

**Submission by National Parks Association of NSW Southern Sydney Branch to the
Dendrobium Extension Project SSD 8194 IPC Hearing Thursday 3rd December 10.28
Time allocated 15 Minutes**

My name is Gary Schoer Secretary of the Southern Sydney Branch of National Parks Association of NSW and have been in that role of President or Project Officer for close to 50 years. This submission reflects the opinion of our Branch covering the greater part of Southern Sydney towards the Northern Illawarra.

Our Branch has worked for decades closely with adjacent Branches and NPA NSW and many other groups represented at these hearings to advocate on behalf of the many diverse natural ecosystems directly or indirectly influenced by many regional mining operations. Since mining began at Helensburgh and the wider region, logs have been cut from giant forest trees within Royal National Park for bord and pillar mining until the Sydney Morning Herald reported on it leading to cessation of such logging. Our Branch has reported on mining waste overflows into the Hacking River turning it black. The development of Helensburgh for mine-workers accommodation and the necessary roads that interlaced the Upper Hacking River Valley arguably helped contribute cumulatively to local species extinctions. Hunting of grey kangaroos for pelts, chemical spills killing the last local platypuses and the devastating 1994 fires which affected 95% of Royal National Park's ecosystems and the apparent local extinction of the Greater Glider all contributed to a trend of increasing local extinctions especially for vertebrates, with 17 now listed as locally extinct or no longer occurring in Royal and Heathcote National Park or Garawarra State Conservation Area to the north. In our largest campaign in former years we successfully advocated with many groups for a refusal of plans to double the footprint of Helensburgh...thus helping to conserve the ecosystems of the Upper Hacking River. The NSW Government has answered several of NPA's calls for adding lands to Heathcote National Park and Royal National Park to try to address the issue of land fragmentation and gaps in the wildlife corridors helping to keep yet more species over the broader Woronora Plateau in including in the water catchment lands. The 2021 fires impact on so much of our natural lands and an estimated loss of five billion native animals has expanded NPA's former major interest in conserving and managing national parks lands to managing ALL substantive tracts of natural areas to provide greater resilience to climate change and threats that increase drying and heating will bring. Attention to the threatened and other communities and native species in our catchment areas is thus of special interest to the increasing number of people advocating for threatened places in a threatened planet. In thinking globally, but acting locally, the advocacy for these lands and waters threatened by mine expansion is now part of NPA's core business.

National Park Association's Southern Sydney Branch Position on future use of Water Catchment lands

NPA's vision is to ensure that all remaining substantial tracts of natural lands in the region are added to the National Parks Estate or given the highest possible zoning protection status. Our policy is that **we believe that the water catchment lands should be mining free and be designated as "Nature Reserve" reflecting the very high nature conservation values that are especially supported in such reserves, while excluding all potentially damaging human activities within the catchment.** It is "National Parks" which permit a

greater degree of recreational usage, so that zonation is not generally indicated for these lands protecting our drinking water. All of the documentation by dedicated state and Federal conservation agencies within this report allude to support for the high environmental values within the catchment and point to predicted continuing “significant” environmental impacts should this mining expansion recommendation be approved. The history of government compliance with mining in an unsuitable area does not justify continuing permissions of the scale and type foreshadowed.

“Special Areas” not So Special

Despite these cumulative threats it was always thought that the southern sectors of Sydney’s ring of green would be more resilient to threatening processes than many their parts of NSW with Australia’s first National Park, “The Royal”, Heathcote National Park, Garawarra State Conservation Area and parts of the Illawarra Escarpment and Sydney’s and Wollongong’s drinking water catchments protecting a diverse range of connected ecosystems over the so-named Woronora Plateau. Dedicated NPWS management had a strong voice in association with a vast and growing community network of people and advocacy groups in helping to ensure a degree of holistic management to care for the ecosystems in our local region. The drinking water catchment, by their very name, SPECIAL AREAS, signalled that a special cooperative arrangement between NPWS (that was to manage the terrestrial ecosystems) and Sydney Water (managing the water and water infrastructure) would be a mechanism to continue this new-found enthusiasm for better managing our natural assets in a more integrated manner. WE all grew up knowing we could be fined zillions if we dared place a ill-judged foot into these special places or indeed pee against a tree while there.

