

The worlds of Stockton Bite

By Inge Arnold

A week of fun-filled thought provoking, many a controversial environment and social issue at the forefront of conversation topics over dinner, or perhaps chai? This was Students and Sustainability 2001.

Sand mining at Stockton Bight proved to be one issue that appeared again and again throughout the week; even managing to wake some keen beans before dawn each morning for a sunrise tour.

Stockton Bight is an amazing stretch of sand dunes just north of Newcastle, reaching about thirty-two kilometres north up the coast. The Stockton Bight issue is far from new, various campaigns on issues surrounding the spectacular dunes have continued for over 30 years. Despite the efforts of campaigners to bring the issues to light, Stockton Bight seems to continue to be one of those amazing places that shies away from the exploits of tourism, attracting mainly locals and giant mining companies.

Stockton Bight is part of the Maaialgal traditional country of the Worimi Nation. The dunes have particular significance to the Maaialgal people; there are hundreds of shell middens, ceremonial, burial and sacred sites throughout the dunes, some dating many thousands of years old. Naturally, wind and water move the dunes with the seasons and weather patterns, covering and uncovering these sites sporadically. Even now, social activities including hunting, gathering and fishing add to the importance of the area to the Maaialgal clan. However, recent activity on the dunes has proved to be nothing but destructive toward the natural dune ecosystems and the cultural

significance of the dunes.

The dunes have been recognised as having high conservation value. In 1972, National Trust identified the dunes for preservation. However it took until earlier this year to ensure their protection. Even now, only approximately one third of the Stockton Bight area has been granted National Park status, preserving only the northern end against the destructive mining practises that are under way toward the south.

In 2000, additional areas totalling 955ha were granted by Port Stephens council to Mineral Deposits Limited for increased mining over a 15 year period. Mining of rutile and zircon has proved to be destructive to the fragile systems of the dunes. It has destroyed the natural habitats of wildlife species, culturally significant sites of the Maaialgal people, as well as increasing areas of quicksand, making visits to certain areas by members of the public more dangerous than ever. Approximately 80% of Australia's glass mining sand comes from the Stockton dunes. However, Peter Williams, the General Manager of Mineral Deposits Limited disputes that the mining has any significant detriment to the dunes. He says, "We filter about 1200 tonnes of sand per hour when the operation is running, but we only remove about 0.3% of the sand, so 99.7% of the sand remains here. The 0.3% we take out is taken up to our processing plant at Hawk Nest where we separate the various minerals and then we truck it back down to Newcastle to be shipped away and sold... And we can actually re-form the dunes to whatever aspect we want. In this case we've been specifically asked to leave a low area beside this vegetated area to try and stop the migration of the sand into the vegetated areas where it's actually killing the forest."

Carol Ridgeway-Bissett is a Maaialgal Traditional custodian of the Worimi Nation. Traditional and cultural sites are not as replaceable in the way artificial sand dunes can be created after mineral extraction. "I've seen our traditional country just raped, if you like to call it that, by sand mining, by sand extractions, by over-development. I think it's about time that the government seriously looked at the environmental effects from such developments. Now if the government's serious about things like biodiversity, the environment, all sorts of things like that, they should put into practice what they preach," She said.

Glen Klatovsky, the NSW Campaign Manager for the Wilderness Society, also disagrees with Peter Williams that mining in the area has no significant detrimental affect. The natural aquifer that exists underneath the dunes and offers an extensive source of fresh water is also under threat from mining through pollution and exhaustive usage. He explains, "Stockton is one of the suppliers of fresh water for Newcastle and the Hunter Valley, and sand mining is renowned to release acid sulphate soils, and also heavy metals into water supplies."

Mining is however, not the only threat to the dunes. National Park status cannot necessarily protect the dunes from the damaging effects of 4WDs. Appreciation of the fragile dune system stands a long way from the erosion and destruction caused by dune buggies, motor bikes and 4WDs that roam the sand dunes and vegetated areas. These have proved to be particularly detrimental to the threatened species of Little Tern and Pied Oystercatcher populations that breed on the frontal sand dunes. Increased visitation by people in 4WD vehicles has also seen an extension of erosion and general pollution on the dunes.

Campaigners however, are hopeful that an increase in support recently from the local community and the lobbying of local councils and state government will result in an expansion of the current National Park area and less emphasis on mining activity. "The economic and environmental future of Stockton Bight is as an eco-tourism site, which will provide long-term employment and large economic gains for the Hunter region. This mine is not only environmentally unsustainable but also economically unsustainable," said Ian Sweeney, The Wilderness Society's Newcastle Campaign Manager.

On the Saturday following Students and Sustainability, conference participants joined with local community groups and individuals to blockade the main entrance to the mine site. About sixty people successfully brought the issues of Stockton Bight back into the limelight in the Newcastle and Port Stephens communities. There were no arrests; the few police who turned up appeared to be supportive of the peaceful demonstration. The action attracted local television and print news reporters who thoroughly enjoyed the colourful entertainment! All in all a great day was had by all but for the chilly winter winds...

MONGA FOREST RESCUE

WHAT STATE FORESTS SAY **THE SHOCKING TRUTH**

The environment:

“State Forests’ goal is to manage the forests under its care to provide the widest range of benefits to the present and future generations of people in NSW”

“ecologically sustainable management of native forests to protect and enhance environmental values including flora and fauna, water and soil quality and scenic attraction.”

Social contributions of forestry to the community:

“our social contribution – helping to generate social and economic benefits for the people of NSW, including recreation and regional employment opportunities. “to bring social, economic an environmental benefit to the State.”

The environment :

100,000 hectares of bushland was cleared in NSW in 2000. The NSW State of the Environment Report suggests that land-clearing in NSW may be as much as 150,000ha per year. This is not sustainable management.

Economic benefits to the community:

The native forest industry receives millions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies. This is resulting in competitive neutrality in forests, undermining the competition from regional plantation industries and more sustainable jobs.

The number of jobs in the timber industry is falling, the trees are falling and the profits are going to a rapacious Japanese woodchipping company (Nippon Unipac in Eden).