

Faith in Mining? An Interfaith Forum

Organised by Faith Ecology Network
Christian Brothers High School, Lewisham 14 October 2012

This interfaith forum of people from a diversity of religious backgrounds explored the ecological, social and economic issues associated with Australia's mining boom.

The event, chaired by Thea Ormerod (President of Australian Religious Response to Climate Change) began with an acknowledgment of country led by Frances Bodkin, a knowledge holder of the Bidjil clans of the D'harawal people and FEN member.

Summary of talks from the four keynote speakers

Paul Cleary (senior writer with the Australian, researcher in public policy at ANU, and author of several books about mining in Australia)

Australia is inflating its standard of living by greatly running down the nation's finite mineral and energy resources. This is inflicting lasting damage on the environment and on food producing regions, thereby undermining our long-term prosperity.

The enormous scale of resource development at present, and over the next decade, amounts to generational theft and will make Australia a mineral-dependent nation.

More effective taxation of mineral production, combined with policies to invest and save some of the windfall revenue rather than use it for everyday consumption, would help Australia avoid mineral dependence and allow us to compensate future generations for depleting our shared resources.

Jacinta Green (marine ecologist, PhD candidate at UNSW, and active in the No Coal Seam Gas Mining in Sydney campaign and Lock the Gate Alliance):

Often overshadowed by concerns about property rights, immediate health concerns, alienation of prime farming land and impacts on water supplies, the ecological impacts of coal and coal seam gas (CSG) are far greater than they appear at first glance. The landscape-wide impacts can have far-reaching effects across the globe and for centuries to come.

The methods for extracting unconventional gas (CSG) by their very nature cause habitat destruction on a far greater scale than the physical footprint of the industry. Habitat fragmentation, edge effects, and invasive species corridors are unavoidable impacts of the industry. Underground, the impacts on stygofaunal communities are ignored. Further afield from the actual mining sites, the release of water into our river systems, treated or untreated, spreads the ecological impacts across large areas of Australia including the Great Barrier Reef.

Despite being touted as a solution for global warming, coal seam gas is a non-renewable fossil fuel that has the potential to accelerate climate change in the short term.

Frances Bodkin (Dharawal knowledge holder, scientist)

Aboriginal knowledge isn't just pretty stories. It is a science because two of the most important elements of any of our sciences is observation and actual experience. We have tens of thousands of years of observation and experience. And that is recorded in our stories and knowledge.

Today, the scientists are measuring and experimenting. If we could combine those two sciences, then we just don't have the last couple of thousand years of knowledge – we have tens of thousands of years of knowledge that can be used to guide us to the future.

Everybody sees things differently. All of the truths are different, because you perceive them from a different position, or you perceive them from different knowledge. When you are capable of seeing the same truth from other eyes, you can recognize what everybody perceives to be the one thing. How can this help us all find our proper place in the land?

We care for the land for one simple reason. The land is our mother, the land is alive. We must accept what she gives us, not take.

Rev Dr David Reichardt (ecoth theologian, Presbytery Minister of the Uniting Church in Australia)

Religious dimensions have often bolstered the relentless pursuit of economic growth and resource extraction, claiming that the resources are given to humanity to exploit for its own benefit.

However, theology and ecotheology can add constructive value to this discussion about mining, which is particularly important in the Australian context, by exploring the foundations of human activities.

Ecotheologians not infrequently now return to the etymological root of three words, each vitally important in our culture: “economy”, “ecology” and “ecumenism”, and their respective cognates. The root for each of these words is the Greek word “oikos”, which means “house” or “home”.

In “Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed” Jared Diamond included a chapter, “Mining Australia”, in which mining is a metaphor for how European settler society has and is extracting wealth from the planet's most ecologically fragile continent.

It is not sufficient to name greed as a root of the problem. Greed has been institutionalized into our economic and societal structures.

Interfaith panel

An interfaith panel of five speakers followed, with each contributor offering brief insights from their respective religious traditions in response to the speakers.

Edwin Humphries

Bahá'í teachings emphasise the oneness of humanity, the importance of intergenerational equity, and the need for economic systems based on altruism. It is important not to blame developing countries for an increase in mineral extraction and exports, but rather to recognize that it is the materialism, consumerism, greed and drive for profits from the wealthy countries. There is a need for better global governance.

Dr Balwant Singh

Hinduism understands the whole world to be a family, and perceives the unity of all existence and the presence of God in all things. For example, Hindus worship the trees, rivers, the Sun and cows and believe in the preservation of all. One should only take one's fair share, and leave the rest to the supreme.

Jacqui Remond, Director of Catholic Earthcare Australia

The Earth is a gift from God, and humans are called to respond with joy and reverence and to live in responsible relationship in creation. Mining is also a metaphor for the exploitation and fragmentation that is happening in our own lives. We start to fix the problems with mining by fixing our daily living and in our advocacy towards government. People of faith must not be bystanders but real contributors to striving for sustainability.

Sadiq Ansari, Islamic Sciences and Research Academy

In the Qur'an, the Earth is described as a living entity and like a large mosque. To damage the Earth is like damaging a mosque. He also commented that the lack of regulation and low royalties on resource extraction in Australia is shocking. In Islamic jurisprudence, there is a 20% rate of taxation (Zakat) on resource extraction.

Melissa McCurdie, Environmental lawyer

Judaism insists that the land is God's, and that humans are only tenants. There are instructions in Jewish scripture and tradition whereby humans are not to take all the resources, but rather to leave a portion behind for the needy. For example, leave gleanings in the fields and some fruits on the carob tree. The intergenerational equity implications of resource depletion are important – all of the children of the Earth should be able to benefit from the fruits of the Earth.

Table discussions

Suggestions for ways forward made by participants:

- Support campaigns against Coal Seam Gas Mining in Sydney
- Support local politicians who have environmental leanings to take a more courageous position.
- Investigate what our superannuation money is being used for. Is it being invested in coal-mining or coal seam gas operations or some other environmentally damaging practice? We could switch money from our super fund to an ethical investment option.
- FEN (with other partners) promote/host further faith events for the good of Earth? eg a large interfaith prayer gathering for the broader community to see the various faiths come together, perhaps under the slogan "One God, Many faiths, One planet, One responsibility".