Labor trade minister became consultant for AGL Energy and Santos.

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Tangled web of influence with the go ahead to destroy Leard forest

BUSINESS journalist Paddy Manning (also the author of a book about Nathan Tinkler) offers a quick trip through the murky genesis of the Maule’s Creek Mine and NSW government – planning sprinkled with National Party politicians, Nathan Tinkler and his Aston Resources.

One theory is that Maules Creek, after relentless lobbying led by former National Party leader and Aston chairman Mark Vaile, was given the green light by the NSW Coalition government under Barry O’Farrell in 2012 as a consolation prize for losing a Newcastle coal loader bid that itself stirred major controversy. Below is a taste of what Manning has outlined. You can read the whole piece at

<http://www.crikey.com.au/2014/08/28/the-murky-world-of-tinklers-maules-creek-approval-revealed/>

“While the loader was rejected, two months later the Planning Assessment Commission finally gave approval to the Maules Creek project near Narrabri, which Tinkler’s Aston Resources had bought from Rio Tinto in 2009, floated on the stock exchange at a tidy profit and then merged into Whitehaven Coal.

“Donations made by former Aston chief executive Todd Hannigan and CFO Tom Todd to the National Party, made at the suggestion of Aston chairman (and former



L to R: Outside Whitehaven gates into the Leard. Mine private ‘security’ on a public road around the Leard State Forest, 23 February 2016.



Nationals’ leader and deputy PM) Mark Vaile, were never disclosed. The company later pleaded guilty and paid a \$20,000 fine. (Note Aston was not a prohibited donor and there is no suggestion these donations were illegal – they simply should have been disclosed during the planning process.)

“After then-Labor federal environment minister Tony Burke toured the Maules Creek site in late 2012, he grew concerned about the adequacy of offsets and extended the time frame for approval pending further investigation. In an unprecedented act, now-disgraced NSW resources minister Chris Hartcher forced Burke’s hand just days later by leaking a letter indicating the federal government intended to approve the mine subject to conditions.

“Burke issued a partial conditional approval saying he had no idea whether the mine would go ahead. This approval was later

upheld in court after a challenge by the Northern Inland Council for the Environment.

“The federal Environment Department told the Senate estimates hearing earlier this year [2014] it was investigating a criminal matter to do with the offsets, but nothing came of it. The conditions set down by the

first PAC were dropped and the mine was finally approved with the void allowed (it will form an increasingly salty lake hundreds of metres deep), and construction went ahead.” [The ‘void’ is the pit produced by the mining and its rehabilitation was an early condition that was later dropped.]

The tragedy of a mine that never should have been okayed and makes no economic sense

WHITEHAVEN corporate presentations call their location the only “emerging high quality coal basin” in Australia and themselves the future face of the Gunnedah region for the next 30 years, with another mine proposal already in the pipeline.

But Whitehaven share price had reportedly dropped from \$6.86 in 2012 to 0.53 cents in January 2016, and 0.41 cents reported by the 5 February, not exactly a vote of investor confidence over time.

Whitehaven appears to be dealing with almost a billion dollars net debt which provides an incentive to maximise extraction and try to lessen debt even while the market price for the coal stays stubbornly low.

Business reporter Paddy Manning, in a 2014-piece for *Crikey* supports that argument saying analysts have called Whitehaven “half-pregnant” and it simply must proceed ... If it was a bigger company, Whitehaven might shelve Maules Creek, or even write it off...

“A lose-lose-lose scenario is unfolding: the forest is cleared, the groundwater used by local farmers fills up an increasingly salty pit lake, and nobody even makes money

out of it. Whitehaven’s Maules Creek Mine makes no economic sense.”

Two years later, it’s the same story. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 5 February that Macquarie analyst Andrew Hodge told clients that Whitehaven “cannot counter macroeconomic headwinds” and was likely to struggle to reduce its debt.

“With spot thermal prices hovering at \$US50 per tonne, lower than what Whitehaven received for the quarter, a forward curve implying \$US43.6 a tonne by year’s end and \$US42 per tonne in 2017 as well as a general momentum against coal, we see little to hope for ahead,” Mr Hodge said.

“We believe Whitehaven will be unable to meaningfully reduce their \$900 million plus debt facility, and do not see them achieving net cash until 2025, almost a full decade away.”

Despite the good news here for anti-fossil-fuel campaigners, the tragi-comic outcome is that Whitehaven will dig ever harder in order to reduce its debt at these prices. The big loss for the rest of us is Australia’s biodiversity, water and air quality, while no-one in power is looking. ■

From p9

• **Greg Combet**, former federal Labor climate change minister, became consultant to AGL Energy and Santos.

Political staffers:

• Bill Shorten’s current chief of staff, former Queensland Labor state secretary **Cameron Milner**, previously provided consultant advice to Adani of the Carmichael Coal project.

• **Stephen Galilee**, former chief of staff to Liberal federal resources minister Ian Macfarlane and chief of staff to Mike Baird as NSW treasurer and shadow treasurer, went on to be CEO of the NSW Minerals Council.

• **Lisa Harrington** was a senior adviser to Mike Baird before becoming the head of government relations at AGL Energy.

• **Robert Underdown** former senior adviser to federal resources minister Ian Macfarlane became manager of the government and public policy group at Santos.

• **Caroline Hutcherson** former senior media adviser to then Liberal NSW resources minister Chris Hartcher, then worked as senior adviser to Santos, before working as a senior adviser to NSW Liberal premier Mike Baird.

There’s a lot more like this revolving between lobbying groups, and state and federal resource offices and state premier’s office.

Source: <http://gu.com/p/4h6pc/sbl>
Ban donations from mining companies and stop ministers working for them by Larissa Waters

From the Editor ... Biodiversity – our greatest loss



AUSTRALIA’s corporate media and the public broadcasters stay firmly fixated on urban social problems, human on human crime and violence, the shenanigans of politicians, even floating debris in the Indian Ocean while a catastrophe that affects us all is unfolding largely unreported in the rural hinterland.

That is the accelerating assault for profit on what remains of biodiversity, wildlife habitat and naturally-growing trees that offset greenhouse gas emissions. Coming up is the NSW government’s efforts to water down or dismantle native vegetation protection laws.

Independent media like the *Bulletin* is able to bring these state and national

stories to the local level, hence this special report. It is our business too as citizens. What would we say if the National Gallery were vandalised for example?

On the Leard and Pilliga destruction, the only slightly balancing argument is that people in country towns are caught with few job options these days – not least through the loss of small town government jobs with council amalgamations. The ‘keep the status quo’ lobbyists and their political mates offer no alternatives in the bush besides shipping out natural resources (and that includes the disgraceful kangaroo industry).

Rural residential haven for wildlife

On a much happier note, we are lucky to have a lot of returning wildlife on the small acreages surrounding the ACT, where the biodiversity is being rebuilt. We forget that wildlife is mostly absent and invisible as you drive through the wider countryside.

We are seeing threatened species like the Rosenberg’s Monitor goanna returning



Here are two images of our returned wildlife: a large male red neck wallaby that cruised the lawn with his little mob and a nectar eater on the bottlebrush.

in numbers, many redneck wallabies and eastern greys, shy swamp wallabies, wombats on the creeks, possums and a profusion of birdlife as well as native plants (all largely absent 20 years ago).

Rural residential provides a sanctuary

that more and more people appear to enjoy (excepting a few criminals, one of whom shot and then ran over a wombat in Wamboin last month). Facebook comments show that people have even reached co-existence with the snakes about. ■