

Blue Mountains National Park: What is really at stake?

As Australia increasingly turns away from fossil fuels to meet global climate change targets to ensure a sustainable future, responsible and sustainable management of Australia's UNESCO world heritage sites deserves renewed attention and scrutiny to ensure a viable and sustainable future.

In July this year the Federal Government narrowly avoided having the Great Barrier Reef listed as an endangered world heritage site by UNESCO, despite extensive climate change-spurred damage to the ecosystem's corals. The list of UNESCO world heritage sites in danger already exceeds 50 in number. Will the Blue Mountains be next?



The Greater Blue Mountains Area of sandstone plateaux, waterfalls, valleys, massive cliffs, deep rain-forested gullies and gorges of eucalypt dominated landscape spreads across eight conservation reserves and is one of the largest and most intact tracts of protected bushland in Australia. In 2000 this massive space of more than 1.03 million hectares was inscribed as the UNESCO Greater Blue Mountains Area. Galvanising community consciousness enabled the UNESCO citation. But will it suffice to safeguard the park's ongoing wellbeing?

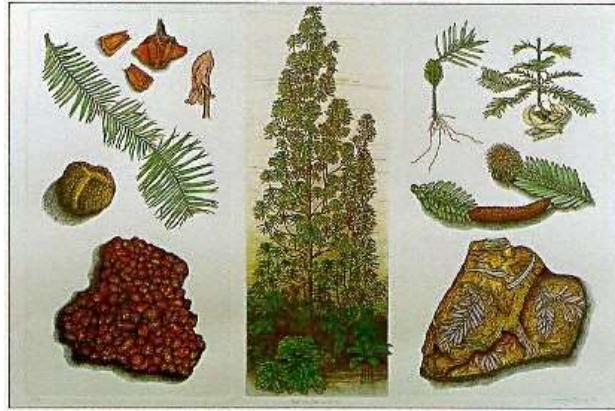
National Parks NSW identifies 267,183 hectares – about one quarter - as the Blue Mountains National Park (BMNP). Benefits of having such a large natural park within 50-110kms from Australia's most populous city, Sydney, are many. Nature based tourism to the BMNP exceed 3 million annually. Around 71,000 people live in the Blue Mountains.

Ready access to magnificent views and plenty of walks long and short, site seeing, rock climbing, camping, hiking and abseiling draw people from near and far. Abundant recreational opportunities have made the BMNP popular for locals as well as interstate and international visitors.

COVID 19 Lockdowns and more people working from home are two trends increasing the perceived value of living outside urban areas and make living in the BMNP more appealing. Psychologists have long recognised that being among trees and in natural surrounds, seeing sunrises and sunsets over the horizon is conducive to physical and mental wellbeing. Being in park surrounds reduces stress, anger, frustration and lowers social anxiety as well as increases personal fitness. People come here to take time out, enjoy nature, relax and revitalise, whilst nature's inherent beauty serves as a source of ongoing artistic, creative and spiritual inspiration.

Why is the BMNP important for posterity? UNESCO's citation helps to protect the biodiversity of a unique natural area which is an outstanding stage of earth's history (Gondwana), representing ongoing ecological and biological processes, containing exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance, and including threatened species of

universal value (mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs make up 432 vertebrate fauna species recorded since European settlement). From ancient Aboriginal rock-art sites to the buildings left over from early European settlements, this park is a natural history book, a place where the Wollemi pine, one of the world's oldest and rarest trees was discovered in 1994. The BMNP provides invaluable cultural, economic, and social wellbeing which future generations deserve to see intact and protected as we do today.



From the colonial days of early settlement, the reserves of this dividing range were seen as difficult terrain, and explorers mostly did not look at it for its aesthetic qualities, but first and foremost how to extract economic value from it, farm it, mine it, dam it, burn it and harvest timber. Determined groups of environmentalists, conservationists and wilderness experts gradually took on politicians to realise that such heritage in our midst is to everyone's benefit. The Colong Foundation for Wilderness and The Colo Committee were prominent activists in this quest. The journey to preserve began by individuals changing public perception of the Blue Mountains as hostile and indomitable to being a spectacular national asset deserving preservation.

Conservation is a primary concern. Previous campaigns were waged by environmentalists who managed to persuade politicians. As we increasingly move towards renewable sources of energy and greater ecological awareness, there emerge dangers to the survival of this park in its original pristine form.

Short term dangers include mine extractions, logging, damage caused by extreme weather events like bush fires, unusually heavy rain and the proposed expansion of the Warragamba Dam. This August Centennial Coal withdrew a coal mine application, five threatened wetlands in the Gardens of Stone were saved and 123 million tonnes of coal were kept safely in the ground. That's equivalent to two years of NSW's total climate pollution. In 1932, Miles Dunphy proposed that this spectacular slice of Wiradjuri Country, the Gardens of Stone, should be protected as part of his vision for the Greater Blue Mountains National Park.



Since then, the Blue Mountains National Park and World Heritage Area have been declared, but the last 39,000 hectares of the Gardens of Stone remain unprotected – because coal companies had an interest in mining deep underneath the ground.

Without conservationists documenting and resisting the irreversible damage that underground coal mining has done to the rare ecosystems, cultural heritage and spectacular cliffs and pagodas above, and being vocally and politically active, the economic motive would have overruled the urge to conserve. Nature Conservation Council investigations last year revealed that the company was cheating on its greenhouse emissions assessment – it failed to account for 97% of the climate pollution it would cause.

Another current threat to the park's heritage status is a proposal to increase the dam height of the Warragamba Dam by 17 metres. Bob Carr (who was the NSW Premier when the UNESCO listing was applied for back in 2000) has warned UNESCO that the NSW government impact assessment fails to comply with international Conservation of Nature guidelines. He believes the NSW Government has a stated disinterest in adhering to world heritage commitments and requests UNESCO to make an independent assessment.

Longer term threats to the park include species extinction, increasingly occurring extreme weather events as mentioned, climate change and the constant threat to the park by stakeholders who see economic value in extracting valuable natural resources. Resort developments, urban sprawl, nuisance air traffic and waste management are topics requiring ongoing local government containment.

Three factors will determine the continued sustainable viability of this park: the ability of scientific evidence to inform and guide political decisions, the willingness of all tiers of government to commit to ensuring environmental protection in alignment with UN Sustainable Development Goals, and societal readiness to place greater value of this park ahead and above mercenary considerations in the interests not only of the survival of the planet, but also to safeguard our own wellbeing. Relentless development is not forever. Covid has taught us to re-assess how we live. Let us rise to the collective challenge.

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