

Battle lines drawn over proposed open cut coal mine in the Gardens of Stone

by Keith Muir

Over Christmas 2010, Coalpac announced a proposal to open cut mine 1,088 hectares of Ben Bullen State Forest in the Gardens of Stone. This proposal, on the western side of the Great Dividing Range, will come forward this April.

This extremely destructive proposal must be rejected. If approved, heaps of waste rock and dirt would replace the scenic woodland vistas on both sides of the Castlereagh Highway north of the Cullen Bullen village, as the existing Invincible and Cullen Valley collieries become integrated into one huge mine.

Coalpac's Invincible colliery extensions 1 and 2 have already cleared about 110 ha of woodland along the fringes of Ben Bullen State Forest. Since 1999, Coalpac's Cullen Valley open cut colliery has cleared hundreds of additional hectares of native woodland on private land.

The proposed loss of 1,088 ha of woodland by the open cut mine includes Box Gum Woodland (Federally listed as a Critically Endangered Ecological Community) allegedly 40 hectares in extent, and woodland containing *Eucalyptus cannonii* (listed as Vulnerable under Federal environmental laws) allegedly 196 hectares in extent.

Site inspection of the project area has found many pagoda rock formations along the Great Dividing Range and a new slot canyon, the 'Coalpac Cleft', as well as a new occurrence of the Broad-headed Snake (*Hoplocephalus bungaroides*).

The point of setting Ben Bullen State Forest aside in perpetuity for conservation and sustainable use is defeated if the recreational and ecological values of this public asset are now to be destroyed by open cut mining. In effect, the mine proposes to privatise the state forest by stealth.

The environmental offset standards for these losses are thoroughly inadequate. There has been no ecological assessment of species richness of the woodlands proposed to be cleared by Coalpac's integrated operation of its Invincible and Cullen Valley mines. The replanting of areas of farmland and the open cut areas with *Eucalyptus cannonii* and other native plants would constitute a small fraction of the species richness of the intact native woodland communities in Ben Bullen State Forest.

The current proposal seeks to 'maximise the recovery' of coal to the detriment of the broader public interest of the conservation of Ben Bullen State Forest. The Coalpac proposal would wind back the environmental protection embodied in its existing consent for the Invincible Colliery, approved in December 2008. The approved operation includes more benign underground methods that would, under this new proposal, be replaced by destructive open cut mining which would have highwall faces up to "100 metres high" directly adjoining scenic pagoda features.

Despite undertaking seven botanical surveys before lodging this proposal over the Christmas break, at least forty native plants were missed. Coalpac's environmental report also omitted reference to *Genista monspesulana* (Cape Broom) and *Scabiosa atropurpurea* being present on Invincible colliery. The use of a non-sterile

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grass in 'rehabilitation' of this mine's mullock heaps has seen this environmental weed invade previously pristine pagoda shrublands on public land proposed for future reservation as a state conservation area.

Coalpac's environmental record is further compromised by its failure to adhere to its undertakings. Approval of a previous Invincible Colliery open cut mine proposal on 7th September 2006 was partly based on Coalpac's assurance that "the open cut operations proposed would not be visible from the Castlereagh Highway due to the intervening topography and existing vegetation coverage". The steep open cuts into the escarpment of Ben Bullen State Forest are clearly visible along the Castlereagh Hwy north of Cullen Bullen.

This vast open cut proposal would set a destructive precedent for future open cut mining in the Gardens of Stone. If approved, it would have a devastating effect on the Gardens of Stone reserve proposal, including matters of national environmental significance.