But there were exceptions to this value-signalling naming of these lands. Long wall mining was the high tech super industrial saviour of the struggling smaller bord and pillar enterprises. Companies like BHP, Peabody and South 32 managed to partner with successive NSW Governments to allow a world exclusive to commence, persist and grow...major coal mining operations in a drinking water catchment. In South 32’s case their Sustainability Policy includes promotion of “enduring environmental benefits” that is clearly not being acted out in this 27-year maximum coal output scenario that fails to avoid damage to the many endangered Coastal Upland Swamps in the area.

The position that the IPC has on agreeing with or not the “Government” recommendation to allow an expansion into Areas 5 and 6, seems, on the face of it, a simple proposition: Whether to support the much higher perceived economic and social benefits of the extension proceeding against the (relatively) so-assessed lesser benefits to the environment. through not proceeding. Support by DPIE recommends that the economy must be a clear determinant in settling this choice. NPA believes this is far too simplistic and counter to the need to ensure that protecting the major environmental values of the area must underpin the future status of these lands, waterways and drinking water security.

NPA Southern Sydney Branch and indeed our State Council and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW representing the tens of thousands of its members in environment and community groups through NSW asserts that there should be no coal mining in our drinking water catchments.

Thus, NPA Southern Sydney Branch's recommendation is that this IPC should thus reject this application for expansion of the Dendrobium mine.

We defend this position by asserting that the stated major economic and social benefits by the proponent and echoed in the DPIE recommendation is completely mining-centric and undervalues the known past and predicted future water and biotic impacts.

Other Branches of NPA, NPA NSW via its Mining spokesperson and indeed many other groups presenting to this Panel will enunciate in more detail on the scale of such impact on water quality and quantity. Our Branch will expand on the known and potential "significant" impacts on the biotic environment. We will also point out some logical inconsistencies promulgated within the language of the DPIE Report that the Commissioners are urged to consider to help ensure decisions are based on valid and consistent arguments.

The Public Interest

If the Commissioners believe that the hundreds of submissions by coal workers about perceived threats to their employment is unchallengeable proof that this proposal is in the "public interest" we would ask the Commissioners to appreciate that 10 000 signatories to a petition opposing Peabody's plans to mine under the pondage at Woronora were collected, not in Labor stronghold but in the conservative belt of seats in Sutherland Shire. There, water security for the Shire was the issue that ensured most people approached signed it. (I was a witness to this at the Gympie Fair). Likewise, multiple groups in the Illawarra and Southern Sydney have mobilised on the back of CSG threats and other longwall proposals to advocate for the water and the natural world as this behemoth proceeds with the giant machines that leave water security, quality and many threatened parts of the ecosystems even more threatened ...all with asserted government support. NPA asks that you as Commissioners do not merely nod to this seemingly simple government recommendation but make your own truly independent assessments as befits by your title.

What are the ecological reasons why this recommendation should be rejected?

In the record of the meeting between South 32 and the IPC, the proponents allude to the position of DPIE that "has acknowledged the major economic and social benefits for the region and to NSW and that "residual" impacts are **effectively minimised**, managed and compensated."

The use of the terms "residual" and "effectively minimised" puts "environmental biotic" and water impacts in a box full of nothing much that marginalises the strong science-based opinions to the contrary by government authorities responsible for biodiversity and water conservation within this super ministry overshadowed by the probably hard-fought executive recommendation by DPIE that has effectively marginalised the in-house expertise. It behoves the Commissioners to be guided scientifically by these contributors and not the final conclusion and recommendation of the summarising wordsmith.

When the impacts of long-wall mining started to be known to the general public through hard-gained access to impact areas by members of various mining Company's Community Consultative Committees and some members of the general public (I was one representing NPA) it soon became clear that impacts were not "minimal" and certainly not negligible. If the Commissioners have not yet read the total reasons why the Sydney Basin Coastal Upland Swamps were declared a "Threatened Ecological Community" under the then Threatened Species legislation I recommend they do so. And under the same legislation, the declaration of "Alteration of habitat following subsidence due to long-wall mining" as a "threatening ecological process" negates South 32's assertion that long wall mining is a mere "residual" impact. Such declarations are made by a group of highly qualified scientists after extensive research and time and feedback from the wider community.

