

## The Black Diamond Raiders

by Keith Muir

Just before Christmas the Minerals Council of NSW claimed in its *State of the Industry Report* that coal exports had increased by 1,694 million tonnes in 2007. In fact, exports increased by 1.694 million tonnes, but several other misleading statements in the report, however, cannot be explained away as typos.

It is surprising that a report, with a subtitle 'Shedding the Light on the Issues' does not illuminate the ever growing '*elephant*' of climate change. Instead, attention is primarily focused on economic output measures, such as increased profits and coal production.

The report also states that the NSW mining industry only uses 1 per cent of water supplies. While miners' efforts in water conservation are significant, the coal mining is in fact reducing the net available water resources by cracking aquifers, stream beds and catchments, as well as adding salt to the Hunter and Nepean Rivers. And then there's that invisible elephant making things hotter, and that too reduces overall water availability. Coal miners are as responsible a group of 'one percenters' as the Hells Angels, although the Hells Angels are probably ahead on blood donations.

The Shedding the Light on the Issues report then seeks to shift the focus of public attention from miners protecting streams and catchments to efforts on rehabilitating the damage caused by coal mining. Changing the terms of a debate is a clever communications tactic, provided the new position can be supported by the evidence.

The report makes the mistake of trumpeting a rehabilitation success at Marhneys Hole on the Georges River, which was a favorite local swimming hole for the children of Appin. BHP-Billiton first rehab effort saw the installation of a tiny cement pond on top of the river's rocky bed, apparently for parched wildlife to have somewhere to drink. Then, BHP-Billion jack hammered a deep slot upstream of the Hole across the sandstone riverbed. The idea was that when the coal was extracted from under the river, the bed would crack there, not at the Hole, which would remain intact. The strategy operates in ways similar to how glaziers cut glass by first scratching the surface and then focusing pressure on the scratch. Well it didn't work. A big boulder fell into Marhneys Hole, most of its water drained away, and that which remained turned bright orange. Local cement contractors were then turned into millionaires as enough cement was pumped underground to make a small city. In the end BHP-Billiton's credibility was patched up, although the Hole is not the same. It has a big rock in the middle of it for a start, and jumping in off the rope swing with wild abandon is no longer an option for the local kids.

'Shedding the Light' then spotlighted BHP-B's Dendrobium colliery as a model mine with 'some of the strictest environmental controls in Australia'. The report does not tell you that this model mine's environmental impact statement predicted that cliff lines would fall, creek beds crack, there would be landslides and slumping of soil, and rock pools starved of water. The company's surface subsidence experts were predicting these impacts for what were supposed to be the specially protected water supply catchment for Sydney. The approval of this mine immediately set this appalling level of abuse as the new lower standard, so that whenever there were subsequent cliff falls etcetera they were 'within the predicted limits' of the development consent. Meaning it was OK to keep right on mining. However, last year giant cracks more than

one metre wide opened up, spoiling BHP-B's strategy of lowering the bar of environmental acceptability.

Undeterred, BHP-B have proposed a significant expansion for the Dendrobium colliery in the vulnerable water supply catchment behind Wollongong. The twenty or more upland swamps, the fountainheads that supply water flows during low rainfall, are at risk. BHP Billiton's modeling says that the upland swamps will be safe, but large swamps on three nearby creeks have been wrecked by adjoining coal mining operations at the old Elouera mine next door. As mining at Dendrobium is much more intense than at Eloura, common sense suggests that the swamps will be anything but safe.

Add to this the recent approval of Appin colliery's precedent setting scheme to mine directly under the Upper Canal, which puts essential water supply infrastructure at risk. Appin is another BHP-Billiton mine.

The previous industry wide practice secured the state's essential infrastructure within protection zones, where mining could not cause surface subsidence. For essential infrastructure, the consequences to society from mine-related surface subsidence damage were too high, even if damage was a rare event. The way for coal mining to proceed was to avoid putting essential infrastructure at risk in any way. Not any more.

Miners now take risks with essential infrastructure, for the same motives that some bankers take risks with credit security. Mining will take place under a fragile 19<sup>th</sup> C cast iron aqueduct and induce surface subsidence affecting the gravity fed Upper Canal that supplies 20 per cent of Sydney's water. Water does not flow uphill, at least not in an open canal, and causing the Upper Canal to subside is a pretty risky exercise.

But for me, the State of the Industry Report really pushed the credibility envelope by reporting Centennial Coal's Green Globe Award for its 'Springvale-Delta Water Transfer Scheme'. The Scheme's award is really an embarrassment. The Scheme claims to save Sydney 15.55 megalitres of water a day. Everyday Centennial's coal mines, including Springvale, sucks 37.25 megalitres of water from Newnes Plateau, or enough to fill at least 25 Olympic swimming pools. It may sound better to use this groundwater that would otherwise flood into these mines in powerstation boilers, but the water use comes at a price. Every litre to the powerstation is one less for stream flow elsewhere.

Mining water at this rate will suck the Plateau dry and, along with the ever growing invisible elephant, the mining under critical infrastructure and sensitive environments; the ultimate question is when are we going to run out of luck as coal miners take more risks? If the miners were instead your teenage sons and daughters, you wouldn't be getting much sleep these days.

The black diamond raiders aren't worried, with coal priced booming they've upped the ante! The industry plans another 25 new coal mines and additions, some under prime agricultural land, and Newcastle's coal export capacity will greatly increase.

Deep down everyone knows what's going to happen. Sometime in the next few years or so, as the world seeks to tame that invisible elephant and communities get fed up with mining abuse, the NSW's highly coal dependent economy is going to hit the wall. When it does no doubt the Minerals Council will say it was all the fault of the greenies.