

MINING THE TRANQUILITY OF MT KEMBLA VILLAGE

*An overview of the proposed BHP Dendrobium Mine
by Natasha Greenwood*

For many years BHP has “invested” in the Illawarra; so much so, that its presence here has become a landmark. Although drastically downsized, BHP is about to once again “invest” in our lucky town. At the time of writing, a Commission of Inquiry is currently being held regarding the construction and operation of the Dendrobium underground coal mine at Mt Kembla.

BHP Steel Pty Limited lodged its application for an underground coal mine between the existing Elouera and Cordeaux mines at Mt Kembla, 4km west of Wollongong, to the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP) during March 2001. It is estimated that the project has a

- ↳ The construction and operation of an access drift from the existing Nebo site and a conveyor drift from the Kemira Valley Site and construction of coal conveyors to remove coal from the mine operations to the Kemira Valley Coal Loading Facility;
- ↳ Coal transportation along the existing rail line to Port Kembla Steelworks;
- ↳ The construction of four new ventilation shafts;
- ↳ Road transportation of up to 1.1 million tones of coal rejects to the West Cliff Coal Mine; installation of a thermal dryer at the Port Kembla Steelworks;
- ↳ Construction of a new road to access the sewerage treatment plant from Nebo, and
- ↳ The construction of a 150,000 tonne



ROM (Run of Mine) stockpile at the Kemira Valley Coal Loading Facility.

Mt Kembla began its life as a mining village in the early 1880s and continued as such even after the loss of 96 workers in a mine explosion in 1902. Abundant in folk culture, the village has come to

“capital investment value” of \$130 million and will provide approximately 261 full time position during construction and 277 positions during operation.

The application submitted to DUAP includes the following:

- ↳ An underground longwall mine of approximately 20 square kilometres, with a capacity to extract up to 5.2 million tones of coal per year, to be used at the Port Kembla Steelworks and exported internationally;

know a much more tranquil lifestyle which BHP’s plan to open the Dendrobium coal mine is threatening.

Residents of Mt Kembla village and surrounding areas have a variety of concerns relating to the transport of coal and services and the environmental impact of the mine on the local area. At present, 1.7 million tonnes of coal is already brought down per year. With the Dendrobium mine in operation, it is estimated that there will be an additional 11 train trips up and down

the mountain per day. To coincide with this, BHP will put an extra 200 vehicles along Cordeaux Road per day with Stones road becoming a major route for heavy vehicles to the stockpile. Such increases in traffic in an area that is now largely residential has immense implications for the safety of the children attending Mt Kembla Public School. The Wollongong City Council also has concerns for the ability of road surfaces and bridges to withstand the increases in pressure, which were problems that they experienced when Nebo mine was operational.

There are also concerns for the implication of the stockpile at Kemira Valley. The movement of fine coal dust off the top of the pile and into the atmosphere has residents concerned for their health and the local river systems.

Furthermore, the opening of the mine has tremendous implications on water catchments and aquatic systems. The Total Environment Centre and the Colong Foundation for Wilderness have raised concerns for the environmental impacts mining will have on water quality in the water catchment areas. There are fears that the mine will damage areas in the same way that longwall mining has damaged upper parts of the Georges, Nepean and Cataract rivers.

BHP’s Elouera Mine which adjoins the proposed Dendrobium Mine is believed to create and discharge 10ml of polluted ground water per day into the Illawarra Escarpment. Longwall mining at West Cliff Mine is causing water loss and flow disruption in the Georges River near Appin. In this area there have been significant fish kills.

One fine example of BHP’s shameless ignorance in regards to the protection of local environments concerns mining under the Cataract River. Mining began here in 1988 with five longwall panels having faces of 110 metres. At this time the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR) stated that there was no reported water loss or damage to river beds. In 1992 the panels were widened to 155 metres. Following these increases the Cataract River experienced cracking damage, loss of river pools and disruptions in river flow. During a court case in 1998, both BHP and DMR admitted to these damages, however continued mining with the 155 metre longwalls until the mine closed in April 2000. The longwall panels proposed for the Dendrobium mine at Mt Kembla range from 182 - 305 metres wide.

Operations at BHP's Appin Colliery have also created large cracks in Broughton's Weir, which controls 20% of Sydney's water supply. The Appin mine operates at a depth of approximately 400 metres. The depth proposed by BHP for the Dendrobium mine is only a third of that, much closer to the surface, therefore creating more risk for cracking in our local catchment and polluting our water.

Before mining even begins, more than 70 hectares of land will need to be cleared to allow the construction of infrastructure and services such as the access road from Nebo to the Sewerage Treatment Plant, the stockpile at Kemira Valley, and the four ventilation shafts. The clearing of land will destroy habitats for local fauna communities and encourage the introduction of exotic species into an area which is part of a habitat corridor. In the area there are approximately 345 native animal species, including Koala, the Broad Headed Snake, the Red-Crowned Toadlet and the Giant Burrowing Frog; of these 21 are threatened.

Surveys carried out to assess flora and fauna in the area were described by the Illawarra Escarpment Coalition as being too small and at inappropriate times in seasons. Most of the environmental impacts outlined in the Environmental Impact Statement, which was produced for BHP by Olsen Environment Consultants Pty Ltd, were too often set aside as inconsequential. For a mine with a predicted lifespan of 21 years, the environmental impacts are anything but inconsequential.

Keith Muir of the Colong Wilderness Foundation believes that the proposed Dendrobium mine is the worst mining development seen for a long time. Once again there are many risks concerning our own welfare and that of our natural environment that BHP are willing to dismiss for the accumulation of revenue and while the need for their "investment" is questionable in every aspect, the need for the protection of our escarpment and Mt Kembla village is not.



by Dr Alistair Lochhead

Delegates from over 70 countries attended the Global Greens Conference in April 2001, with a commitment to creating a cooperation network and to develop a charter. A total of 1100 delegates met in Sydney and Canberra for both the Young Greens and Global Greens conferences.

The sessions were exciting and colourful due to number and diversity of participants. The conference opened with music from the Stiff Gins and Ecopela followed by addresses from Bob Brown and speakers from Niger, Japan, Mexico and Malta.

Some of us find it hard to get the attention we feel Green issues deserve in Australia, but most of us have not had to put up with the life threatening intimidation and prolonged imprisonment endured by some of the Latin American and African delegates- true heroes! The "lady of the forest" Kenyan Wangari Maathai, the Mayor of Santa Monica, the convener of The German Greens and Ministers from several countries were among the attendees.

Sessions and workshops were held on many topics including globalisation, the experience of Greens in government as well as Charter development. The principles of economic wisdom, social justice, participatory democracy, non-violence and sustainability represent the core of the charter.

Specifics include:

- A call for ratification of the Kyoto Protocol for a reduction of greenhouse emission of 20-30% by 2020. Political actions relating to democracy, equity, climate change biodiversity
- Domestic environmental laws to be applied to mining and logging companies operating overseas
- Women's rights to control fertility
- Abolition of the death penalty
- World environment court
- Phasing out of nuclear power
- Electoral systems based on proportional representation

The debate for the charter and its ultimate adoption were inspirational. There were difficult moments, however, when issues of religion and sexuality were discussed. That such a large and diverse group worked together so well was a reflection on the sense of cooperation and ultimate goals of the conference. As Bob Brown said "no other political party in the world could have negotiated such a comprehensive platform that will help guide the growing green tide around the planet".

A dinner in the Great Hall of Parliament House was held during the meeting supplemented with organic food and wine. Following this, exotic fire dancing and music made the entire conference a great experience.