The original *Threatened Species Conservation Act, 1995* alluded to the responsibility of the state's Environment Department to "develop strategies for mitigating or managing this Threatening Process on our wildlife." Are the Commissioners convinced that under the new Biodiversity Act that replaced it, sufficient opportunity for scientific expertise there has informed the mining design? Whether formally within this Act or not, the Commissioners need to ask: How do we know that the survivability of impacted animals within the Endangered Sydney Coastal Upland Swamps has been fully considered under the "maximum yield" mine design model? After all the parent Company IMC asserts that "one of our key approaches is to avoid impacts"

This goal is actually a nonsense statement when it failed to accept that the indicative alternative mining plan which it developed avoiding impacts to upland swamps was summarily rejected as "uneconomical". Yet at the same time South 32 in discussions with IPC maintains that "We have designed our mine plan to avoid sensitive surface features, *where possible* (it states) including cultural heritage. This is spin...there is NO concession to avoiding upland swamps in areas 5 and 6 over the life of the approval. The so-called concession not to mine in area 4 due to denser upland swamps there is not a concession when one is seeking 27 years of mining expansion in other areas containing multiple upland swamps and there is no serious consideration to adjust the mine plan to avoid the majority of these swamps. NPA is not convinced about this promoted largesse. We understand that there may well be alternative suitable coal resources in the company's operations outside the drinking water catchment which I understand other groups will discuss, so we urge the Commissioners to ensure that the economics and suitability of these alternatives are critically examined.

Offsetting Issues

There is also too little detail on what the purchased offset property that is a so-called "stewardship site" can achieve in reducing the overall impacts of this proposed expansion. The Commissioners may wish to explore this. NPA and many other environment groups reject the concept of offsetting, for the net effect is not to improve the conservation status of ecosystems allowed to be compromised by legally identified threatening processes in particular.

The claims of the value of “offsetting” are grossly exaggerated and misleading. Despite providing numerical weightings for offsetting impacts on particular species to help determine what type of offset is required, there is no guarantee that there will be like for like, that the offset will be in the same bioregion and that the offset will be on land that has a resilience of scale and long term sustainability in its setting beyond the network of swamps to be impacted. This is not offsetting, this is destruction at any cost. The net area of threatened and other communities will go backwards under this scheme of convenience that is not a substitute for ethical decision making that puts some real value on keeping fast-disappearing ecosystems intact.

The simplistic assertion of a “good balance”

According to DPIE, The Project would provide **major economic and social benefits** for Wollongong and its surrounding region and to NSW. The Department considers that South32 has designed the project in a manner that achieves a **good balance** between **maximising the recovery of a coal resource** of State significance and **minimising the potential impacts on the water resource, biodiversity values and other environmental values** of the Metropolitan Special Area.

There is no doubt that the Department can assert it will *maximise the recovery of a coal resource*. The company provided an indicative plan to avoid undermining upland swamps, but effectively asserts and explains away that to follow this more conservative plan would not be economical. We have not found a critical analysis of this assertion. We wish to advise the Commissioners that many groups addressed a similar Commission to this (A PAC) when BHP announced that a rejection of a proposal to expand mining further into the Bulli Seam, (and undermining many upland swamps) would be very uneconomical...indeed it was implied that effectively, the sky would fall in. The Commissioners saw beyond that assertion and rejected the proposal. With no mining under this area, a new Dharawal National Park was gazetted and announced several times by several MPs about how this was a great win for the environment and the social good of the people who stood up for important natural areas. What makes this “balance” achieved any worse than the one being spruiked here? And it is noteworthy that there was a high valuing of the social good for those many citizens that spoke the truth about values beyond the economic. It needs to be stated that NPA supports sustainable economies...it is not a case of Environment OR the economy but Environment AND the economy. BHP worked out how to survive a rejection of a proposal for a new mine.

This proposal, if approved, will, supply coal at present rates of extraction for a further 27 years after 2024. The Business Media in recent days has been reporting on the probable medium-term investment in green hydrogen developments. Green Hydrogen can provide a suitable alternative, greenhouse gas emission-free reductant for steel manufacture. NPA has sought some initial advice from an energy consultant (Allen Lowe) that indicates that while this industry reform will not take place immediately in Australia, the alternative is viable. NPA asks, if in view of potential alternatives on the energy horizon, is it really necessary to give permission for 27 years more extraction that would lead to further “significant” environmental impacts in view of likely steel industry reforms in the near to medium future.

Koalas and other vertebrates in the catchment The discovery of six koalas in the expansion footprint area results not in an overall assessment of the potential impacts of stream collapses on drinking water for animals, but a “species costing” exercise for offset purposes. There seems no over-riding moral responsibility for maintaining healthy ecosystems if one can express the potential environmental cost as a number under offsetting provisions which allow development in an area where one of our most threatened marsupials occurs. And what use an offset property that has no koalas or where there is not the geographic connectivity to allow dispersion of animal species in a population to other areas as occurs in larger connected landscapes? What are the dispersion routes of this koala colony? What surveys have been done in a wider area to research dispersal routes and role of suitable habitat IN THIS AREA. Water NSW’s assessment of the potential loss of water flows in this catchment does not auger well for Koala’s and water-dependent animals in a future predicted climate change regime of reduced flows for Eastern Australia together with cumulative impacts of mining. Viz

“In a dry year, surface water may reduce the yield of Avon Reservoir by 3.9%, Pheasants nest Weir catchment by 2.7% and a prediction of 100% reduction in stream flow to Avon Reservoir and 67% reduction in stream flow to Pheasants nest Weir from that portion of the catchment directly overflowing Area 5 in a dry year” **effectively minimised impacts indeed!**

It is not just loss of water for animal drinking that concerns some of the contributors to the DPIE Report. BCD, Water NSW and IESC summarise:

“While direct clearing of vegetation is small...the likelihood of subsidence over a much more extensive area is high and this is predicted to have a **significant** impact on multiple threatened coastal upland swamps and other water-dependent ecosystems and threatened species.”

Such species include especially the Broad-headed snake, the Giant Dragonfly, Littlejohns Tree Frog, the Giant Burrowing Frog and the Red-crowned toadlet. The occurrence of Twelve verified threatened species and eight likely ones should signal that Offsetting is a very poor substitute for keeping upland swamps, river banks and even the lower level streams intact to prevent species extinctions by multiple cuts as has happened around the in Royal National Park and adjacent reserves where 17 species have been lost. In my 50 years advocating for ecosystems of Southern Sydney and Northern Illawarra, I have witnessed the loss of Greater Gliders from Royal national park due to fire destruction of Tall open forest habitat, the last sighting of a released spotted tailed Quoll possibly due to foxes, the last record. The last Platypus population in Royal National Park possibly due to a chemical spill. The last (endangered) ground parrot seen in the region was on swampy land near where Peabody is mining. I mention these to demonstrate that there are many potentially threatening cumulative impacts that HAVE been causing species extinction locally. Yet there is negligible refence in this DPIE study about the potential of newer cumulative impacts such as long wall mining combined with climate change that threaten both the Upland swamp EEC and other communities. Of some highlighted concern was how drying of swamps will make them less resilient to increased intensity and frequency of fires. There is no determination within this study to help ensure the swamps do not dry

out...when they do, habitat of at least 12 threatened and endangered animals will also be lost as will their faunal assemblages. I have only seen photos of the endangered Giant Dragonfly, a species whose ancestors would have been part of a Jurassic swamp...but soon, I suspect, I may be witness to its demise. What cost can one place on such a loss? Decisions here will determine if we truly value keeping such species.

Expertise and environmental goals of Water NSW Ignored

Our Branch asks that the Commissioners gain some scientific and moral direction in assessing this issue by heeding the key management objectives promulgated by the only government department to formally object to this proposal, Water NSW.

Of Water NSW's nine "Strategic Management Objectives" guiding its "Principles for Managing Mining and Coal Seam Gas impacts in (drinking water) Catchment areas, the one below should have provided a guide to how the NSW Government developed its much-flawed Report. Viz

"...To maintain ecosystem integrity including threatened plant and animal species, endangered populations, endangered ecological communities...and other natural values"

Conclusion and summary

National Parks Association of NSW Southern Sydney Branch joins with other submitting Branches and NPA NSW in rejecting the proposal to expand long wall mining into areas 5 and 6 of Dendrobium's operations

In so rejecting the proposal we also submit that:

1. Our economy should be transitioning away from carbon-based fuels as a serious commitment to reducing greenhouse gases and reducing the impacts of anthropogenic global warming.
2. This particular proposal endangers our precious drinking water, both through quantitative loss and potential pollution
3. This particular proposal endangers important ecosystems and the species within, especially but not limited to the endangered Sydney Coastal Upland Swamps that are crucial to the protection of our water supply
4. With the accelerating impacts of climate change and observed impacts, of, for example associated megafires on ecosystems and their composite animals and plants, it is beholden on government to place ecosystem conservation top and center of its consideration of developments likely to harm the environment. This has not been the case in this coal extraction maximising proposal. What natural areas we still have intact must be managed to stay intact.

